

walking through windows

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walking through windows

by [CorvidCordelia](#)

Summary

“Shane Hollander’s having a big gay wedding.”

Ilya’s ball rocketed sideways into the woods with a crack like a rifle shot; somewhere in the trees, a goose honked in outrage.

“Jesus Christ,” Tyler said.

“Wow,” Marly said. “That was...what the fuck was that, Roz?”

Ilya was gripping the club so hard his knuckles had gone white. “Bad swing.”

“That wasn’t a bad swing, that was like a physics-defying swing. I didn’t know you could make a ball go in that direction. You okay?”

“Fine.” Hollander was getting married. Getting gay married. Who the fuck was Hollander marrying? He wasn’t even... Ilya cleared his throat, shoved his biggest club back in the bag, noted distantly that his hands were shaking. “Hollander is gay?”

OR: Ten years after the Tampa Bay All-Star Game, Ilya Rozanov crashes Shane Hollander's wedding

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

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

Ilya was trying to like golf. His friends all liked it, even those still playing hockey. There were similarities, or really just the one: you could hit something with a stick, but that was true of baseball and lacrosse and...cricket? Ilya was pretty sure there were sticks involved with cricket. And running, which baseball and lacrosse also had.

Not golf, though. With golf, you sat around in a fuckass little car and drank beer and had to be very quiet and polite (okay not really, but Ilya had been shushed three times already today which they had to know was only going to encourage him) and every once in a while you got to hit your ball with your stick.

Also? Golf had no hitting people, and Ilya found he missed that much more than he'd expected.

"It's supposed to be relaxing," Marleau said, and reached into the cooler behind them to crack open another Sam Adams. Ilya made a face and Marly rolled his eyes and offered him a Masshole Light instead.

"It's boring," Ilya said, and took a long pull.

"You literally asked to come along."

This was, unfortunately, true. Ilya had officially retired five weeks and three days ago, and he was already not handling it well. His days consisted of: waking up, eating a breakfast of toast with peanut butter because he no longer had to eat an entire cow to keep up with his protein intake; going to the gym, where he worked out without much purpose; watching one of the American Film Institute's One Hundred Movies You Should See Before You Die (thus far he had seen 84 and quite frankly he could have died happily without enduring *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* or fucking *Shane*—"Why, Shane! We want you, Shane! Come back, Shane!" Motherfucker); texting people; jerking off; going to bed.

Once a week he made himself go out, but he was fucking 36 years old. At some point, picking up girls at a club got to be a little sleazy.

Their playing partner for the day—Tyler Canning, a depth forward from corn country who'd just finished his second season with Boston—pulled up in his cart with the enthusiasm of a golden retriever who'd just discovered tennis balls existed. "You guys ready? I think we're holding up the group behind us."

Ilya glanced back. Sure enough, there were four middle-aged men in polo shirts radiating impatience about fifty yards back. Ilya raised his beer in a mock toast.

“Roz is having an existential crisis,” Marly said.

“Am not. Am having *beer*.” Ilya stomped on the pedal, sending the golf cart careening at a thrilling fourteen miles per hour across the course. The sun was warm, the grass was manicured and aggressively pleasant. There were geese nibbling happily and shitting everywhere, and ponds and mounds of sand referred to, respectively, as “kettles and kames,” whatever the fuck that meant.

Fucking Boston. Ilya needed to move somewhere else; he’d been stuck in this small town of a city for his entire adult life.

They paused at Tyler’s bright yellow ball—Ilya could at least congratulate himself at being better at this boring game than a twelve-year-old farm boy—and watched the kid line up his shot. He took it seriously, tongue between his teeth.

“So I gotta ask,” Tyler said, addressing the ball more than them. “What’s it like? Retiring?”

Marly stretched his enormous wingspan and kicked a leg out to prop it on the other side of the windshield. “It’s fucking great, man. No more bag skates, no more weeks on the road, no more All-Star bullshit—”

“This is not Tyler’s problem,” Ilya said, and Marly elbowed him in the side. “Not yet,” he added, conciliatory.

“I’ve got a girlfriend who doesn’t hate for being gone all the time. We might even get married, have some kids. And if you’re smart and don’t spend all your money like a jackass, you’ll never have to work another day in your life.”

Ilya seriously doubted that Tyler was that smart, but it *was* good advice.

“This asshole doesn’t know how to do it right, though. Yesterday I got a fifteen minute voice message from him ranting about—what was it? Fucking *Snow White*?”

Ilya glared at him. “She was very stupid and then she died. And her voice was very squeaky. How is this the best America can do?”

“It’s a cartoon from 1937, what do you want from me?”

At the next tee, Ilya selected the biggest club because bigger was always better. He put his ball on its tiny little ball stand and lined up his swing, bending his knees.

“Oh, shit,” Tyler said, glancing down at his phone. “Did you guys hear about this?”

“Hear about what,” Ilya asked, and lifted his biggest club in the air.

“Shane Hollander’s having a big gay wedding.”

Ilya’s ball rocketed sideways into the woods with a crack like a rifle shot; somewhere in the trees, a goose honked in outrage.

“Jesus Christ,” Tyler said.

“Wow,” Marly said. “That was...what the fuck was that, Roz?”

Ilya was gripping the club so hard his knuckles had gone white. “Bad swing.”

“That wasn’t a bad swing, that was like a physics-defying swing. I didn’t know you could make a ball go in that direction. You okay?”

“Fine.” *Hollander was getting married. Getting gay married. Who the fuck was Hollander marrying? He wasn’t even...* Ilya cleared his throat, shoved his biggest club back in the bag, noted distantly that his hands were shaking. “Hollander is gay?”

“Apparently! It’s not like there was a coming out announcement or anything—look, there’s just this invitation.”

Ilya walked very slowly over to Tyler’s cart, did not snatch the phone out of his hand.

together with their families

SHANE HOLLANDER & JULIAN REEVES

invite you to celebrate their marriage

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Beckwith, ON

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Who the *fuck* was Julian Reeves? Ilya tapped on Instagram, ignoring Tyler's halfhearted "Hey..." and searched #holleeves

The first photo that came up was from three weeks ago: Hollander with a sunburn pink beneath his freckles, smiling at the camera while a handsome man kissed his cheek. They were standing somewhere tropical; Hollander was in a linen shirt, *Julian Reeves* was shirtless, the better to show off his gym body—thin and sculpted, no real strength to him.

He was shorter than Hollander by a few inches, with carefully maintained stubble and artfully tousled hair. Younger, too, by the looks of it; Hollander had always had a baby face, so *Julian* might have been as much as ten, even fifteen years younger.

The caption below the image read: "last vacation before we become #holleeves forever! 31 days until the happiest day of our lives!"

Ilya kept scrolling. The photos didn't go back very far—the earliest posting was only about two months ago, to announce their engagement. It was a professional photo shoot done at, if Ilya wasn't mistaken, Hollander's "cottage." He was laughing—actually laughing, his face lit up—at something off-camera while *Julian* looked at him with obvious adoration. "He said yes! Well, actually *I* said yes, because this beautiful man somehow thought he needed to plan the perfect proposal when just asking me in our living room would have been perfect. Love you forever, Shane. Let's do this thing. #holleeves #loveislove"

After that, it was just couple photo after couple photo. Julian in Hollander's Metros jersey, Hollander looking embarrassed. The two of them at dinner with Rose fucking Landry. With Hollander's parents. A carousel of images from what looked like a charity gala, Hollander in a tuxedo looking like he'd rather be anywhere else, gamely posing with Julian's hand possessive on his lower back.

"Hey, man, uh...you want to play the game or..." Tyler tried again.

Ilya ignored him, clicked on the single reel.

"Babe." It must have been Julian's voice, coming from behind the camera. "Babe, tell them about the wedding cake drama."

The camera swung to show Hollander in the kitchen from the cottage, Ilya recognized it from the documentary; he was wearing sweatpants, a threadbare Metros hoodie, white socks. He looked up from chopping vegetables, exasperated but fond.

"There's no drama. I told you to pick whatever you want."

"But that's not...Shane! It's our wedding cake! You have to have an opinion!"

“And my opinion is that you should pick whatever you like.”

The camera flipped around, and there was Julian’s handsome face. Ilya wondered if he waxed his eyebrows. “See?” Julian said. “He doesn’t care at all!”

There was movement at the edge of the frame, and then Hollander’s face appeared in the video, pressing a kiss to Julian’s forehead. “I care about marrying you,” he said, and the soft look in his eyes made Ilya want to throw up. “The details don’t matter to me.”

“Ilya.” Marly’s hand on his shoulder. “Maybe put the phone down.”

“He looks happy.” Ilya’s voice sounded strange to himself.

“Yeah,” Marly said heavily. “He does.”

Ilya looked up; Marly was giving him the same look he had on a night in Montreal, years ago, the one he’d given while watching Ilya search frantically for news about Hollander’s concussion, the one he’d given him when Hollander announced he was retiring.

Ilya had never known what to do with that look. It made him afraid of what showed on his own face.

He handed a very confused Tyler his phone. “I am going to find my ball now,” he announced, and walked into the woods.

January 27, 2017

Ilya sat at the hotel bar in Tampa and wondered why people put fruit in beers. Which fruit for which beer? Why limes for Corona, but oranges for Blue Moon? Who was in charge of this? Why did no one put, say, maraschino cherries in Guinness? It made as much sense as anything else.

He sat at the bar and studiously thought about things like that, things that didn’t matter, that he didn’t really give a shit about. He glanced down at his chest, undid another button on his shirt. Red suited him, he thought.

He wasn’t the only one who looked when Hollander walked in; fucking everyone in the place did, including the very pretty woman in a bikini at the other end of the bar who right up until that moment had been smiling at Ilya instead. Too bad for her; even tits like that couldn’t compete with Rose fucking Landry.

And yet—what an honor—it was Ilya that Hollander decided to walk up to, perching on the stool next to him with a too-friendly “Hey, teammate.”

Ilya didn't look at him. "Hello, *Captain*."

"So this should be fun, huh?" Hollander leaned forward, signaled the bartender. "Always wondered what it would be like to play on the same team."

"Have you."

Hollander ordered a beer; Ilya drained his and stood up. "Now we will find out."

It was terrible playing on the same team as Hollander—terrible, because it was fucking wonderful. It wasn't all that different from fucking him; Ilya still knew what Hollander wanted without being told, still knew how to meet him halfway, how to anticipate and respond in an instant. He'd pass the puck and Hollander would already be moving to where he needed to be. Hollander would look left and Ilya would drive right, creating the space they needed. They played beautifully together, and Ilya wanted to flee from it, to go back to a time before he knew how it felt to win with Hollander, rather than against him.

He did flee, afterward; hid in the bar when everyone else was out on the beach. But fucking Hollander—he came to find him *again*, stood close enough that Ilya could smell his cologne (he wore fucking cologne now?) and said, so very earnestly, "I need to talk to you."

Ilya stared straight ahead at the bottles lined up behind the bar, their labels blurring slightly. *Why?* he wanted to demand. Nothing about their...whatever it was...demanded that Hollander tell him personally that he was going to get married, have a bunch of beautiful freckled babies who had their mother's famous smile. "What do you want?"

"In private." Hollander's voice dropped lower. "What room are you in?"

Oh. Ilya turned to look at him then; Hollander's eyes were dark, a shy smile on his face.

Well. In that case...

Ilya smiled back, let his eyes linger on Hollander's lips. It would be a shame, he decided, if not a single one of those babies got their father's mouth. It was perfect.

Ilya went up first, swiped away texts from Alexei while he waited. This was probably going to be the last time, he knew; maybe Hollander was willing to cheat on Rose Landry now, when they'd only been dating for a few months, but he wouldn't be when things got serious. Hollander just wasn't like that.

So Ilya tried to decide what he wanted, on this last night with him. How long could he make it last? Could they go more than once? He was half-hard already, just thinking about it.

He wanted Hollander to come in his mouth, to taste him—but he also wanted him to come on his cock. He wanted to watch Hollander ride him, wanted to fuck him hard from behind and then shoot all over his back, wanted to bend him in half and kiss his perfect mouth and watch the tears squeeze from his eyes as he shuddered and came hot between them.

One last night. It was never going to be enough.

But when Ilya opened the door, Hollander sat down on the bed like he was going to confession, bent over his knees with his hands clasped.

“This looks serious.” He tried to sound light, casual, even as dread crept up his spine.

“It’s not.” Hollander looked pained. “I mean, sort of. Can you just sit down or something?”

Ilya wanted to leave, but it was his room. He sat himself on the dresser, as far away as he could get. *This is the last time*, Hollander would say, as if Ilya didn’t already fucking know.

“It’s...” Hollander took a breath, steeling himself. “It’s not just me, right?”

Ilya genuinely had no idea what he could possibly be talking about. “Not just you, what?”

“You feel it, too, don’t you?”

“Feel what?”

“Last time we were together, it was different.”

Fuck you, Hollander. Ilya had spent the last three months working so hard not to think about the last time, how he’d begged him to stay, how he’d fumbled trying to feel out what this all meant, how he’d ruined everything. “What was different, that you ran away?”

“Look, I’m...I’m sorry I freaked out, okay?”

Ilya couldn’t do this he *could not do this*. “Freaked out over nothing.”

“It wasn’t nothing. Don’t act like that, this is hard enough without you being an asshole.”

But Ilya *was* an asshole. He always had been, and he always would be. “What do you want, Hollander? We get together, we fuck. It’s simple.”

“Simple?” Incredulous.

Ilya shrugged, bent over slightly to contain the churning in his gut. “It’s simple for me.”

“Bullshit.” Hollander was exasperated; good. He’d leave, then. Give up and walk out the door and out of Ilya’s life, as he should have a long time ago. Ilya would regret this one last night (probably forever) but anything was better than sitting here listening to Hollander hash out all the reasons they were finished.

But Hollander didn’t get up. He inhaled deeply, steadying himself, and said, “I think...I think I’m gay.”

Ilya laughed—he couldn’t help it, he didn’t think anything about this could be funny, but Hollander was just so... “Hmm. Oh, yeah, what makes you think that?”

“Fuck you, you’re not gay.”

Ilya didn't know what he was, didn't know why it mattered. It was just *fucking*. "No, not completely."

"Yeah, well, I think I am. Completely."

Ilya stopped laughing; his stomach curdling again. "Why are you telling me this?"

Hollander's face was red, mortified, but he held Ilya's gaze. "I needed to say it out loud to someone. To *you*."

"Why?" Ilya stood up from the dresser, crossed his arms over his chest. "You want me to what, throw you a party? What does this have to do with me? I already know you like to fuck men. This is not news to me."

Hollander stood up too, and Ilya could see that his hands were shaking. "The last time we—you asked me to stay."

"Yes, because I like the way you suck my dick. Are we going to get to that anytime soon, or...?"

"God, fuck you, will you please stop for one fucking second? I know I ran, but I'm here now, okay? Rose and I are over, it's done, and I wanted to—"

"You broke up with Rose Landry for *me*?" Ilya felt something lurch in his chest, something he'd kept buried next to his mother. If it broke out, he wasn't sure what would happen to him, couldn't bear to think about it. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"She broke up with me, actually, but—"

"Ahh, okay." Ilya forced a smile on his face, the cruel one he used on the ice when he wanted to get hit. "I get it now. Poor Hollander, so sad and alone, finally ready to admit he likes dick now that his famous girlfriend doesn't want him anymore."

"Christ," Hollander said, and he sounded disgusted. "You're such a fucking coward. You asked me to stay, *Ilya*. And I'm here now. I'm telling you I want this."

"Don't. Don't fucking do this, Hollander."

"I want *you*."

Ilya had to shove the words out. "I don't."

Hollander's face went slack, uncomprehending. "No, you..."

"I don't want this. I don't want you." He sounded cold and dead; he was, probably.

Shane's eyes filled, wet and shining, his lip trembling. "You're lying."

Ilya shut his eyes, turned away from him. He could feel the tear slip out anyway, feel that broken thing in his chest trying to escape.

“If I walk out that door right now, is that it? Are we done?”

Shane’s voice was shaking, slurring a little the way it did sometimes when he couldn’t bear his own emotions. Ilya wanted to hold him, to cover him with his body, to plead with him not to walk out, to never leave again.

Instead he said: “We were never anything to begin with.”

Would he have known about this if he’d kept better tabs on Hollander? He’d forced himself to stop when Hollander retired a year ago, when Ilya couldn’t keep up the illusion that he’d only been interested because of hockey.

He spent the rest of the afternoon in the car, the white leather seat sticky against his back, claiming he’d lost his ball and therefore couldn’t play. Tyler tried to explain that he could just drop another; Marly stopped him, told him to leave Ilya be. He sat next to him and let Ilya drink his beer in silence, and when at last they got back to the clubhouse Marly took Ilya’s keys and drove his Lotus Emira back to his house in Brookline for him. He parked it in the garage and clapped him on the shoulder.

“I’m sorry, man.”

“What for?” Ilya said dully.

Marly shrugged, awkward. They both knew Ilya would never confess that there was anything anyone had to be sorry for.

When at last he was alone, Ilya stood in his kitchen and stared at nothing. He opened the fridge, eyed the options. There were a lot; he’d started cooking more since quitting hockey, had tried making pelmeni and golubsty with middling success.

He closed it again, poured himself a vodka instead.

Hollander felt like a nearly severed limb, something he’d tried and tried to carve away without ever quite succeeding, every slice making the pain worse. Ilya dragged Hollander behind him, always an open wound but never bleeding out.

He settled himself on his couch; it was threadbare now, not even very comfortable, the ugliest thing in his home but he’d never managed to get rid of it. He opened Instagram, took his time going through every photo, reading every comment. Boziau, Pike of course, Vaughan—Scott Hunter had posted a fucking essay beneath the engagement photo, going on and on about how important it was for the queer youth of today to have such a joyful event to look forward to.

Ilya poured himself more vodka, and once he was well and truly drunk he called Svetlana.

“What do you want?” she said—in English, so she must have been out with friends.

“He’s getting married,” Ilya said in Russian, because it was easier that way.

“Who is?”

He didn’t answer, just waited. He could hear voices and loud music in the background.

“дерьмо,” she said at last, then “I’ll call you back.”

They had spoken about it only once, when they had (very briefly) tried dating for real.

It had been Ilya’s idea. They’d been sprawled in his bed, watching Montreal slaughter Denver, and he’d rolled toward her, propped himself up on an elbow. “Sveta, who else are we going to find? Who else would put up with me?” He didn’t say *with you*, knew that she could be with anyone she chose.

It was an open relationship; neither of them were interested in anything else. But they slept together almost every night, at his place or hers, their clothes mingling in each other’s closets. He’d introduced her as his girlfriend. He’d told her he loved her, had meant it. They went out for dinner, watched movies, met her friends for drinks.

Three months in, she told him it was finished.

They were in her apartment, the late afternoon light cutting lines across the floor. She was still in her underwear. He’d been about to suggest they order in.

“I love you,” she’d said, “and I know that you love me. But...”

“But what?” He genuinely didn’t understand, thought he’d been doing everything right.

Svetlana had squared her shoulders, steeling herself. “Shane Hollander.”

Ilya had stared at her, his throat tight and chest heaving—and then he’d vomited in her kitchen sink.

She’d brushed his hair back from his forehead, handed him a glass of water, watched him rinse out the sink without comment. “It was okay when we were just fucking sometimes,” she said at last. “But this? I can’t do this. I can’t be your lifelong distraction, любимый.”

“I don’t—”

She’d shaken her head, and they’d never spoken about it again. They’d slipped back into friendship, without the fucking this time around.

Now Ilya got up to pour himself another vodka. If he kept on like this he’d be sick in the morning, but he needed to drink enough to pass out.

His phone rang five minutes later, too loud in his silent house, and when he answered the music was softer, farther away. “Are you okay?” Svetlana said, in Russian.

“Of course, yes,” automatically.

“Ilya.”

“I...” He pressed the glass to his forehead, watched the room tilt. “No. I need to talk to him.”

Svetlana blew out a breath, staticky. “To say what?”

He didn’t know. He hadn’t spoken more than a handful of sentences to him in years, not since the day he’d walked out of Ilya’s life. Been chased out. Whichever. They’d continued to play against each other, to attend the same events. It wasn’t even terrible, not after the first year or two. Ilya was able to enjoy being on the ice with him, battling him for the puck, anticipating where he’d go, chasing after him, the two of them flying faster together than anyone else ever could.

“He’s marrying a man,” he said at last.

“Oh.” Svetlana sounded surprised, as well she should. After their conversation in Tampa, Hollander had locked himself back in the closet with the fervor of a Catholic priest.

“I need to go to the wedding.”

“That is the worst idea you’ve had in a long time.”

“I know.”

Svetlana sighed, exasperated. “What do you think is going to happen? You show up and what? He calls it off, just because you’re there?”

“No.” Hollander wouldn’t do that. Once he’d made a decision, he stuck with it. Even if Ilya begged... “I just want to see him again, okay? Make sure he is...happy.” It sounded like a lie, and maybe it was. Maybe Ilya could never be that selfless.

But Svetlana was quiet, so quiet that he could hear the music again, the street sounds, could picture her standing outside whatever bar she’d been at, the harsh lines of her frown. “I will come with you,” she said finally.

“Sveta—”

“Shut up. This is incredibly self-destructive, and you’ll need someone to get you home after you crash and burn.”

Chapter End Notes

This All-Star Game rewrite is brutal, I know, I'm sorry. But like, what IF Bisexual Terrorist Ilya stayed as fucked up as he was at the club? What then?

Chapter 2

Shane was doing a final walk-through of the venue—the Strathmere Country Retreat, like somewhere Londoners would summer at a century ago, playing croquet and drinking cordials. The evening sun cast everything in amber, making the white hydrangeas glow like paper lanterns along the gravel path. He paused to let Gordie sniff around them, half-heartedly tried to drag him away before he peed them, only to watch him pee on one of the carefully arranged white chairs lining the green grass aisle. He knelt down, the fabric of his trousers pulling tight across his thighs, took the handkerchief from his breast pocket (why did he have one of those?) and wiped it away, then looked at the soiled handkerchief stupidly before shoving it in his trouser pocket to get rid of it at the earliest opportunity. He peeked inside the barn—yes, those white chairs were carefully arranged, too, so they could easily move the ceremony indoors if the weather shifted.

Every contingency had been planned for, everything set and ready even though the ceremony wasn't for another two days—if it rained in the meantime, it was just going to have to be done again. That had been Shane's fault; Yuna and Julian had tried to convince him that some things were better left for the last minute but Shane's anxiety wouldn't allow for it. At least they hadn't put out the flowers and ribbons and whatever else yet.

Gordie bumped his head against Shane's hip, nudging him to open his legs so he could wriggle between them. Shane was going to have inner thighs covered in gray hairs, but he couldn't bring himself to mind, bending down to receive a kiss. Gordie was three years old, probably a Catahoula mix of some kind, blue-gray coat with darker patches. He'd shown up half-starved at his parents' house right around the time when Shane thought he should pull a Michael Jordan and see if he could play another sport, maybe. (What went into a Decathlon?)

Rozanov had retired this Spring, and Shane wondered absently how he was handling it. He'd never cared as much about hockey as Shane did, not really—for him it was always about what hockey did for him, who it made him, rather than the game itself. Except when they played against each other, of course—that had always been different, and stayed different throughout their careers. Shane doubted either of them would have been as good without the other to push against.

He'd been thinking entirely too much about Rozanov these past few weeks, though probably it was normal in the lead up to a wedding to be thinking about past...sexual partners? Hookups? Shane had never found a word that seemed right. *Ex* implied a relationship they'd never had, and *friend* was laughable. He'd watched Rozanov's last game with Julian—well, sort of with Julian; he was mostly on his phone, had never managed to learn to care about watching hockey, much less hockey that Shane wasn't even playing in. Rozanov had played well; he always played well. It had been a few years since either of them had won any major awards, but they weren't slouches, either, still putting up respectable numbers, still making the highlight reels. Maybe he, like Shane, had simply begun to wonder what else life might have to offer.

Shane checked his watch; guests had probably already begun to arrive. Three days was an awfully long time to stand around and be congratulated for doing something that was at its core a legal procedure. But he had long since come to understand that he was required to get dressed up for every important thing that ever happened to him; playing hockey was the only exception, apparently.

He could hear music drifting over from the garden house, jazzy and elegant. It was past time he made an appearance. He brushed off his thighs as best he could and patted his hip; Gordie left off trying to pounce on a grasshopper—jumping and missing, landing in a graceless heap—and trotted alongside him, panting happily as they took the path through the rose garden. The evening was perfect—cool enough that you wanted a jacket, warm enough that once you'd had a glass of champagne you wouldn't need one anymore. Shane was in his favorite suit, the one he'd bought with the help of a stylist almost a decade ago and that he was quite proud still fit him perfectly.

Through the French doors he could see Julian near the bar, animated and beautiful in his bright blue suit, telling a story that had everyone around him laughing. Shane smiled, felt that familiar warmth; Julian was so good for him. He pushed him to try new things, didn't let him hide away in his cottage forever. Sure, Shane might only very rarely enjoy those new things, but relationships were about compromise. And Julian had compromised, too—had agreed to spend every summer at the cottage (provided they could have visitors on rotation and go to tropical places in the winter). He put up with Shane's terrible communication skills, his need for routine, his ill-behaved dog.

"Shane!" Yuna appeared, drink in hand, beaming. "There you are! Everyone's been asking—oh, honey, you can't bring Gordie in here."

"I know, I thought I'd just say hi real quick and then—"

She kissed his cheek, straightened his collar. "Go find your father, he'll take him—I'm sure he wants a break already. And you look very handsome, by the way."

Inside it was warm with conversation and laughter. Shane recognized some but not all of Julian's friends—sleek, fashionable people with interesting haircuts and even more interesting clothes—and he smiled and said hello anyway, just in case he had in fact met them before. They made him a little nervous. They were all queer, seemingly, which was obviously fine and made sense, but Shane always felt inadequate around them, like there were prerequisites for being gay that were not at all limited to enjoying sex with men. Julian had assured him several times that now that he was comfortably out, Shane would embrace that part of his identity more fully, that he didn't have to be a jock all the time anymore.

"There you are!" Julian kissed him, tasting like champagne. "I was starting to think you'd gotten lost. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, sorry, I was just..." Shane didn't really have a good explanation; there were wedding planners and staff innumerable to handle whatever it was he'd been doing.

"I know," Julian said indulgently, but then he noticed Gordie. "Oh—babe."

“He’s not staying,” Shane said quickly. “I’m trying to find my dad—”

But Gordie, ever cursed with the worst possible timing, chose that moment to jump up on a passing caterer—in his defense, the man was carrying a tray full of pigs in a blanket. Shane lunged forward, steadied the tray before more than a half dozen of them slid to the ground and were immediately hoovered up by a dog who, despite eating three meals a day and snacks in between, had never gotten over his perpetual food insecurity.

“Sorry, I’m so sorry,” Shane said as Gordie snuffled and gulped, tail wagging frantically, but the server only laughed, rebalancing the tray with ease.

“Hey, it’s all good. Can he have another?”

The correct answer was no; Gordie should definitely *not* have another. “Sure.”

The server leaned down, the tray still perfectly balanced in one hand, and Gordie sat hopefully, accepting his treat with the delicacy of a high-class poodle at a dog show.

“Thank you.” Julian was smiling, but Shane could hear the tightness in his voice. “But I think he’s probably had more than his fair share.”

“I’ll get him out of here,” Shane muttered, but before he even had the chance, his father appeared.

“I’ll take him,” he offered. Gordie looked away from the tray for the first time, immediately settling at David’s side. “Give us a chance to escape for a bit.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

David nodded, squeezed Shane’s shoulder briefly, then headed for the door with Gordie trotting along.

“Your dad’s the best,” Julian said, slipping his arm around Shane’s waist. “Okay, crisis averted. Come on, let’s get you some champagne, and there are these amazing crab cakes you have to try. The remoulade is to die for.”

Shane let himself be guided into the party, let Julian introduce him to a cousin from Seattle—mid-thirties, worked in tech, enthusiastic handshake—and a colleague from his old PR firm—impeccably dressed, sharp wit, already two drinks in. The cousin asked about hockey, which was nice, and the colleague told a funny story about Julian that Shane had heard before. Through the window, he could see his father and Gordie walking across the lawn in the fading light, the dog’s tail wagging. He excused himself to get some more champagne, asked the bartender to fill his glass with ginger ale instead.

“Uhoh,” Rose said, and Shane turned to find her at his elbow, smiling. “You’ve got that glazed, I-need-to-be-away-from-people look in your eye again.”

“I don’t need to get away from you,” he said, and leaned in to kiss her cheek. “Sorry I wasn’t here when the party started.”

“No, I figured you needed a little time to psych yourself up for it,” she said cheerfully. She accepted a glass from the starstruck bartender, smiled warmly at him, then pulled Shane away to a somewhat quiet corner. “How are you doing?”

“Fine. Great.” He gestured at the room, with its soft lighting and freesia and elegantly dressed people. “This is fantastic.”

“It is,” she agreed. “If this is just the cocktail party, I can’t wait to see what the wedding will be like.”

Shane laughed, shook his head a little. “I know, it’s a lot, isn’t it?”

“You’re worth it,” she said lightly. “I’m really happy for you.”

But the way she said it, it sounded more like, *I’m really worried about you.*

“Rose,” he began, but she waved him off.

“I’m not...” she tapped on her glass with a fingernail, looking frustrated. “It’s your *wedding*, Shane, I’m not going to...I just...”

Shane knew perfectly well what she *just*. It was a conversation they’d had about a dozen times since things had started to get serious with Julian. It started with Rose gently asking him if he wanted to maybe date a little more, not just come out and then immediately get married to the first person he’d ever had a relationship with. Then, more seriously, if he was really sure about this, that just because he was retiring from hockey, that didn’t mean he had to organize the rest of his life like he was on some sort of deadline.

“Why don’t you like him?” he said plaintively, because really, that’s what this came down to, wasn’t it?

She sighed, her shoulders sagging a little. “It’s not that I don’t like him.”

“He makes me happy.”

Rose bit her lip, then said quietly, “I made you happy, too, honey.”

Shane drew back from her, reeling a little. “That’s...” He had to take a second to try to understand what she was saying, *why* she would be saying it after all this time. He hadn’t thought she’d held it against him, that he’d dated her when he didn’t want her. It was ages ago. “It’s not the same,” he said finally, a little angrily.

“I know,” she said quickly, reaching out. “I know it’s not. But I also know what it’s like when you *really* want something, and—”

She was talking about Rozanov. He couldn’t *believe* she was talking about Rozanov at his fucking wedding.

She’d been the person he’d told, when Rozanov had ended things in Tampa. There hadn’t been anyone else he *could* tell, and so even though they had just barely decided to be friends,

she'd come to stay at his apartment for a few days, listened to the whole sordid thing.

"It wasn't just me," he'd insisted. "Whatever he said. It *wasn't*."

He'd even, stupidly, held out hope for a long time after that—years—thinking that Rozanov would allow himself to see what they could be together, maybe, if they decided to try.

But he never fucking did, and eventually Shane had moved the hell on.

"That," he said, low and furious, "was over a long time ago. What the fuck are you trying to do, bringing it up *now*?"

Rose's expression was contrite, but her eyes were sad. She lay a hand on his arm, slid it down to entangle their fingers. "I'm sorry. You're right. It's not—"

"*Rose!*" Julian—*fuck*, Julian had better not have heard anything, *please* let him not have heard—slid an arm around Rose's waist, pressed a kiss to her temple. "You look exquisite—Shane, did you tell her she looks exquisite?"

Shane blinked a little, forced a smile. "Sorry—you look great, as always."

Julian shook his head, dramatically fond and exasperated. "He's hopeless. Anyway, Rose, I was just talking with Tim Chalamet's PR rep, he's an old friend—Todd, I mean, not Timothée—and he was saying that the two of you should have dinner—well, the four of us, really, Shane and I would love to come along—because you would be *perfect* for Scorsese's new biopic, I don't remember who it's about, but..."

Rose gave her wide, glamorous smile, and Shane winced internally. "I don't actually know Timothée all that well. I think we've only met on, like, Graham Norton or something."

"Sure, but you can reach out to him, can't you? I'd *love* to meet him."

"You know, I'm so sorry," Rose said, and gave Shane's shoulder another squeeze. "I think I see Yuna waving me over, excuse me, I'll be right back."

"Of course," Julian said, releasing her. "We'll catch up later—I want to hear all about what you've got coming up." Rose gave him another smile, dazzling, and didn't answer. Julian practically swooned. "She's the best, isn't she?"

At that precise moment, Shane wasn't sure Rose was his favorite person, but then he probably wasn't hers right now, either. "She's great."

He wanted desperately to find Hayden and Jackie, or Scott and Kip, Vaughnie, Mitty, JJ—any of his friends, who were happy for him but would show it by talking about ordinary things, who would probably want to step outside and get some fresh air. But he let himself be pulled along, smiling when he was supposed to smile, shaking hands and kissing cheeks, his face starting to ache from the effort. Julian introduced him to a woman from *Vogue* who asked about how they'd met, what their first dance would be. Julian answered most of the questions, his hand warm on Shane's lower back.

“And you’ve started a charity now, is that right? A hockey camp?”

“Yeah,” Shane said, glad for a topic he could contribute to, something he cared about. “It’s a youth camp, open to all genders—you know, women’s hockey is really something—”

“Trans youth, too,” Julian chimed in.

“Yes, of course.” Shane flushed. “I didn’t mean...” The columnist smiled encouragingly, and he went on, “The idea is to promote inclusivity in hockey. It was...” he shrugged a little, uncomfortable “...such a big deal when I was drafted because I’m half-Japanese, but it shouldn’t have been. Just like when Scott Hunter—” he looked around for Scott, didn’t see him “—came out, that shouldn’t have been such a big deal, either. We’re trying to upend the idea that hockey is just for straight white cisgender men.”

“And now we’re celebrating your wedding,” she said.

Julian’s hand slipped a little lower, squeezed the top of his ass. “That’s right,” he said, and reached up to bring Shane’s mouth in for a kiss. “We couldn’t be happier.”

Shane smiled, kissed him again, and straightened. It was so *good*, what he had with Julian. He didn’t have to hide this part of himself any longer.

He scanned the room, looking for Scott again, since he’d made it so much easier for Shane, not to mention Ryan Price and everyone else who’d come out in his wake. There were so many people here, how did Julian even know this many people? But Scott wasn’t exactly hard to miss, he—

Shane froze. His eyes tracked backward, and...*fuck*.

Ilya Rozanov stood in the doorway to the garden, as if Shane had summoned him like a specter from what he had firmly believed was his past.

He wore a dark suit and tie, slim-cut, his hair a little longer than when Shane had last seen it on television for his last game, curling slightly at the collar. He had a glass of champagne dangling in one hand but he didn’t seem to be drinking it; his eyes were moving, searching the crowd, and Shane had a single heartbeat to think *I need to get out of here* before Rozanov saw him and it was too late.

Their eyes met across the room, and Shane forgot how to breathe.

One Year Earlier

It was Yuna's idea to hire a social media manager. "This isn't my expertise," she said, sounding flustered. "And you need to have a presence in order to get donations—you can't fund this organization by yourself, not indefinitely. People need to know who you are, what the camp stands for."

"They know who I am," Shane said drily.

"They know who you *were*. You need to stay relevant if you want this to work."

So Shane had interviewed three candidates, all of whom seemed equally good at whatever it was they did. He'd hired Julian Reeves because he had a nice laugh and a flirtatious smile, not that Shane had ever imagined anything would come of it. Julian dressed well, spoke confidently, and didn't seem bothered by Shane's lack of imagination or, frankly, interest in Julian's work. Their first meeting had gone long, stretching from a planned hour to nearly three as Julian pitched ideas, asked questions about Shane's vision for the camp, enthusiastic but not overwhelming.

It wasn't until the third meeting that the flirtation became more overt, unignorable. Small touches—a hand on Shane's arm when he laughed, fingers brushing when passing papers across the table. "You photograph well," Julian said, scrolling through potential images for a campaign. "I mean, obviously you know that, but the camera loves you. That shy smile? We can erase the freckles."

Shane flushed, uncertain how to respond. After Rozanov, he'd reached out to Rose's friend Miles, not to date him, but to ask his advice. He'd started, very discreetly, to arrange hook-ups on Grindr, meeting only at hotels in cities where he was less likely to be recognized, stopping just short of insisting on an NDA from anyone who wanted to fuck him. The results were mixed at best, but he wasn't about to remain celibate for the rest of his life.

He never saw any of those men more than once, never learned their last names, never exchanged numbers—it was better that way, with no complications, without the possibility of getting hurt again.

But Julian had a last name, a job, a reason to be in Shane's life that had nothing to do with sex. He was charming and flatteringly persistent, and so when he'd asked point-black, "Can I take you to dinner?" Shane had said yes.

It was nice. Julian knew how to keep up the conversational flow, didn't seem to mind that Shane was quiet and awkward and kept checking his phone out of nervousness. At the end of the night, standing outside Shane's apartment—where anyone could see them, God it was heady—Julian kissed him, confident, practiced, just enough to make Shane want to lean in for more.

"I'd like to see you again. If you're interested."

They slept together on the fourth date. Shane cooked—badly, but Julian was gracious about it—and they had wine, and then they were kissing on the couch, Julian's hands pushing up under Shane's shirt. "Is this okay? Good, because I've been thinking about this since I walked in for my interview."

Despite being a little shorter—five-ten to Shane’s six feet—Julian was confident, almost aggressive in a way that Shane definitely liked, pushing him back onto the bed and straddling his hips. “God, look at you,” he’d murmured, “you’re fucking gorgeous.”

Shane let himself be pushed around, positioned, told what to do. “Turn over,” Julian said. “On your knees,” and Shane obeyed. Julian seemed to love the contradiction of it, being in charge of someone bigger and stronger than he was. “You like this, don’t you?” Julian had whispered in his ear, fingers working him open with careful patience and plenty of lube. “Like when someone else takes control?”

And he did; Shane knew that much about himself, certainly, but it wasn’t something he’d felt safe enough to allow, not since Rozanov. It was such a *relief*, to have it again. When Julian finally pushed inside him, it had been good—really good, actually. Julian knew what he was doing, found the right angle, kept up a steady stream of praise that made Shane’s face burn. “Take my cock, that’s it, look at you, you love it—”

Afterward, Julian curled against him, traced patterns on Shane’s chest. “That was amazing,” he said. “You’re amazing.”

Shane stared at the ceiling and thought, *This could work. This could be something.*

They fell into a relationship with surprising ease. Julian was good at relationships; he checked in frequently, remembered details about Shane’s schedule. He introduced Shane to his friends, all of whom seemed to know each other, and they spoke a language of pop culture references that Shane could never quite grasp. He met Shane’s friends in turn—Hayden and Jackie at first, then JJ and the rest of the guys who took Shane’s “I’m gay actually, and this is my boyfriend” in stride. He seemed at a loss for how to talk with them, settling on things like the weather and the way Montreal was getting more expensive every year, but the point was, Julian tried.

They started living together very quickly, according to Rose, but it felt gradual to Shane: a toothbrush, a drawer, then half the closet, so that when Julian’s furniture was being delivered and they were discussing paint colors for the guest room that would become Julian’s office, it just seemed to Shane like the natural progression of what was already in motion.

The sex continued to be good, stayed in line with the dynamic they’d established, Shane on hands and knees or maybe bent over the kitchen counter, the lights on so Julian could watch. He liked to talk during sex, liked to give clear instructions—and Shane always liked to know what was expected of him, appreciated the clarity. “Go on,” Julian would gasp, “jerk yourself off. Tell me how good it feels. Tell me how you love my cock.”

“So good,” Shane would say, obediently, his hand working himself while Julian fucked him. “So fucking good, I love it.”

It wasn’t a lie, and Shane knew how to value reliably good sex after going without it for so long. If sometimes his mind wandered, if he had to concentrate in order to come, if sometimes he didn’t manage to come at all—then that was just what it was like to be in a relationship, with the space for desire to ebb from time to time.

He could admit to himself, in the dark with Julian asleep beside him, that it never felt the way it had with Rozanov, that terrible bright urgency, that conflagration. But that was a good thing, because that feverish, all-consuming whatever it was with Rozanov had been unsustainable, unhealthy. Teenage intensity stretched over time to seem like something more than what it was, simply because it had been forbidden.

The proposal was inevitable. He'd just come off a successful first run of the youth camp, with Hayden and JJ and Scott and a bunch of other guys showing up for it, for him, and he felt like he'd done something really *good*, like maybe he had more to offer the world—more to offer himself—than just hockey, even though this was, of course, still about hockey.

Two weeks later, Shane spent three hours cooking the complicated sort of meal Julian loved, had gotten his mother's advice on what wine to serve it with, and after they finish eating, he brought Julian outside to the dock to stand beneath the stars. Shane got down on one knee, and he asked his boyfriend to marry him, told him he couldn't wait for the rest of his life to start.

Shane didn't move. Next to him, Julian was still talking with the woman from *Vogue*, something about how Shane had always been a symbol for progression in hockey, and even at this harrowing moment there was a part of Shane that wanted to bristle, to chime in with something like, "I just played good hockey," but he couldn't because he couldn't seem to say anything, couldn't move, couldn't even fucking blink.

Rozanov stared back at him, his lips parted, his eyes wide and dark. It hadn't been all that long since they'd seen each other, just over a year probably, but it felt like decades, like Shane hadn't properly looked at him since the last time they were alone together, so long ago. And maybe he hadn't; maybe he'd limited himself to glances and scowls and false smiles—but he was looking now, and he saw all the ways Rozanov had changed. There were crow's feet around his eyes, little lines around his mouth, probably from smoking. His cheekbones seemed even higher, the hollows beneath them deeper, his jawline just beginning to soften. But his mouth, and most of all his eyes—those were exactly the same, and even the parts of him that were different were somehow precious, because they were the marks of a life lived.

A life lived *without Shane*, he reminded himself sharply, just as a woman he recognized from photos appeared at Rozanov's side, leaning up to whisper in his ear. This was Svetlana Vetrova, then, Rozanov's *very good friend*. Rozanov tilted his head down to listen, but he never once looked away from Shane, and after a beat her eyes followed his, so that she was looking at Shane, too. She gave him a small smile, said something else to Rozanov before patting his arm and stepping away.

"Holy shit, is that Rozanov? The fuck is he doing here?"

Shane blinked—at last—and turned to find Hayden next to him, looking more bewildered than anything else.

Julian turned, and so did the reporter. “Ilya Rozanov?” she said. “How nice, the two of you setting aside your old rivalry at long last! Excuse me, I’d love to get a quote from him—”

“No!” Shane said, too loudly, and felt the flush crawling up his neck, hot and damning. “Sorry, just—let me talk to him first, okay? It’s, uh...it’s been a long time since we’ve had a chance to catch up.” He pressed Julian’s arm distractedly, then moved away, heading not toward Rozanov but deeper into the crowd. He had to find Rose because Christ alive Shane could not be expected to handle this by himself.

“Since when do you and Rozanov ‘catch up?’” Hayden said in a low voice, and Shane laughed, a little hysterical.

“Never. I have no idea why he’s here, he...” *He fucking crashed my wedding*, Shane thought, and the laugh got bigger, more panicked. His hands were shaking, and he shoved them in his pockets, only to encounter the piss-soaked handkerchief he’d stashed in there. Rozanov was moving toward him and Shane whirled around, headed in the other direction even though he knew it looked like he was running away.

“Whoa, buddy, where are we going?” Hayden was trotting a little to keep up with him. “Do you want me to go talk to him? It’s no trouble. Honestly it would be my absolute pleasure to throw that fucking guy out on his Russian ass—”

“No,” Shane said, though he had no fucking idea why he wouldn’t want precisely that. “Rose—I need to find Rose, she should be the one to talk to him.”

“Shit, yeah, that’s probably a good idea. She’s a lot more, what’s the word? Diplomatic and shit. I could get Jackie though, if Rose isn’t...”

But Rose was. She hurled herself in front of Shane, uncharacteristically graceless, nearly tripping over his foot in her heels. “Ilya Rozanov—” she began, eyes wide.

“I saw,” Shane said. They stared at each other for a moment, and Shane could only begin to imagine what she saw on his face. He had to hope that no one else knew him as well as she did, that if they didn’t already fucking know what Rozanov was—used to be—to Shane, they wouldn’t be able to tell now, just from looking at him.

“I’ll talk to him,” she said, and Shane exhaled heavily, the breath shuddering out of him.

“Thank you. Tell him...I don’t know.”

Rose squeezed his arm, stepped in close to kiss his cheek. “It’ll be okay,” she whispered, and turned away. Shane watched her go, his heart in his throat.

“Babe?”

He turned to find Julian at his elbow, smiling despite the crease of confusion between his brows. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, sorry, I just—” Shane put on a smile, leaned in close when Julian’s hand curved around his waist. “It’s a little weird, having Rozanov here,” he said, in what had to be the

greatest understatement of his lifetime. He watched Rose offer a cool smile to Rozanov; his eyes flicked to her, then immediately back to Shane. “I didn’t know he was coming.”

“Well, the more the merrier, right?” Julian kissed the corner of his mouth, and Shane had to steel himself to keep from flinching away. “This wedding is mostly my friends anyway. It’ll be good to have more hockey people for you to talk to.”

“Right,” Shane said faintly. Rose was talking to Rozanov now, gesturing him outside to the terrace. Svetlana had joined the conversation, her smile conciliatory. “Sure, that’ll be great.”

“Hey.” Julian pulled Shane’s face toward him, thumb gentle on his jaw. “You sure you’re okay?”

Fix it, Shane thought desperately, fix it so he doesn’t know, so nobody knows. He turned his head, pressed a kiss to Julian’s palm, then bent and pressed another to his mouth, made sure it was soft and sweet. Shane could still feel Rozanov’s eyes on him, but when his gaze flicked over, he had turned away, was following Rose out the door, Svetlana at his side. “Why wouldn’t I be?” he said, smiling. “Everything is perfect.”

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

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

Ilya did not like Rose Landry.

He understood that her relationship with Hollander had probably never been anything serious, given that she was at his wedding; on the other hand, she was currently inserting herself where she had no business to be, i.e. between Ilya and the fucking reason he'd come here.

"How did you even get in?" She sounded genuinely confused, and fair enough: there was a decent amount of security for such a remote location.

Ilya smiled at her, coolly flirtatious. "The valet parker, he is a fan of mine. I autographed the tip I gave him."

Svetlana muttered something in Russian Ilya was glad Rose Landry was unable to understand. "We will not be staying long," she said in English.

Rose's eyes narrowed. "And who are you, exactly? I can't believe you brought a fucking date, Mr. Rozanov, Jesus Christ."

"I am not his date," Svetlana said mildly. "He did not have a plus one, I think?"

For a moment, Ilya thought Rose was about to start shouting at them both, and he was honestly a little excited for it—but after a beat, she seemed to catch the spark of wry humor in Svetlana's tone, and gave an exasperated little laugh. "No, he sure didn't," she agreed.

"This is a bad idea," Svetlana said. "He knows this. He won't..." She looked at Ilya, who raised an eyebrow. What exactly was it Svetlana thought he would or wouldn't be doing? Because Ilya hadn't the first clue. "He is not here to make things difficult for Hollander," she settled on at last. "He just wants to talk to him."

"About what?" Rose said flatly. She glanced over her shoulder toward the warm spill of light, lowered her voice. "Look. He's never told anyone about..." she gave Ilya a doubtful look "... your relationship. Julian doesn't know, nobody does. Shane would definitely like to keep it that way."

"Apparently he told you," Ilya pointed out, a little petulant. Svetlana stepped on his foot, ground her heel in, but he barely felt it because he was stuck on the word *relationship*.

"Yeah, well, I'm the exception that proves the rule."

"That doesn't even make sense," Ilya said, irritated. "If you are exception, then the rule is—"

"Завали," Svetlana said sharply. "Just tell her."

“I should shut up or I should talk? Which?”

Svetlana raised her eyes to the heavens, or rather to the twinkle lights strung through the vine-laden trellis. “Ilya,” she said, softer now. “You are here, yes? What do you want to do? Fight with beautiful women? You can do that at home.” Rose let out another surprised laugh, and Svetlana glanced at her, sharing a quick smile that seemed to create an alliance Ilya was distinctly outside of. “His mother died young,” she said, “so instead he has me. It is a thankless job.”

Ilya shot her a betrayed look—they *never* spoke about Irina, and also they fucked sometimes? Granted, it had been nearly a decade since the last time but *still*.

“Shane only accepted he was gay because of how much he hated sex with me,” Rose said, her lips quirking.

Svetlana spread her hands, as if to say *See what we have to put up with?*

Ilya would continue to be annoyed with them both, only he was now stuck on imagining Shane having sex with Rose Landry and hating it. He smiled a little, couldn’t stop himself.

“Okay,” Rose said. “Okay.” She bit her lip, seemed to come to a decision. “I’m not... *unsympathetic* to your position. Or,” she added pointedly, “what I imagine is your position, since you haven’t actually said anything useful, Mr. Rozanov.”

“Ilya,” he said. “And this is Svetlana Vetrova.”

“Hi. Here’s what I can offer you: you have exactly one more minute of my time to convince me to allow you access to Shane. After that, *if* I decide it’s the right thing to do, I will get Shane to hear you out. More than that,” she added, a little more gently, “I cannot promise. If he tells you to leave, you have to go. That’s it.”

After a beat, Ilya nodded. It was all he could ask for, more than he deserved.

“All right then.” Rose made a show of glancing at her bare wrist; there was no watch, but Ilya had the sense that she would somehow give him sixty seconds precisely, and nothing more. “Go ahead.”

The thing about being Ilya Rozanov was, he always had something to say. Quick with a comeback or a deflection or an insult, even when he could barely find the words in English. He could make the people around him laugh or want to hit him, usually both, and he knew how to make those he cared about—Svetlana, Marly, Connors, most of the rest of his teammates—feel loved, to know how important they were to him, even if he did it in a particularly *Ilya Rozanov* sort of way.

He’d never known what to say about Shane Hollander.

How could he explain someone that lived in his chest? That for twenty years, Ilya had carried him around like an extra organ, squeezed in where it wasn’t supposed to be, there wasn’t room for it, but it was *necessary*.

He thought about Hollander at strange times. In the middle of games, scanning the opposing bench for him even though it wasn't his team they were playing. In the middle of the night, wondering if Hollander was also awake, if he too thought about Ilya sometimes. When he fucked other people, which he did, often, frantically, because maybe this time he'd finally forget the feeling of Hollander's hands on him, his mouth, the tight fucking closeness of him.

What did Ilya want to say to him? He wanted to take him by the shoulders and shake him and say, *You've ruined me for anyone else. With your stupid clothes like your mother still picks them out, the way you pout when you lose, the way you can't tell a joke to save your life, the way you look at me still after all this time, after all that I did.*

"Ilya," Svetlana said softly, and he realized he'd been standing there silent for—how long? Not a minute, surely. Rose Landry was watching him with something that looked humiliatingly like pity. He shut his eyes to block it out.

"I know I have no right to be here," he said, shoving the words out like boulders over a cliff. "I know that. But I have thought about him every day for twenty years. And I think...I think he should know that. He deserves to know that."

Svetlana took his hand, squeezed it, and Ilya squeezed back, grateful. When at last he managed to open his eyes again, Rose's expression had shifted to something softer, kinder than pity, though Ilya couldn't possibly have said what it was.

"There's a rose garden," she said, "over toward the barn. Go wait there."

Ilya's knee—the bad one, that hurt when he rested his feet on the coffee table for too long—nearly gave out. "Thank you."

"If he tells you to fuck off, you fuck off. Understood?"

"Yes."

Svetlana released his hand, shoved him lightly in the middle of his back to get him going. He walked through the twilight with his eyes on his feet, listening to his shoes crunch loudly on the gravel path, the sounds of party fading behind him. The rose garden was strung with more twinkle lights, but they were softer out here in the darkness away from the crowd of people; just a gentle warm glow. It was too early for blooms, the timing was all wrong, and the bushes were all leaves and thorns, skeletal. There was a stone bench in the center and he thought about sitting down to wait, but he couldn't make himself settle, so instead he paced in a loop, made himself dizzy. He shoved his hands in his pockets and tried to imagine what he'd say, what Hollander would say back, but no matter how many times he went over it, there was no version that didn't end with Hollander telling Ilya to go and never come back.

He was starting to think Hollander had told Rose to go to hell, that he wasn't coming—but then he heard footsteps, heavy breathing in the darkness beyond the light. He thought for a wild second that someone had come out here to fuck, some drunk couple seeking privacy, but then something wiry-soft and about knee-high collided with him, causing him to stumble.

“Gordie, heel,” he heard Hollander say, but it was half-hearted. Ilya crouched down, and the dog licked all over his face, enthusiastic and slobbery.

“Блядский ад,” he said, laughing. “Dogs—they make you smile and then they take advantage and lick inside your mouth. Devious little bastards.”

“I’m not sure anyone has ever called Gordie *devious*,” Hollander said, amused. “A bastard, though, absolutely.”

“But you are such a good boy,” Ilya said, rubbing behind Gordie’s ears. “You are an angel, anyone can see this.”

“You literally just said he was—”

“Don’t listen to him,” Ilya said as the dog rolled over, tail wagging in the gravel, creating little swirling patterns as he offered up his belly. “We just met but already I love you. Come here, yes, give me kiss.”

“He licks his own asshole. Just so you know where his mouth has been.”

“Ah, well, who doesn’t enjoy a little asshole from time to time?” Ilya looked up, grinning, caught the white flash of Hollander’s answering smile. It was so easy, then, to remember how Hollander would whimper when Ilya licked at him, thrust his tongue inside, worked him open with his mouth—so easy to get hard, just by being close enough to breathe the same air as him.

Nothing was safe, Ilya thought, disgusted with himself. Not even a fucking dog.

He gave Gordie another rub, since it wasn’t his fault at all, and got to his feet. Hollander backed up a step, and Ilya could see the tension in his perfectly straight shoulders, the defensive set of his jaw.

“So,” he said carefully. “Rose said you wanted to talk.”

All of the ideas Ilya had come up with for what he wanted to say to him flew right out of his head. “Yes,” he said stupidly.

Hollander made an impatient gesture, *Go on then*.

“You are...getting married.”

Hollander huffed, incredulous, gestured back toward the glow of the cocktail party. “No shit. And I’d very much like to get back to it, if you wouldn’t mind telling me what the fuck it is you want?”

It was a fair question, one Ilya would love to have an answer for. What *did* he want? It would be easier to say what he didn’t want, all the things he couldn’t have. “I—” he stopped, started again. “I was sad when you retired. It was no fun playing anymore, without you there.”

Hollander sighed, scrubbed a hand over his face. “Is that seriously what you came here to say?”

“No. Yes—Hollander, I’m trying to...” He ducked his head, inhaled a breath that smelled of fairly-clean dog and *Canada*, outdoorsy and leaf-strewn. “I’m trying to say I missed you,” he said roughly.

When at last he looked up, Hollander was staring at him, and Ilya flinched away. “You *missed me*? Are you fucking kidding me? After—” he stopped, breathing heavily. “What did you expect? That I’d wait around for you to, what, change your mind and decide any of this actually fucking mattered?”

“No, I—”

“I moved the fuck on, Rozanov,” he said coldly. Gordie, sensing the tension, had stopped wagging and was looking between them uncertainly, ears back. “I’m getting married tomorrow, to someone who actually wants me. Who actually likes me.”

It came out broken, too small: “I liked you.”

Hollander laughed, harsh and painful and nothing at all like himself. “Bullshit. You liked fucking me, sure. But the second it got complicated, the second I wanted—” he cut himself off, shook his head. “You know what, it doesn’t matter. I don’t know why I came out here.”

“I still like you,” Ilya said, a little desperate now. “Shane, please, I know it was years ago, but —”

“It was a fucking decade ago! Jesus Christ! You want me to say I forgive you? Fine. You’re fucking forgiven. You want absolution, it’s yours. Now get the fuck out.”

He turned to go, and Ilya felt something in his chest tear open. Twenty years of carrying Hollander around inside him, and he simply could not—*could not*—let him go now. His hand shot out, grabbed Hollander’s arm, felt the muscle tense beneath his fingers.

“Don’t touch me.” Hollander’s voice was low, dangerous.

But he didn’t listen, hauled him in close, and Hollander swung at him, caught him in the jaw, not hard but enough to make Ilya blink, his teeth clack together.

“I said don’t fucking touch me!” Hollander shoved at his chest. “What is wrong with you? You can’t just—you don’t get to show up here and—”

“I know,” Ilya said, holding on. “I know, but—” He kissed him.

Hollander went completely rigid, made a shocked, furious sound against Ilya’s mouth—but an instant later, his hands fisted in Ilya’s jacket and he was kissing back, rough and desperate. He caught Ilya’s bottom lip, bit down hard enough to sting, and Ilya groaned into his mouth.

He had convinced himself over the years that he’d exaggerated it in his memory, that kissing Hollander couldn’t have been this good, because nothing was, because memory was

unreliable and regret was a liar. How could anything be so familiar, so *safe* almost, and also so unfathomable, as if there were depths to kissing Hollander that could never be reached, not if he had a thousand years to try.

Hollander had always kissed like he was starving for it, like would take whatever he was given—but now he was insurmountable, his mouth hot and demanding and *perfect*, and when Ilya licked into it, when he tasted him properly for the first time in so very long—God, how had he lived without this?—it felt like returning to a home he'd never even had, like he'd come across a house with all the lights left on, warm and welcoming, intended for someone else entirely, because no one in their right mind would let in someone like him.

He gave back everything Hollander offered and then some, untucking his shirt and running his hands beneath it, over his skin, the warmth and smoothness of it, *fuck*. Hollander made a broken sound, yanked him closer, his own hands everywhere—in Ilya's hair, gripping his shoulders, his ass. Ilya couldn't breathe, didn't want to, just wanted this: Hollander's mouth on his, Hollander's hands on his body, Hollander, Hollander, Hollander.

“Shane?”

Hollander wrenched himself away, stumbling back. His chest was heaving, lips swollen and shining wet as he touched his mouth with shaking fingers.

“Fuck,” he whispered.

“Shane?” Julian's voice cut through the darkness, closer now, footsteps on the gravel path. “Shane, where'd you go? Everyone is looking for you.”

Ilya grabbed him, spun him around, tucked his shirt back in, smoothed his hair where he'd mussed it. “Here,” he called, impressed at how steady he sounded. He wiped Shane's mouth with the back of his hand, then his own, lips still tingling. “We're here.”

February, 2017

“First game in Montreal in a while,” Marleau offered, grinning.

Ilya grunted, didn't answer. He leaned forward, focused on lacing his skates just as if it was his first time tying a fucking knot.

“So?” Marly nudged him, trying again. “You going to see her tonight, or what?”

“See who.” He untied his left skate, tied it again.

“Come on, man,” Marly scoffed. “What happened, you break up?”

The lace snapped, and Ilya spat out a curse. “No. Leave me alone.”

He didn’t have to look to see that Marly’s face had fallen, like the big fucking softie he was. “Aw, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...” he sat down on the bench, his pads bumping into Ilya’s shoulder. “You want to talk about it?”

Ilya took a deep breath, let it out slowly. “I want to get a new lace.”

Later, at intermission, after he’d spent the first two quarters chasing Hollander around the ice only to get slammed by Comeau for his trouble, and then when Marly stepped up in answer he’d had to pair up with Hollander during the ensuing scrum, Hollander who wouldn’t even fucking look at him.

So he’d tripped him because Ilya was at his core a fucking asshole who ruined everything.

Hollander had gone down hard, and for a second their eyes had met, but instead of the anger Ilya had wanted, Hollander gave him nothing at all. His face was blank, empty.

He slammed his helmet on the ground, muttered something rude when Connors handed it back to him. “The fuck, man? You never fight, or hardly ever, and Hollander *really* never does. What’s going on with you two? I know you’re always going at it, but...”

“Oh shit.”

Ilya’s head snapped up. Marly was staring at him, his eyes wide with a dawning realization. “Jane’s not...”

Ilya’s heart fucking stopped, and he shook his head frantically, tried to say *No it’s not what you think* but of course the English wouldn’t come even though he could fucking *dream* in English now after all this time.

“She’s not...” Marly looked almost sick now “...Hollander’s girlfriend, is she?”

Ilya sputtered, choked out “No! She’s...” He had to say something, they wouldn’t get off his back if he didn’t. “She’s just a girl I used to fuck, that’s all. It’s done.” He forced himself to shrug, his shoulder stiff and aching. “There are other women.”

Connie clapped him on the back. “Damn straight, bro. We’ll go out tonight, find you some quality pussy—by tomorrow, you won’t even remember her name.”

Ilya thought about the last time he’d gone out in Montreal, how Hollander had watched him like Ilya taken a knife to him—but then he’d gone home with Rose Landry, hadn’t he? Because Ilya had never once been able to give him what he wanted, what he needed.

“No,” he said through the tightness of his throat. “Not tonight. Another time, maybe.”

They lost 5-2.

Marly and Connie didn’t go out without him, but sandwiched him between them on his bed (it was absurdly too small for the three of them, mostly Marly’s fault) and fed him tequila

(disgusting) and soggy poutine (worse) and watched episodes of *Bake Off* with him until at last he fell asleep.

They did that every night they were on the road for the entire rest of the season.

“Hi, babe,” Hollander said, his voice a little thready. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to vanish.”

Julian—handsome, clean-cut, self-assured Julian—gave Hollander a warm, loving look that had Ilya hiding his clenched fist behind his back. “Of course not,” he said, indulgent. “You *love* being at parties.” He pulled Hollander in for a kiss, and Ilya watched with a smile on his face, told himself that now his saliva was on Julian’s mouth just as if he’d spit at him. “I totally understand you wanting to catch up with an old friend—and hang with Gordie, of course.” He reached a hand out, and Ilya watched with pleasure as Gordie glanced at it disinterestedly before butting his head against Ilya’s hip.

“Yes,” Hollander said, then coughed. Ilya stepped in close, thumped him on the back, smiling broadly.

“Sorry,” he said brightly. “Didn’t mean to take him away from you. Julian, right?”

“And you must be Ilya Rozanov.” Julian’s handshake was firm, his palm soft. “I’m a huge fan.”

“Is that right?”

Julian laughed lightly. “Well, as much as I am of any of Shane’s hockey friends. Not my scene, I’m afraid. But you’re staying, aren’t you? We’ve got a whole weekend planned.”

Ilya glanced at Hollander. He didn’t shake his head, didn’t say *Don’t you dare*—because he didn’t have to. The murderous, trapped look on his face said more than enough. “Ah. Well. I would love nothing more, but...” Beside him, Gordie whined, and Ilya knelt down, let him lick all over his face. This was a good dog, he thought, scratching behind the velvet-soft ears. And Shane had a good life. Ilya had come here because he had to, and he’d let Shane know that he was still wanted, that he always would be. There wasn’t anything else for Ilya to do here except let him go.

So he pet Shane’s dog once last time, opened his mouth to give his regrets, looked up and stopped dead because just for a second—a breath, no more than that—he saw Shane’s face open and soft with that same beautiful, impossible sweetness. He was looking at Ilya the way he always had when he forgot or was simply unable to stop himself, and for once in his fucking life Ilya decided he would not run away from it. Not this time.

“Sure,” he said easily, and got to his feet. “Why not?”

He heard Shane gasp, a quick intake of breath.

“Excellent!” Julian said. “You’ll have a great time, I’m sure. Hayden is here, of course.”

“Of course,” Ilya said. “Pike and I are old friends, go back a very long time.” Shane choked again, and Ilya shook his head. “You sure you are okay, Shane? You aren’t allergic to anything, right? Besides fun, of course,” he added for Julian’s benefit. “He is the most boring man alive, yes?”

Julian barked out a laugh, causing Shane to flinch a little, a perceptible tightening around his eyes. “Well, maybe not the *most* boring, but he’s probably up there.” He took Shane’s hand, kissed his palm. “We’re working on it. It’s only been a year since he retired—give me a little time, and he’ll quit talking about rainfall statistics and birdwatching.”

“I’m sure.” Ilya looked at Shane, added softly, “Of course, some people like that sort of thing in a guy.”

“It’s true. You wouldn’t be you if you weren’t a little boring, baby.”

Shane blinked a little, then smiled, said “Thanks. I think.” He snapped his fingers and Gordie instantly trotted over to give them an affectionate lick. “I’m just going to run him back to the house. Julian, do you want to…”

“I’ll walk Ilya back to the party. It’s our wedding, at least one of us has to stick around for it. Don’t stay away too long, okay?”

“I’ll be right there, I promise.”

Ilya didn’t want to leave him, but he thought that Shane would probably explode if they didn’t give him a moment to breathe. “Yes,” he said, shoving his hands in his pockets. “I am out of champagne.”

Julian was easy to talk to, which was annoying. He worked in social media management, had built up Shane’s online presence from nothing, and was charming in that effortless way that came from being handsome and well-liked his entire life. Ilya smiled and laughed and thought about all the many bones in his body he’d like to break.

Shane came back twenty minutes later, and the first thing he did was find his fiancé. He slid an arm around Julian’s waist, pressed a kiss to his temple, ignoring Ilya entirely. “Sorry I took so long,” he murmured.

“That’s okay, baby.” Julian turned into the embrace, and Shane kissed him again, properly this time, his hand coming up to cup Julian’s jaw. When they broke apart, Shane kept his arm around Julian’s waist, possessive or anchoring or both. “Thanks for keeping Ilya company, but you don’t need to worry about him. He has plenty of friends here.” He pulled Julian away without a single glance back.

Ilya downed his glass of champagne and went to get himself another.

The evening, incredibly, only got worse from there. Hayden fucking Pike came to talk to him, all joking and friendly just as if Ilya hadn’t hated him for the better part of his life because he

had access to Shane's life in a way Ilya never had. "Howdy," he said. "I guess you're staying?"

"I guess so," Ilya said, a little surly. "This is your wife?" He glanced at the quite lovely woman beside him. "She is too good for you."

"Don't I know it," she said, and leaned in to give Ilya a hug. "I'm a huge fan."

"This is Jackie, and she's lying, she hates you. We all do."

"You're all retired, Hayden, give it a rest." She took a sip of champagne, seemed to savor it. "A full weekend without the kids. God bless Shane, I tell you."

"Yes, I'm sure that's why he's dragging us through this godawful affair," Hayden said drily.

Ilya leaned forward, suddenly much more interested. "You don't like this wedding?"

Hayden shifted his weight, looking caught. "Oh, no—I mean, of course I do. It's just..." he gestured vaguely. "It's not really Shane's kind of thing, you know? More Julian's. Which is a perfectly good reason," he added hastily.

"Shane wants to make his man happy," Ilya said, and took a moment to savor the way it felt to say his name aloud.

Hayden seemed to think this was enough friendliness and took his wife off to dance very badly, the two of them smiling at each other, completely unembarrassed. The whole room was smiling, and everyone who had ever been tangentially involved with hockey—including a very nosy reporter from *Vogue*, didn't they mostly just take pictures?—seemed to decide that they needed to make Ilya feel personally welcome at Shane Hollander's wedding, let rivalry bygones be bygones, isn't this a hell of a thing, Shane Hollander in love, so happy for him.

He tried to get Svetlana to come over and rescue him, but she was having none of it, was instead talking animatedly with the Metros coach, explaining to him all the things he had done wrong in his entire (very successful) career. Theriault looked like he was either on the verge of throwing his drink in her face or writing down every word she ever said for future reference; Ilya could relate.

He found a chair in the corner of the terrace outside, wrought iron and uncomfortable, where he could look in the window while smoking a cigarette or maybe ten. He bribed a caterer to bring him more champagne, started drinking directly from the bottle when he saw Shane laugh at something Rose said, leaning into Julian and smiling—his actual smile, that rare, real thing.

The bottle was halfway gone before someone found him, dragged a metal chair with a clang the made Ilya scowl, and settled in with a very middle-aged dad sort of sigh.

"Rozanov," Scott Hunter said.

Ilya tilted his head to get a better look at him. His vision had gone a little blurry at the edges—was this perhaps his second bottle of champagne? He couldn't remember. "Hunter."

"You look like shit."

"Thank you. You also look like shit. Marriage is very bad for you, I think. Too many smoothies."

Scott laughed, settling back in his chair. "Probably," he admitted. "Once a food becomes a love language, it's hard to get away from it. But the day I tell Kip I hate his smoothies is the day I cut my own balls off."

Ilya grinned. "They are so tiny, he would not even notice."

"Go fuck yourself," Scott said genially. He stretched his legs in front of him, reached out a hand; Ilya passed him the bottle, mostly because he was curious about why Scott would bother with him. They weren't what you'd call friendly.

"So. What are you doing here, exactly? I know it's not because you're so overjoyed about this wedding."

"You don't know anything," Ilya grumbled, pulling another cigarette from his pack.

"Sure I don't." There was a dry note of amusement in Scott's voice that Ilya couldn't really understand. "You planning to make a scene, or just drink until you pass out?"

Ilya looked at him sharply. "What scene? I'm sitting here quietly, smoking a cigarette. Is that not allowed? You're the one making a big deal."

Scott went quiet, took another drink from the bottle before handing it back. "You remember the All-Star game back in...whatever the fuck. I think it was your first?"

Ilya shrugged. "The time I broke your record."

"Only to have Shane shave off a full second," Scott retorted. "I had the hotel room next to yours."

That, Ilya remembered. He'd fantasized for weeks leading up to it about talking Shane into letting him fuck him, and it hadn't happened because Scott fucking Hunter was in the room next door. It hadn't happened for another *two years* after that.

No wonder he'd always hated Hunter.

"It's not information I ever wanted to have," Scott went on calmly, "but, you know, I had it. I didn't do anything with it. Maybe I should have told you, or Shane probably since he's not such a fucking asshole. Maybe I should have let you guys know you weren't alone."

It took Ilya far longer than it should have to process all of that. Scott had...*known*? All this time? When he'd won the Cup and kissed his boyfriend on the ice for all the world to see, Ilya had wanted to reach out, to thank him maybe even though it was much too late for him

and Shane. But he didn't, because as Scott had so rightly pointed out, he was a fucking asshole.

He watched through the window; Shane was dancing with Rose now, awkward but clearly having a good time anyway, his freckled cheeks flushed pink and his eyes bright.

"Okay," he said, because he didn't know what else to say. "It doesn't matter now, anyway."

"Doesn't it?" Scott leaned forward, elbows on his bony knees. "I saw his face when you came in. I just think...maybe don't count yourself out yet. Not until the 'I do' is actually said."

Ilya took another drink, was sorry to find the bottle empty. "Why do you care?"

"Because I spent most of my life hiding who I was, and when I finally came out, you know what the worst part was? Not the press, not the assholes on Twitter. It was realizing how much time I'd wasted, how much happiness I'd given up because I was scared." He stood up, stretched. "And you're a dick, Rozanov, but you're not a coward. So stop acting like one."

"Fuck off, Hunter."

"Yeah, yeah." Scott clapped him on the shoulder, probably a little harder than necessary. "Drink some water, you're going to feel like death tomorrow. And for God's sake, stop lurking in the dark like a serial killer. You're making the caterers nervous."

He left, and Ilya sat there with his empty bottle of champagne, the cigarette burned down to the filter between his fingers, watching through the window as Shane danced with Julian now, the two of them swaying together, Julian's head on Shane's shoulder.

Chapter End Notes

Завали - shut up

Блядский ад - fucking hell

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

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

Shane was drunk.

It wasn't a feeling he typically enjoyed; he didn't get the fuzzy good humor or even the belligerent boisterousness that Hayden assured him was really very fun actually, provided you weren't a dick about it. Instead he got tired, a little headache-y, overwhelmed. But he did have trouble thinking clearly, and that was what he wanted: to be utterly unable to think.

So he abandoned his ginger ale and drank champagne, and then more champagne, felt the world turn slightly unreal, like he was living behind frosted glass. Julian, for his part, was delighted: "You never let loose like this, baby!"

He didn't want to think about how he could feel the prickling awareness of Rozanov's eyes on him, always watching, how it made Shane feel like he had to perform his own affection, as if to say, *See? I'm in love, fuck off.*

He didn't want to think about how it had felt, kissing Rozanov again after all this time, how he could still make Shane tremble and want the way no one else ever had or probably ever would, how he still kissed Shane like he needed it, like Shane was something precious and essential, like Shane was all he could ever want. He kept touching his lips with his fingertips, like he could still feel the ghost of Rozanov's mouth there.

He especially didn't want to think about how it felt to kiss Julian, after—a little cold, a little exhibitionist. Formulaic, maybe? Like somewhere along the way some part of Shane had jotted down notes on how Julian liked to be kissed, and he'd stuck with that, stuck with what worked because he didn't really need anything else.

He switched to whiskey, which he hated, and let Rose pull him onto the dance floor even though she knew he hated that, too. She lifted his arm over her head, spun around beneath it, and he laughed because he loved her. Other couples danced beside them; his parents, Hayden and Jackie, Scott and Kip, plenty of Julian's friends, all of them having the time of their lives, happy with each other, happy for *him*.

Rose pulled him in close, pressed her cheek to his. "You okay?" she whispered. "How did it go?"

Shane's throat tightened. He opened his mouth to answer, though what he'd say he didn't know, but the words wouldn't come. His eyes were hot and stinging, and he was terrified he might actually start crying right there on the dance floor in front of everyone.

But then Julian was there, cutting in, taking Shane's hand. "I'm stealing my fiancé, I can't believe you got him to dance."

Rose stepped back, and Shane let Julian pull him close. He stumbled a little—his feet weren't quite receiving his brain's instructions—and Julian caught him, frowning. "Wow, okay. Maybe you've had enough champagne."

"Maybe," Shane agreed, but when someone walked by with a tray of glasses, he grabbed another one anyway, downed half of it in one gulp.

"Shane—"

"I'm fine," he said, a little too sharply, and Julian's expression flickered in surprise. "Sorry," Shane said, and tugged him in close, "sorry. It's just...a lot of people. I wish it was just the two of us, you know?" He drank the rest of the champagne, knocking back the guilt like a too-large pill.

"I know you do, baby," Julian said, and wrapped his arms around Shane's waist, hooked his chin on Shane's shoulder, swaying them both to the music. "Soon. We have our whole lives together."

Shane's stomach lurched, the alcohol churning, and he turned his head away. And there, framed perfectly in a window like a painting, was Ilya Rozanov, a champagne bottle dangling in one hand and a glowing cigarette in the other, watching him, always watching. Shane looked back, as he always had, and everything else fell away—the music, the people, Julian's arms around him—until it was just the two of them, staring at each other. No one had ever looked at him the way Rozanov did.

"Shane?" Julian sounded concerned, and Shane realized he'd stopped moving entirely, had gone rigid in Julian's arms. "You're kind of freaking me out now. What's going on?"

"Nothing," Shane said, and made himself look at Julian instead. He kissed him, hard and with tongue, knew that Rozanov was watching him do it, and he couldn't tell why that made him feel guilty, too.

When he pulled back, Julian was smiling. "I think I like drunk Shane."

Shane's stomach rolled again, and suddenly the room was spinning, the lights too bright, the music too loud, everything pressing in on him at once. "I need—I'm going to go check on Gordie."

"The dog's fine, babe. He's probably asleep by now."

"I know, I just—" Shane pulled away, and Julian let him go with obvious reluctance. "I'll be right back."

"Shane—"

But he was already moving, pushing through the clusters of people, mumbling apologies when he bumped into someone. A hand found his arm, steered him toward the door, and the cool air hit him like a splash of water to the face. "I'm fine—"

“You’re really not.” Rose steered him away from the party, down the terrace steps and into the garden. “When’s the last time I saw you this drunk? Has it ever happened?”

“Probably not,” Shane mumbled.

They walked in silence, and he was grateful for it. The estate was beautiful at night, the crickets singing loud enough to be heard over the music and laughter, a gibbous moon overhead casting silver shadows between the gold of the twinkle lights.

When they reached the rose garden, Shane stopped, sat down hard on the stone bench in the center. “I kissed him,” he said miserably.

Rose sat down beside him, rested her head on his shoulder. “It’s okay.”

“It’s *not*. I’m ruining everything.” The tears spilled over, and he wiped at them with his sleeve. “Julian planned this whole weekend, everyone’s here, everyone’s so happy for us, and I’m—” he gestured helplessly at himself. “I’m so fucked up. Ilya, he—he fucked me up so badly. I spent years trying to get over him and I *did*, I was *happy*, and then he shows up here and...how can he just walk back into my life and make me feel like this?”

“I don’t know,” Rose said softly. “I think maybe...maybe sometimes it’s like that? That there’s a person who, for whatever reason, is someone you’ll always feel something for. I’m not saying you’re soulmates or anything, just...he’s someone you’d choose, if you could.”

“I hate it,” Shane said, sniffing a little. “I *don’t* choose him.”

“Okay,” she said, easy, not argumentative. It still made him want to push harder.

“We were never...he doesn’t...”

“Shane,” she said, a little exasperated. “Clearly you were, and he obviously does or he wouldn’t be here. Whether that matters, I don’t know—only you can answer that. But,” she said, standing up. “I don’t think you should try to figure it out right now. You need to sleep this off, get your head clear.”

Shane let her pull him to his feet, though his legs were shaky and the world still spun. They continued through the garden, until the farmhouse was visible through the trees, warm light glowing in the window from the bedroom he’d be sharing with Julian tonight.

His stomach lurched again and he stopped, bracing himself on his knees. “I’m going to throw up.”

“Please wait until we get you to a toilet so no one has to clean it up.”

“Right.” He breathed through it, swallowed bile. “I can’t go back there. I can’t face him.” He wasn’t sure which *him* he meant.

“Oh, you’re not going to. I’ll tell Julian you’re not feeling well, that you’ll sleep in one of the guest rooms so you won’t wake him up when you do inevitably vomit.” She guided him through the door, steered them both into a guest room, the one not occupied by David and

Yuna. Shane collapsed on the bed fully clothed, let Gordie hop on the bed and lick his face, his neck. Rose pulled off his shoes, threw a blanket over him, set a glass of water and the trash can beside the bed.

She smoothed a cool hand over his forehead, pressed a kiss to his sweaty temple. “Get some sleep, okay? Try not to make any decisions tonight. There’s still time.”

She shut the light off and closed the door, but Shane lay awake in the darkness. Gordie settled against his side with a contented sigh, warm and solid, his breathing already evening out into sleep.

The room spun less when Shane kept his eyes open, fixed on a single point—a crack in the ceiling like a river on a map, a dividing line. His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he pulled it out, wincing away from the bright screen.

Julian: where did you go? you ok?

Julian: rose said you’re not feeling well. can’t say I’m surprised lol. feel better, love you.

Shane’s thumb hovered over the keyboard. *I kissed another man today. I don’t think you want to marry someone who would do that.* But he couldn’t say that, not without ruining everything—it would be more for his own sake, would only hurt Julian, and he didn’t want that.

Shane: sorry. drank too much. see you tomorrow.

The phone buzzed again almost immediately, and Shane reached for it automatically—but it wasn’t Julian. The notification showed a text from a number he no longer had saved, had deleted from his contacts years ago, but had never managed to forget.

Unknown: i just want you to be happy. that’s all that matters to me. if you tell me to go i promise i will leave. i won’t bother you again.

Shane stared at it for so long he thought the words would probably be imprinted on his retinas, that he would see them when he closed his eyes for the rest of his life.

He typed out a series of messages, each more painful than the last. *I think that would be for the best. You shouldn’t have come in the first place. I never want to see you. I wish I never knew you.*

In the end, though, he sent nothing at all.

February, 2017

Unknown: sorry for tripping you

Unknown: i lied, sorry you can't skate for shit

Unknown: i know it was your bad ankle though ice it please

March, 2017

Unknown: can i call you. please. just for a minute.

Shane: why? we have nothing to talk about [deleted, unsent]

Shane: what's wrong? are you okay??? [deleted, unsent]

Shane: i just heard about your father. i'm so sorry. call me in an hour if you still want to.

April, 2017

Unknown: are you okay?

Unknown: please be okay. i don't know what i would do if you weren't

Unknown: they say you have a concussion, a broken collarbone. marleau is sorry, it was an accident.

Unknown: i am sorry too

Shane: fuck off with your sorry [deleted, unsent]

Shane: finish that sentence. what do you mean, if i wasn't okay? [deleted, unsent]

Shane: thank you for checking on me [deleted, unsent]

May, 2017

Unknown: happy birthday, i got you some good headphones so you can listen to boring audiobooks without hurting your head

June, 2017

Unknown: scott fucking hunter. who would have thought.

Shane: right??? what the hell?? [deleted, unsent]

May, 2018

Unknown: happy birthday, i got you a butt plug. it's purple. you're welcome.

Shane: what the fuck is wrong with you, YOU BROKE UP WITH ME [deleted, unsent]

May, 2019

Unknown: happy birthday, i got you a high-quality knife set so you can stab me

May, 2020

Unknown: happy birthday, i got you a full-sized cardboard cut out of me. i'll sign it if you ask nicely.

June, 2020

Unknown: congratulations. third cup, you should put all your trophies in a room and jerk off on them, that's what i do

Unknown: and mvp too, you want me to suck your dick or what

Shane: why can't you just leave me alone [deleted, unsent]

Shane: YES. FUCK YOU. [deleted, unsent]

May, 2021

Unknown: happy birthday, i didn't get you anything.

May, 2022

Unknown: happy birthday, i got you one of those sad lamps they use for seasonal depression since you live in a frozen hellscape

February, 2023

Unknown: update: the lamp works for shit

Shane: are you depressed? [deleted, unsent]

May, 2023

Unknown: happy birthday, i got you a dog. no i didn't. i want a dog though.

May, 2024

Unknown: happy birthday, i got you one of those green egg things for grilling, it's so fancy you'll love it.

Unknown: okay so I actually did buy it and i'm trying to use it and what the fuck is this thing how does it work

May, 2025

Unknown: happy birthday, i hear you like birds i got you a bird cam so you can watch the birds better.

Unknown: name five birds hollander

Unknown: i bet you can't

Unknown: five birds that aren't sports teams

Shane: loon goose crow duck wait shit do movies count [deleted, unsent]

Shane: loon goose crow starling gull also fuck you [deleted, unsent]

Shane: did you know it's wrong to call them seagulls, they're all just gulls because they all live by the sea, it's redundant [deleted, unsent]

May, 2026

Unknown: happy birthday, I got you a car. one of my cars, actually, you can have it. really i'm selling it, i don't know what i'm doing with so many cars when i can only drive one at a time.

Unknown: you can still have one though. which one would you like? something boring probably but none of my cars are boring so too bad for you.

June, 2026

Unknown: you are retiring? already? hollander, it's too soon, we are not old enough yet. we will stay until we are decrepit like scott hunter.

Unknown: it won't be the same without you there.

Brunch, Shane decided, was a meal specifically invented to torment him. It happened at the brightest time of day, involved both alcohol *and* caffeine, two things that did not mesh well with his system, chemically speaking, and every available food item was decidedly not macrobiotic. Not that he was strictly following his diet anymore, but still.

He emerged from the bathroom showered and shaved, in a cream suit but no tie, and the largest pair of sunglasses his only slightly judgmental mother could find. "Don't drink too much tonight," she warned.

“I won’t, Mom,” he said, too tired to point out that he had gotten drunk precisely once in the past decade and so probably did not need to be told not to do it again for at least another.

“I’m just saying, it’s your bachelor party tonight, things are likely to get a little wild and you don’t want to—”

“*Mom*. It’s a barbecue with a few of my friends, I’m not having strippers over.”

The brunch was being held in the barn, long wooden tables lined with benches and frothing over with yellow and blue flowers that Shane definitely knew the names of at some point.

Ilya was already there.

He stood near the entrance in dark jeans and a fairly ugly shirt that stretched across his chest, the buttons gaping a little. It ought to have looked tacky and it *did*, but somehow that had never seemed to translate properly in Shane’s mind. The shirt was objectively awful, and Shane wanted to tear it off of him. Some things never changed.

He was ever so slightly pleased to note that Ilya also looked a little haggard, with deep shadows under his eyes that spoke of too little sleep.

Gordie spotted them first, lifting his head from where he’d sitting beside David, letting out a happy bark. He bounded toward Shane, fifty pounds of muscular enthusiasm, and Shane had time to say only “Gordie, down” before his paws landed squarely on his chest. He staggered back a step, catching himself

“Sorry,” David called from across the barn.

Ilya knelt down to draw Gordie’s attention, giving Shane enough time to wince at the mud on his white suit (why had he thought that was a good idea?) before standing, brushing his hand off before offering it to Yuna. “Ilya Rozanov, hello.”

“I know who you are,” she said, a little haughtily, though she shook his hand politely enough. “I didn’t realize you and Shane had become such good friends.”

“Ah, well. There was never really anyone else, you know?” He glanced at Shane, who went very still, focused on petting Gordie and not looking at anyone. “Nobody played as well as either of us—it’s not nice to say, but…”

“It’s true,” Yuna agreed with a sniff.

“I don’t think anybody in the world could ever understand me like Shane.” Shane’s breath caught, and when he finally looked up, Ilya’s eyes were shadowed, bloodshot, and he’d cut himself shaving, a tiny nick just below his jaw. He looked back at Shane, intense, then away, then back, like he couldn’t decide which was better, or perhaps worse. “I understand him, too, I think.”

Yuna had a little frown between her eyebrows, the line she got when something wasn’t quite adding up for her—usually an accounting error or an omitted clause in an agreed-upon

contract. “Oh. Well, that makes sense, I suppose. I hadn’t ever really thought about it like that.”

“So of course I wanted to come celebrate his special day,” Ilya said. “I want nothing but the best for him.

Shane could see it even as it was happening: his mother *liked* Ilya Rozanov. She’d spent the past twenty years despising him when it wasn’t necessary, and now when it would actually be sort of helpful, she was smiling at him, probably planning a way to get him involved in Shane’s foundation. Before he knew it, Ilya would be invited to fucking Christmas dinner.

“I’m going to get some food,” he said loudly, and Gordie wagged his tail.

“A good idea,” Svetlana said wryly, coming to stand beside him. Shane hadn’t even noticed her there. “I will go with you.”

She took his arm, and he braced himself for her to make excuses for Ilya, to try to speak on his behalf, to tell Shane he owed it to Ilya to give him a chance. Instead she said, “I like your friends. They care about you.”

“Oh. Uh, thanks. I like them, too.”

“You are a good person, I think, to have so many people who care so much for you.”

Her tone was a little flat, hard to read, and Shane twisted his head down, trying to get a look at her face. It was equally unreadable, beautiful and a little remote. “I guess so. I mean, I try to be.”

She nodded, squeezed his arm. “Not everyone has so many people to care about them. It makes it harder for them to accept it, even when it’s there. It doesn’t mean they are...” she made a face, and suddenly Shane knew exactly who she was talking about.

“I don’t think he’s a bad person,” he said in a low voice, watching Gordie lap up something that had spilled on the ground, hopefully nothing too toxic. “I know some of...not everything, obviously, but...I can guess some of it.” He looked back at Ilya, smiling flirtatiously at his mother, all sparkling eyes and cheekbones despite his hangover, and sighed. “I want him to be happy, too, you know? But you can’t expect me to—”

“Oh, I don’t,” she said with a small, humorless laugh. “My expectations are always very low. It is too late, we both know that. Just...” she looked up at Shane directly for the first time, and he saw that here, at least, was someone who did care about Ilya, who had managed to make him accept it as Shane could not. “Don’t hurt him too badly.”

Shane could only nod, throat tight. He was jealous of her, he realized, but he was also glad she was there, that she could help Ilya when Shane finally managed to do what he knew he had to. “Let’s...” he croaked, tried again. “Let’s just get some food, okay?”

He piled his plate with scrambled eggs from the buffet, looked for some spinach to stir in, found none, and took his plate and a cup of orange juice to the table where Hayden and

Jackie were seated with JJ and his girlfriend. He'd barely taken two bites when Julian loomed over him, pressing a kiss to the back of his neck. Shane's shoulders tensed involuntarily.

"Baby, you look terrible!"

"I've been better," Shane acknowledged. He spun around on the bench, tried to look sheepish. "Sorry about last night."

"Me, too," Julian said, leering a little in a way that usually made Shane smile but now made the eggs go sour in his stomach. "It was our second to last night before we're an old married couple, I was looking forward to living it up before the spark is gone." He looked around the table, waiting for a laugh that Hayden and Jackie, married almost twenty-five years now, eventually gave him.

"Oh, sweetie," Julian said, frowning at Shane's plate. "You need to get more variety—are you starting a yellow foods diet or something?"

Shane looked at his plate, had to admit it was quite yellow. It matched the flowers, matched the oppressive sunshine streaming in through the barn doors. "I just wanted eggs today." He could hear that he sounded petulant, and hated it.

"What about some smoked salmon? With brioche maybe?"

Shane liked fresh salmon; he hated smoked salmon. Julian knew that. "No, thank you. I'm good."

He looked across the barn; Ilya and Svetlana were sitting with David and Yuna. Gordie was beneath the table at Ilya's feet, head in his lap, accepting bits of egg and toast. He swallowed, shook his head. "Did you eat already?"

"Me? Only if you count a Bloody Mary as meal, which in fact I do."

"It's the celery," Hayden said gamely, raising his own glass. "Practically a salad."

"See? Hayden gets it. No, I'll eat something in a bit, I promise, there are just a few things I need to take care of. The rehearsal is in an hour, you remember that, right?"

Shane nodded, shoveled in some more egg. "I remember."

The rehearsal resembled nothing so much as the commercials Shane used to film, only this time Julian was the director and he wasn't interested in making anyone, particularly Shane, feel at ease. The wedding planners, two women in crisp linen dresses with tablets and headsets, made a few attempts to do their job, but eventually gave up and stood off to the side to watch.

"No, no, Marcus, you need to stand *there*, next to Thérèse, because the color blocking has to work with the floral arrangements—Shane, are you even paying attention?"

"Yes," Shane lied.

Julian had nine groomspersons, all of them wearing complicated outfits that seemed to be variations on a number of different themes, including height, color, and something called silhouette that apparently had nothing to do with what they were standing in front of.

By contrast, Shane had Rose and Hayden, and they could each wear whatever they wanted (according to the color scheme). The three of them stood together on Shane's side of the aisle, trying not to look as bored as they felt. He could see Ilya standing off to the side by the farmhouse, talking with Scott and Vaughan, laughing with them though his eyes kept sliding back to Shane.

"Julian, honey, should your father and I just—" Gina, Julian's mother, was tentative, apologetic in a way that made Shane's skin crawl with secondhand embarrassment.

"Mom, I told you, just sit wherever, I've got a million things to deal with right now."

Shane winced, looked meaningfully at David and Yuna, who quickly waved Julian's parents over to come sit opposite them at the front. Julian wasn't close with his family, Shane knew that. He'd heard the stories, understood the distance. Still, it went against the grain to watch him be actually rude to them.

There was some more back and forth that Shane tried to care about—should they enter from the farmhouse, or be waiting in the rose garden? Was Shane *sure* about the choice of song for the processional? It wasn't too traditional? So he wouldn't mind if they changed it? Marcus, for the love of God, it's a poetry reading not a Shakespearean death scene, tone it the fuck down.

Shane knew that Julian was just nervous, that this kind of thing was important to him. They were the same in this way: details mattered to them, getting it right mattered to them. But where Shane's perfectionism turned inward, Julian's expanded outward.

Across the lawn, Ilya had found a stick somewhere in the perfectly manicured grounds, and was attempting to get Gordie to go fetch it. He would throw it, Gordie would bound a few feet after it only to instantly return, far more interested in Ilya than a stick, who cared about sticks when there were Ilyas in the world. So Ilya would go get it himself, and the whole thing would start again.

It was painfully sweet, and Shane couldn't contain his smile.

"Okay, I think we've got it," Julian said after the third run-through. "Thank you so much everyone, I know that was a lot." He kissed the corner of Shane's mouth. "Try to smile a little more tomorrow, yeah? You look like you're at a funeral."

"I'll work on it," Shane said. Beside him, Hayden snorted, and Shane kicked him.

"We all wrapped up, then?" Hayden said. "We've got a bachelor party to get to."

"Oh, right, where you all sit around and eat burgers and talk about hockey," Julian said. "How is this different from every other time you hang out?"

“It’s what I like,” Shane said, and the irritation in his voice surprised even him, bubbling up hot and sudden. “Sorry if it doesn’t meet with your standards.”

There was a long, awful pause, and Shane felt his stomach drop, a chasm open up inside him. Julian looked at him, surprise and hurt and a little anger in his eyes, and Shane felt that usual compulsion to apologize, to say he hadn’t meant it—but he *had*, and it was bright and hot and he’d been standing in the sun for over an hour, and his head ached like he’d taken a fucking sledgehammer to it.

Hayden and Rose glanced at each other, turned away, murmuring about getting something to drink.

“Okay,” Julian said at last. “Jesus, I was just teasing, I didn’t mean—” He took a breath, straightened his shoulders. “Look, we’re both tired and stressed. Let’s just...let’s move on, okay? We’ll see each other at the altar tomorrow morning and it’ll all be perfect.”

“Julian—”

“No, really, it’s fine.” Julian’s smile was bright and a little brittle. “I’ve got to get going anyway—we’re driving to Ottawa, remember? There’s this club Thérèse knows, supposed to be decent. I mean, it’s not Montreal, but we’ll make it work.”

“You’re staying overnight?”

It was Julian’s turn to look irritated, his jaw tightening. “I told you that, remember? We got hotel rooms. Anyway, it’s tradition, right? One last night of freedom.”

“Right.” Shane in fact did not remember hearing about this, but admittedly he hadn’t paid much attention. “Say goodbye to me before you leave?”

Julian made a show of checking his phone for the time. “We’re running behind schedule already. I’m just going to grab my things from the bedroom.”

“I’ll come find you there,” Shane said doggedly. “I’d rather you not leave on a fight.”

Julian softened, pulled him in for a kiss. “This isn’t a fight, baby. This is just because weddings are terrible. But yes—we probably won’t leave for another fifteen minutes or so.” He kissed Shane again quickly before striding off, stopping to talk with the officiant one last time.

Shane looked over to Ilya, saw him looking back. He took a small step forward, another, and Shane’s breath caught in his throat.

“Everything okay, dude?” Hayden was at his side, a can of ginger ale in one hand and a straw in the other. Ilya stopped in his tracks, and Shane forced himself to look away.

“Yeah. Just...”

“Pre-wedding jitters, I get it. No sweat, we’re going to take it easy tonight, only people you know and like, I promise. Scott and Kip are definitely coming, JJ obviously, Vaughanie.

Jackie's bowing out, said she loves you very much but she's never going to another hockey barbecue for the rest of her life." He grinned, trying to coax a smile out of Shane. "Rose is coming though, right?"

"I think so." What would he even have said to Ilya if Hayden hadn't appeared? Why would Shane *want* him to come over here? This was long past ridiculous, Shane needed to tell him to leave—and he would, Shane was sure of it.

"Cool. I was thinking..." He raised his voice slightly, looking past Shane. "Rozanov! You and Svetlana should come to the barbecue tonight."

Shane's stomach, which had apparently decided to no longer be a long-term resident of his body, dropped out again.

Ilya looked surprised, glanced at Shane uncertainly. "We would not want to intrude," he called back, shading his eyes.

"It's all hockey players," Yuna said, "you wouldn't be intruding at all." She smiled warmly at Ilya, and Shane wanted to scream, wanted to grab his mother by the shoulders and demand whose side she was on. "You should see his cottage, he had it built, you know. It's really quite something."

"I have heard," Ilya said. "I saw a documentary once."

He and Scott and Vaughan had all made their way over by now, and Scott was grinning broadly. It looked bizarre on him. "Yeah, Rozanov, you should come. The more the merrier, right Shane?"

This absolutely could not be happening. This bachelor party, such as it was, was supposed to be the one place he felt safe this entire godforsaken weekend. It was at his cottage, where Julian had wanted to host the wedding but Shane had refused because it was private, it was *his*, it was the one fucking thing in his life that Ilya Rozanov hadn't touched.

He looked at Rose, standing off to the side talking to Svetlana, their heads bent close together. She must have felt his gaze because she looked up, and he stared at her, trying to communicate everything he was feeling—but she spread her hands helplessly. *What do you want me to do?*

"Definitely," he said at last through gritted teeth. "The more the merrier. Rose, can you maybe drive Ilya and Svetlana?" Because he certainly wasn't going to, and he wasn't giving them the address, either. He'd blindfold them both if he could, lead them there through some circuitous route that would erase the memory from their minds the moment they left, as if that could erase it from his. Ilya in his house, *fuck*.

"Actually," she said apologetically, "I was thinking of skipping out on this one? It seems like it's going to be very..."

"Bro-y?" Hayden suggested. "Damn straight. We'll eat our burgers bloody and burp the alphabet."

“We will not be doing that,” Shane said wearily.

“I’m not sure I want to go, either,” Kip said to Scott, not quietly enough.

“We will not be doing that,” Scott assured him.

“Rose and I are going shopping,” Svetlana announced. “She always has the best style.”

“I’m not sure what you’ll find in Ottawa that’s up to your standards,” Yuna said doubtfully.

“We’re going thrifting!” Rose said. “Sveta’s never been before.” Shane narrowed his eyes at her; she smiled sunnily. “You boys have a great time.” She looped her arm through Svetlana’s, and the two of them strode off while Shane stared after them, betrayed.

“Uh, it’s okay that I invited Rozanov, yeah?” Hayden said in a low voice. “Rose told me to.”

Shane was going to fucking murder her. “It’s fine,” he said tightly. “I’ll just—give me a second, would you?”

He grabbed Ilya’s arm, not even caring what it looked like, and dragged him off by the hydrangeas behind the farmhouse, out of sight. “You are *not* coming to my cottage.”

Ilya grinned lazily, that wide, mischievous smile that had always made Shane want to hit him or kiss him—both, usually. “Your mother invited me. It would be rude of me not to show up. I don’t want to be rude to your mother, we are very good friends now.”

“Ilya—”

“Your father, too, he is very nice. Do you know that he played hockey? Some town called McGill, wherever that is.”

“It’s not a town, it’s a—*Ilya*. ”

“Yes, Shane?” he said innocently, but his eyes were dark, intent. He had a line of sweat along his temple, and he’d rolled up his sleeves, the hairs on his arms golden in the sunlight. He had a scar on his chin that Shane didn’t remember being there before, and he was close and warm and irritating, and Shane could feel the heat radiating off his body, could see the pulse beating in his throat.

If Shane didn’t walk away this second he would do something very stupid, like kiss him or ask him to get whatever awful muscle car he’d driven to get here and leave with him, it didn’t even matter where they went, they could just *leave*, go off somewhere together and then maybe they’d see what might have been, what could be.

Ilya’s mouth parted, watching him, and he stepped forward, backing Shane up against the wall, one arm braced above Shane’s head, blocking him in but leaving him room to get away if he wanted to.

“Don’t,” Shane said, but it came out breathless, not a warning at all.

Ilya stopped anyway, though he was close enough that Shane could see the individual lashes framing his eyes, the imperfections in his skin, a few gray hairs scattered in with the brown. “If you tell me to leave,” he said gently, “I will go.” He reached out with his other hand, brushed a thumb across Shane’s cheek, feather-light and tender, a callus on his thumb catching slightly on Shane’s skin. Shane wanted to bury his face in Ilya’s neck, wanted to climb into his lap, wanted to beg him to stay, to never, ever leave—and it was that thought that made him pull away, stumbling into the shrubbery.

“I have to—Julian’s leaving. I need to say goodbye before he goes.”

Ilya’s hand dropped, and he stepped away, shoved his hands in his pockets. “Right. You should hurry, then.”

Chapter End Notes

tip of the hat to Sidney Crosby's alleged love of birds

also these chapters just keep getting longer I'm so sorry I swear to god I'm following an outline even if it doesn't look like it

these texting scenes are fun to write maybe i'll write a fic one day. just without the fancy html bc let's be real

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

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

Ilya got out of Hayden Pike's car after spending a fairly awkward hour-long ride talking about video games, a topic Hayden had apparently deemed safe and was resolutely sticking to. Yes, Ilya had played the goose game. No, the goose did not remind him of himself (actually it did, but he wasn't going to admit that).

The gravel crunched under his feet as he stood, stretching out the kinks from the drive. Shane's cottage was beautiful. More than that, it was perfect, because it was perfectly *him*, a mixture of clean lines and comfort, of bright light and warm wood. It was private, or nearly so—there were a few houses across the lake, but unless someone had a telescope and a grudge Ilya couldn't imagine they were much of an issue.

He accepted the beer Vaughan tossed him and walked around slowly, taking it in. Ilya couldn't help but think of that apartment in Montreal, dark and hotel-like with its thousands of pillows. Shane must have gotten a better interior designer, or maybe he'd finally allowed himself to have opinions, because while there were still a lot of pillows, they were soft and cozy-looking. There was dog hair all over them despite the lint-rollers stashed everywhere—Gordie hadn't arrived yet, but was clearly very comfortable here. There was a collection of stuffed animals in the basket in the corner of the upper living room where the massive television was, all of them a little chewed and drooled on. There were little bird figurines resting on the windowsill next to a pair of expensive-looking binoculars, coasters scattered everywhere because Shane was neurotic, knit blankets that didn't even have the Metros logo on them.

It was all so calming, so relaxing, so fucking *nice*, that the pieces that didn't fit stood out all the more garishly. There was a painting over the fireplace, nonrepresentational in blacks and reds, aggressive and a little unsettling. It was probably good, Ilya couldn't really tell, but it certainly wasn't Shane.

On the bookshelf—built-in, custom—he found hockey biographies and dog training manuals and nature guides nestled alongside R.F. Kuang and Patricia Highsmith and Elliot Page's memoir. Shane's books had sticky notes stuck throughout; Julians' looked untouched.

There was a door that Ilya assumed led to the bathroom, and he had never been above going through someone's medicine cabinet; he'd certainly thoroughly investigated Shane's before. (Band-aids, sunscreen, moisturizer, something called toner Ilya thought was for printers, Advil, and more vitamins than a person could be expected to swallow in one sitting. Except Ilya knew how Shane liked to apply himself to getting things down his throat). He wondered if this bathroom would have his-and-his sinks, whether Julian used the same bougie shaving cream Shane did, whether they had matching electric toothbrushes and waterpiks (Ilya had pressed the button out of curiosity exactly one time in Montreal, and had shot water into his eye).

He opened the door, and found himself in Shane's bedroom.

Like the rest of the cottage, it felt personal in a way the apartment in Montreal never had. It was a room full of windows, bright and open, with a view of the lake and the woods, and Ilya could see the afternoon sun sparkling on the water, throwing the light back at him like he was expected to catch it. There was little to no furniture, the bed taking up most of the available space, and it had some sort of wood-and-resin headboard that sort of reminded Ilya of the color the ice on the Moskva river would turn would the morning sun hit it just right.

The bed was smaller than he would have expected, and he stared down at it, imagining Shane with his arms wrapped around Julian, Shane with Julian's morning wood pressing into his ass, Shane asleep on Julian's chest. There was a stack of books on the nightstand, a pair of reading glasses atop them, and Ilya's breath caught at the idea that they were Shane's, could see him in them so perfectly, imagined them nestled atop his freckled cheeks, the red spots they would leave on his nose when he took them off.

There was lube on the nightstand, and Ilya's stomach clenched. He'd mostly managed, thus far, not to think about Julian inside Shane, Julian making him come, the fucking privilege of it, Julian hearing him plead and moan, feeling him tremble and tighten. Did Julian know what it was like to have Shane try to kiss him through his orgasm, to see his eyes fill with tears when it was too much, too good? Did he know how fucking lucky he was, how much it meant to be the one Shane Hollander trusted to see him like that?

"What the hell are you doing in here?"

Ilya spun around, dropped his beer, cursed when it began to spill all over the beautiful hardwood floor.

"Shit," Hayden said, and knelt down to try to contain the mess with his hands because he was a fucking idiot who'd taken too many hits to the head.

Ilya stripped off his shirt to stem the tide, soak it up before it could seep into the floorboards. Hayden opened a door next to the bed—ah, there was the bathroom—and came out with a towel.

"Here, give—" Ilya took the towel, wondered how much liquid was even in a can of beer, surely not this much, when—

"What the fuck?"

Shane stood in the doorway, and Ilya watched his eyes go wide, watched them drop to Ilya's bare chest and stay there. Shane's mouth parted, his hand gripping the doorframe, his cheeks and throat flushing. Abandoning the towel, Ilya sat back on his heels, tightened his stomach to better show off his abdominal muscles, the vee of his hips disappearing into his jeans.

"Jesus Christ," Shane muttered. "Hayden, what—"

"He dropped his beer," Hayden said, gesturing helplessly at the floor.

Shane stared at the puddle, at Ilya's beer-soaked shirt, back up at Ilya's chest—lingering on his nipples, his collarbones—back down to the floor. “Right. Okay. I...I'll take care of it.”

Hayden looked between them, his mouth hanging open like it had just now occurred to him that, wow, his best friend really was gay. “Uh. You sure?”

Ilya lifted his chin, angled it to show off his jawline, flexed a little more because what the hell, why not give it everything he had?

“Yup,” Shane said, clipped.

Hayden lifted his hands and got to his feet, leaving the door open as he left, though not without one more confused glance back at them.

Ilya returned to cleaning up the mess, moving deliberately, aware of Shane's eyes on him. He picked up the wet towel—and his shirt, fuck, he'd liked that shirt, it had Pegasuses on it—and carried them into the bathroom. The space was all cool marble and clean lines, with one of those rainfall shower heads. He dropped the wet items in the bathtub, ran under towel under the faucet until it was damp, then came back to wipe up any trace of stickiness, getting down on his hands and knees.

When he looked up, Shane was still standing there watching him, his breathing gone ragged.

He pushed past Ilya, walked through the bathroom to the walk-in closet on the other side, yanked open a drawer in his dresser. He pulled out a t-shirt—gray, the Metros logo small on the chest—and thrust it at Ilya without quite looking at him. “Here. Put this on.” Ilya took it slowly, letting their fingers brush. Shane snatched his hand away. “You shouldn't be in here,” he said jerkily. “This is my...this is our bedroom. It's private.”

Ilya pulled the shirt on. It was worn soft from dozens of washings, smelled like detergent and maybe a little like Shane.

“Go back outside with everyone else and stay there,” Shane said, but his eyes were on the logo over Ilya's heart.

“Okay,” Ilya said softly, and slipped past him, their shoulders brushing, Shane's breath catching audibly.

Outside, the afternoon had taken on that golden quality that made everything look like an advertisement lining the halls of Ottawa International Airport: *Ontario: Yours to Discover*. Ilya helped himself to another beer, resolving not to make an idiot of himself with it this time, and let himself be drawn into a conversation with JJ about the upcoming season and how the Metros were shaping up, even though he really didn't care.

A bark made him turn just in time to be leapt on by a very wet dog, Gordie bounding up from the dock in abject, writhing joy. Ilya shielded his face from the spatter of lake water as best he could, but crouched down to tell him yes, he was very glad to see him, it had been such a long time, did he have a good swim, yes, he was such a good boy, the best, everyone knew this.

“That dog is a menace,” Hayden said fondly. “Watch your shoes, he’ll take them off and bury them somewhere.”

Shane emerged from the cottage, clapped Scott on the shoulder, went around making sure everyone had drinks, and then lifted the cover off of a large green ceramic egg at the edge of the deck, very carefully not looking in Ilya’s direction.

Ilya’s hands on Gordie stilled, and he got to his feet, wiping them on his jeans. He’d bought one of those years ago, when they were all anyone talked about, but never had the patience to figure it out—he was more of a turn on the grill, stand around with a beer until the food was done sort of guy.

It wasn’t surprising that Shane had one, he told himself—half the guys on the Raiders had one, even if hardly any of them actually used it. But he’d wondered, all those years of texting Shane, if he was even receiving them, whether he’d in all likelihood blocked Ilya long ago, as he should have.

He made his way over there, trying to appear casual about it. “What’s this?” he asked, then took a long pull of his beer, swished it around in his mouth.

“It’s a Big Green Egg,” Scott said.

“No kidding,” Ilya said drily.

“It’s a kamado-style grill,” Shane said, still not looking at him. “Inspired by Japanese clay ovens. It retains heat really well over a long period of time.”

Ilya watched his hands as he adjusted one of the vents. “Seems complicated.”

Shane glanced at him now, smirking a little. “It’s not that hard to figure out. You control the temperature with the airflow. Top and bottom vent, it’s really pretty easy once you understand the principle.”

“Shane’s obsessed with that thing,” Hayden called from one of the Adirondack chairs. “He got it a few years ago, and he uses it constantly. Made pizza in it the last time I was here.”

“Pizza,” Ilya repeated, a delighted grin spreading across his face. “Very fancy.”

“I don’t think anyone would call pizza *fancy*,” Shane grumbled, but his cheeks were pink and adorable, and Ilya wanted to wrap his arms around him.

He stepped in closer, and Scott mumbled something about checking on Kip, moved away, leaving them alone. “Show me,” Ilya said.

Shane swallowed, his throat moving, then lifted the ceramic lid. The heat rolled out in a wave. “I put the cast-iron grid inside, and you want to set it for direct heat for burgers. If you’re smoking something, like brisket or pork shoulder, you’ll want to keep it steady. Low and slow, for hours.”

“Low and slow,” Ilya repeated, and maybe he shouldn’t have made it sound quite so suggestive, but Shane’s blush spread down below his collar, out to the tips of his ears, and Ilya wanted to close the distance between them, wanted to taste the flush on his skin.

Instead he took a step back. “I have one,” he said offhandedly. “I didn’t have the patience to figure it out, though. Maybe you can teach me sometime.”

Shane’s shoulders sagged, and he looked at Ilya directly, held his gaze. “Yeah. Maybe.”

Ilya knew what he was thinking, tried to imagine it himself: the two of them as friends, after all this time. Grilling together on a summer afternoon, seeing what else they might have in common besides hockey and sex. Maybe Ilya would learn to like hiking, would let Shane tell him all about all the birds they saw. Maybe Shane would come golfing with Marleau and Connors. Maybe they’d get together for game night with the Pikes, go fucking fishing or whatever it was people did when they lived by a lake.

Sometimes Julian would be there, sometimes he wouldn’t. Sometimes, maybe, it would just be Ilya and Shane, the past long forgotten or at least set aside, learning to laugh together and relax together, to confide and trust and rely on and all the other things friends did, real friends who mattered to one another, who stayed close even though they lived far apart, who had inside jokes and sent stupid memes, who would always be there.

Ilya shut his eyes and turned away, because it was good, it was *so good*, but it could never, ever be enough.

“Rozanov!” Vaughan called. “You playing or what?”

He joined the game of bocce set up on the small lawn, the guys fucking around with the smaller ball, tossing it behind obstacles so it would be harder to get to.

“If you break one of my lamps I’ll—”

“Yeah, Hollander?” Vaughan called. “You’ll what?”

“I’ll...be really mad about it.”

Nothing got broken, and Kip won, mostly because he wasn’t trying to hit anyone else’s ball to make it roll farther away.

The burgers came off the grill perfectly, crisp on the outside, juicy in the middle, and they ate on the deck as the sun started its slow descent behind the tree line, turning the lake into hammered gold broken only by Gordie diving off the dock over and over again, only to come trotting back to the table shake himself off and devour the burger that Shane had cooked just for him.

Conversation flowed easily—hockey reminiscences and chirping, arguing about which times would make the playoffs next year, speculation about trades and prospects, none of it mattering much now that most of them had retired.

Someone—JJ, maybe—suggested they go out on the water, and suddenly everyone was moving, ignoring Shane’s offers of life jackets, heading down to the dock where a small motorboat was tied up. Ilya let himself be herded in, found himself sitting next to Shane on the narrow bench seat, Gordie panting happily at their feet. Ilya noted with a smile that Shane wasn’t wearing one of his life jackets, either. There wasn’t really room for six adult men, let alone six professional hockey players, but they were all (with the exception of Shane) tipsy enough not to mind the tight fit.

Shane drove them out toward the middle of the lake, cutting the engine once they were far enough from shore, floating in the center of all that gold-lit water. The sudden silence was startling; just the lap of water, hypnotic against the side of the boat. Ilya could hear everyone’s breathing, could smell the sunscreen and lake water and the lingering scent of charcoal.

And then a *wolf* howled, long and terrifying, the sound echoing across the water.

Ilya jerked to his feet, panicked, looking wildly toward the shore. “What the fuck was that?” The boat rocked violently, and then, because Ilya was definitely being punished for his many, many sins, his foot slipped in the wet and he went over the side with a splash.

The water was shockingly, heart-stoppingly cold, and he surfaced with a splutter, coughing, to the sound of everyone absolutely losing their shit laughing at him.

“Fuck all of you,” he said, spitting out water. “Fuck.”

“What is wrong with you, did you have a fucking seizure?” Hayden said, reaching down to haul him up by the back of his jeans like he was trying to give Ilya a wedgie, the asshole. Ilya shoved him off, and Gordie, delighted that Ilya was joining him in his favorite game, leaped into the water beside him.

“There’s a wolf!” he shouted, treading water. “Didn’t you hear it?”

Five faces stared at him with equal incomprehension.

“No?” Kip said at last. “I definitely did not hear a wolf.”

And then Shane lifted his hands to his face, cupped them around his lips, and made the same blood-curdling noise—a long, wavering wail that rose and fell. “That?” he asked, grinning widely, his eyes sparkling.

An answering call came from the shore, eerie and echoing.

“What is it then?” Ilya said warily.

“Oh my god,” JJ wheezed. “Oh my god, your face—”

“It’s a loon, you idiot,” Scott called.

“A what?” Ilya was freezing, his clothes were weighing him down, and there was a dog trying to climb on his head.

“It’s a bird,” Shane said.

“A *bird*? It sounds like a fucking wolf!”

“Jesus Christ, Rozanov,” Hayden said. “Aren’t you from Russia? That’s not what wolves even sound like!”

“I’m from Moscow, you asshole,” Ilya said, as haughtily as he could manage while being used as a flotation device by a forty-pound dog.

Shane leaned over the side, extending his hand. He was still laughing, looked so fucking happy that Ilya decided he would humiliate himself a million times over, spend the rest of his life doing stupid fucking shit just to make Shane smile like that.

Their hands clasped, and Shane pulled as Ilya hauled himself up, water streaming off of him.

“You okay?”

“My dignity is dead,” Ilya said solemnly, “but otherwise, yes.”

“Your dignity died a while ago, dude,” Hayden said cheerfully. “Probably around the time you showed up uninvited to someone’s wedding.”

Getting Gordie back into the boat required three people and a lot of swearing, but eventually they managed it. The dog immediately shook himself off, soaking everyone who had managed to stay dry; Ilya told him he was a very good boy.

“I’m driving back,” Shane announced. “Before anyone else ends up in the lake.”

The ride back was slower, Shane navigating carefully while Ilya shivered in the bow, Gordie draped across his lap. When they reached the dock, Ilya was the first one out, squelching up toward the cottage.

“There’s a bathroom downstairs,” Shane said. “You can shower, and I’ll find you something dry to wear.”

“More of your clothes,” Ilya said. “I am building a nice collection.”

He toed off his soaked shoes, hoped that Gordie wouldn’t make off with them but figuring, with his luck so far, there wasn’t much chance of that. He followed Shane inside and downstairs to where there was a third living space, still with a view of the lake, two more bedrooms, and a second bathroom.

This one had slate tile floors and a glassed-enclosed shower. It was cool inside, away from the late-day sun, and Ilya began to shiver.

“Towels are in the cabinet,” Shane said, already moving away. “I’ll leave clothes outside the door.”

“Shane,” Ilya said, and Shane froze, his shoulders going tight and straight.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” he whispered. “Can’t you see how hard this is going to be for me? This is the one place I had in my life that didn’t have you all over it, the *one thing*, and now...”

“I’m sorry,” Ilya said, aching. “For today—you’re right, it was selfish of me. But also for... for all of it. I’m sorry. For what it’s worth, you were right, you know. Back then. We were... something.”

Shane turned around, his eyes shining with unshed tears. “I know we were.”

And then he left, closing the door behind him.

April, 2017

Ilya couldn’t look away from the spot on the ice where Hollander had lain there, unmoving. There wasn’t any blood, no deep gouges, nothing to show what had happened there. It was just a patch of ice, like any other place on the rink.

“Rozanov!” Desjournays shouted. “Get your fucking head in the game!”

He looked up, saw that the puck had moved on, the Metros transitioning to offense. He’d lost track of the play completely.

It had happened so fast. He’d been chirping at Hollander at the face-off, trying to get him to look up, to pay attention to him because Ilya devolved into a fucking child whenever he was near. It hadn’t even worked; Hollander had snatched the puck and run off with it, but then for no reason—no reason at all, after months of never once looking Ilya in the eye—he’d glanced back, his expression a little triumphant, a little angry, a little sad.

And Marleau slammed into his shoulder, knocking him to the ground, his helmet thumping loud against the ice.

Hollander had been so still. He’d been so very still.

“Roz!” Connors shouted, and Ilya’s head snapped up, watched the puck slide past him.

At half-time, Marleau sat beside Ilya on the bench, nudged him with his shoulder. “What’s up with you tonight? You got something better to do?”

Ilya went very still, his hands bunching into fists between his knees. He could feel himself starting to shake with the effort of not moving, of not hauling off and punching Marleau in

the jaw, in the balls, of not stomping his face into the concrete floor of the locker room.

He heard Marleau take in a slow, careful breath, felt his big hand descend on his shoulder, gentle. “Hey,” he said uncertainly. “You okay?”

Ilya looked up then, and Marly’s eyes went wide at whatever he saw on Ilya’s face. “Shit, Roz. I...”

“Rozanov!” Desjournays barked. “Whatever’s going on with you, you get it the fuck together or you’re benched. You hear me?”

Ilya didn’t get benched, but he didn’t play well, either. Despite being out their best player, the Metros won 2-1. Ilya didn’t care; the final buzzer was a mercy.

In the locker room afterward, everyone left him alone, talked quietly, filed out in clumps. Ilya had stripped off most of his gear, but was still sweaty and gross as he sat in front of his stall, refreshing Twitter over and over again.

Ilya: are you okay?

“Hey, man,” Marly said, quiet in the doorway. “Let’s get out of here, okay?”

He steered Ilya by the shoulders, put a coat on him, tied his fucking shoes. Ilya’s mind drifted through concussion protocols, statistics. Hollander might never play again. He might never be himself again; personality changes were uncommon but not unheard of.

He might not even be alive.

Ilya: please be okay, i don’t know what I would do if you weren’t

Once they got to the hotel, Marly took away his phone and put Ilya in the shower, and he stood there for a long time, letting the hot water run over his skin. It’s possible he was crying; he couldn’t tell.

Marly tapped at the door. “Uh, you got a bunch of texts. Montreal area code.”

Unknown: hi. uh, you don't me. this is Hayden Pike, i'm a friend of Shane's.

Unknown: Shane Hollander. sorry, i took your number off his phone a while ago, as a joke.

Unknown: that's not important. i don't know if you were watching the game tonight, but Shane got hurt. it's pretty bad.

Unknown: i know you're all the way in Boston but sometimes it seems like you're here in Montreal, too? idk you two are kinda weird. i just thought if you are here maybe you would want to come to the hospital. he's at Montreal General.

Ilya sat down heavily on the bed, towel wrapped around his waist. His hands were shaking.

Ilya: no. i can't come to the hospital.

Ilya: we are not together anymore and he would not want me there.

Marly handed him a bottle of water. Ilya opened it, drank from it, recapped it and put it beside him on the bed.

Unknown: oh shit ok sorry

Unknown: or not sorry, idk

Unknown: he's a great guy so fuck you i guess Lily

Ilya laughed despite himself. A tear splashed down onto his screen.

Ilya: yes.

Ilya: will you let me know how he is? when they are done testing?

Unknown: sure, i guess. might be a while.

Ilya: i will be here.

Marly left him alone eventually, which was for the best. Ilya couldn't settle; kept the television on Sportscenter and his phone on Twitter, checking his messages every five minutes just in case he'd somehow missed a text. It finally came in a little after midnight.

Unknown: he's ok. broken collarbone, concussion, but not too bad. he's awake and talking, knows the year and the prime minister and everything. he'll be out for the playoffs, but should make a full recovery in a few months.

Ilya let the phone drop out of his hand, drew up his knees and buried his face in them, pressing the bones of his kneecaps into his eye sockets, taking deep, shuddering breaths.

Ilya: that is good. thank you, Hayden, for telling me. you are a good friend to him.

He spent the next hour typing and sometimes deleting text after text to Hollander, none of them adequate, none of them what Hollander would want to hear from him.

Ilya: i am so sorry. this is my fault. [deleted, unsent]

Ilya: i wish you a speedy recovery. [deleted, unsent]

Ilya: i should never have let you walk out of that hotel room. [deleted, unsent]

Ilya: i am sorry. i did not mean to hurt you. [deleted, unsent]

Ilya: i was scared. i am scared. i am always so scared when it comes to you. [deleted, unsent]

In the end, all he said was:

Ilya: they say you have a concussion, a broken collarbone. marleau is sorry, it was an accident.

Ilya: i am sorry too

Ilya got out of the shower, steam billowing around him as he dried himself off on one of Shane's towels. It was the thin, waffle-weave kind, soft and quick-drying, fancier than terrycloth. He wrapped it around his waist, opened the door to find a neatly-folded pile of clothes, including a pair of joggers, another Metros t-shirt, and boxers.

Shane even folded his underwear, and something about that was so achingly endearing Ilya felt dizzy with it.

He squatted down on the floor, brought the clothes to his face, inhaled deeply. They didn't *really* smell like him, Ilya knew that. They smelled like organic detergent, probably, without dyes or paraffins.

He heard the sound of laughter upstairs, running water, the clatter of dishes in the kitchen sink. It was all so domestic, so easy.

He got dressed there in the doorway, pulling on Shane's soft boxers, his joggers, his t-shirt. Ilya was standing in his home and wearing nothing but him.

Shane was worried that he'd never get the memory of Ilya out of his cottage? *Ilya* was never going to be able to forget it, what Shane Hollander's quiet, ordinary life was like, how lovely it was.

He couldn't bring himself to go back upstairs, to laugh and be funny, to pretend that his heart wasn't breaking—that it hadn't already broken, that he hadn't smashed it himself a long time ago.

He hung his towel on the rack, left his wet clothes in the shower, made sure he hadn't left any water on the floor. He opened the door to one of the downstairs guest rooms, intending to give himself just a little more time—and found Shane sitting on the edge of the bed, head in his hands.

He didn't even have to look up to know who it was. "You need to leave."

Ilya closed the door behind him, turning the knob so it made only a soft click. "Can we talk?"

Shane let out a breath, got to his feet. "There's nothing to talk about."

"But what if there was? Maybe it doesn't have to be too late, maybe we—"

Shane laughed, sharp and wild and breaking at the edges, his eyes shining, and he moved in close to Ilya, shoved at his chest hard enough that Ilya stumbled back a step. "Not too late? It's *years* too late! I'm getting married tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow, yes—not today. You are not married yet. I know you are right, I know it's too late, but I...I thought we could never be anything. I thought it would be easier if we never even came close. But it was awful, Shane, it's been awful the whole time."

"You don't get to say it was awful!" Shane said savagely. "You don't get to say that, when it was your fucking fault!"

"I know, and I'm sorry—"

"Shut up. Just *shut up*. I have tried so hard, Ilya, so fucking hard—" Shane's hands twisted in his shirt—Shane's shirt, on Ilya's skin—and then he was tearing it off, the threads snapping along the hem, at the armpit. Ilya had a face full of cotton, and then Shane's mouth was on his.

He tasted of ginger ale and a bit of charcoal, and his hands were shoving at Ilya's pants, catching on his dick because Ilya could never be touched by Shane and *not* get hard, it was just something his body did, had always done.

He tore his mouth away, tried to take in a gasping breath. “Wait, Любимый, wait—you are upset—”

“I’m not upset,” Shane snapped, though his face was wet. He grabbed Ilya’s jaw, yanked his hair hard enough to hurt, brought their mouths back together, bruising.

Ilya let him, for a moment—let Shane kiss him angry, let him dig his neatly trimmed nails into Ilya’s bare skin, let him bite his lip hard enough to bleed. But when Shane’s hands went to Ilya’s waistband again, fumbling, graceless with fury, Ilya caught his wrists.

“No,” he murmured. “Not like that.”

“Yes, like this!” Shane tried to wrench free, but Ilya held firm. “I want—I *need*—”

“I know what you need.” Ilya backed him toward the bed, inexorable, pushed him down on it. He kissed him again, slow and deep; Shane resisted at first, tried to make it rough, tried to make it hurt, but Ilya wouldn’t let him. He gentled each kiss, soothed each desperate grab of Shane’s hands.

“Let me,” Ilya whispered against his mouth. “Please.”

Shane’s breath hitched, his hands trembling where Ilya held them—but when Ilya let go, testing, he didn’t move, let Ilya unbutton his shirt, slide it off his shoulders. Ilya looked down at him: Shane’s face was flushed and tear-streaked, his chest heaving. He looked devastated. He looked beautiful.

“Shane, I—”

“Don’t,” Shane said brokenly. “Don’t say anything, Ilya, don’t—”

“Okay.” Ilya kissed him instead, soft and gentle, a brushing of open mouths, of breaths.

“Okay, sweetheart, I won’t.”

He kissed down Shane’s throat, lingering behind his jaw, at the join of his shoulder. He ran his lips across Shane’s collarbone, felt the little swell where it had broken and healed years ago. He lapped at his nipple, ran his tongue around it, pulled gently with his teeth, and Shane’s hands came up around Ilya’s head, cradling him close.

Ilya was on his knees between Shane’s thighs, and he looked up, saw Shane staring back at him. He wasn’t crying, and he wasn’t angry—Ilya didn’t know what he was. Shane had looked at him that way forever, possibly since the day they’d met, and Ilya had never once been brave enough to put a name to it.

He ducked his head, kissed the convex curve of Shane’s belly, brushed his cheek against his cock through his jeans. “Can I,” he said raggedly.

Shane undid his own button, dragged down the zipper, held his dick in his hand, hard and flushed, glistening at the tip. Ilya dipped his head down, licked across Shane’s knuckles and up the underside of his cock, slow and deliberate, before knocking his hand aside and taking him in his mouth.

He tasted the same, felt the same, salt and skin and warmth, and Ilya bobbed his head, taking him deeper, the head of Shane's cock bumping against the back of his throat.

"God." Shane's fingers tightened in his hair. "I forgot how good—*fuck*—"

Ilya pulled off. "I didn't forget. I never did." He took Shane deep again, relaxing his throat, dropped all the way down until his nose was pressed against the coarse hair at the base of Shane's abdomen. He stayed there, breathing shallowly through his nose, swallowing convulsively as Shane's thighs trembled around either side of his head.

He pulled up slowly, sucking gently, taking his time before dropping all the way back down and holding there. Every time Shane tried to thrust up, Ilya held his hips in place. Somewhere above them, their friends would be wondering where they were—had probably guessed. Ilya didn't care, was *glad* of it, because Shane was his, had always been his from the very beginning. He'd let him go but it hadn't mattered; some things were as essential as gravity, and Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander had been spiraling around each other, intertwined since the day they met.

Eventually he let himself move faster, harder, the room nearly silent except for Shane's gasping breaths and the wet sucking sounds Ilya made around his cock. He could feel himself aching hard in Shane's joggers, and he thrust helplessly into the air, moaning.

Shane bent over Ilya's head as he came, muffling his shout in his hair, hips bucking despite Ilya's hands holding him down. Ilya pulled back enough to taste it, to suck on the head, to work him through every drop—and his own orgasm crashed through him sudden and devastating. He moaned around Shane's cock as he came untouched, spilling into his borrowed clothes, making a mess of himself.

"Fuck," he gasped against Shane's thigh. "Fuck, Shane—don't marry him, please don't marry him, *please*—"

Shane pulled him up by the hair, kissed him hard and desperate, then pulled back just enough that they breathed together, panting into each other's mouths, their foreheads pressing together hard, slick with sweat. Then he shoved Ilya away.

"I need you to leave now."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is like that episode of Teen Wolf: how many times can I make this guy take his shirt off?

Also grills as metaphors, wtf am I doing, this is the bro-y-iest thing I've ever written

Любимый - Lyubimiy, beloved, darling

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

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

By the time Shane made it upstairs, everyone had gone.

Gordie was sitting by the door looking mournful, wondering why his friends had abandoned him. He had one of Ilya's soaking wet shoes in his mouth.

"Drop it," Shane said quietly, and Gordie did, the shoe landing with a wet smack.

There was a scribbled note on his kitchen counter.

Rozanov says you need space. I'm driving him back to his hotel. He says he's getting on the first flight back to Boston.

I don't know what the deal is with the two of you. I mean, I can guess, but...it seems complicated. I can't really imagine what you're going through, but you know I have your back, right? Always. And for what it's worth, I don't think Rozanov is all that much of an asshole. Just a little bit.

Love you, man. Hope you're okay.

-Hayden

Shane folded the piece of paper carefully, in half and then half again, creasing the edges hard, and stuck it in his back pocket. The dishes had been abandoned halfway through, so he finished them, running off the dishwasher and rinsing out the cans of beer and putting them in the recycling bin, wiping down the counters. He went outside and scrubbed down the grill, the one he had bought just because Ilya had said he couldn't figure out how to use it. He dealt with Ilya's numerous piles of wet clothing.

He let Gordie sleep in the bed even though he smelled of lake water, even though it was against the rules. He stripped off his clothes, dropped them on the floor in a heap, climbed into bed naked.

He was still covered in Ilya's touch, his saliva. He could taste him still.

Gordie curled against his side, warm and solid, a comfort. Dogs didn't care if you were a good person or a terrible one. They loved you just the same.

Shane had always believed he was a good person, someone who did the right thing, who didn't hurt the people he cared about, who kept his promises and showed up on time and said

please and thank you and held doors open for strangers. He wasn't someone who cheated on the man he'd asked to marry him, on the man he'd said he was in love with.

The night before his fucking wedding, *fuck*, who did something like that? Who was that heartless, that selfish, that cruel? How was this the person he was, how had that happened?

He couldn't even blame Ilya; this was no one's fault but his own. If, sometimes, Shane had allowed himself to believe that Ilya made him worse, made him a liar and a needy, pathetic loser—well. The truth was that Shane was all of those things, and that had nothing to do with Ilya, except that Ilya was what he lied about, and Ilya was what he needed.

None of this had been forced on him; Shane had made choices every step of the way, and now he had to live with them.

Gordie made a soft whimpering sound in his sleep, his paws twitching as he chased something in his dreams.

May, 2026

Shane bent over for the face-off. It was the third period, only five minutes left to go.

This was, in all likelihood, the very last time he'd be face to face with Ilya Rozanov. When this quarter ended, they'd never share the ice again.

Shane was the only one who knew that. He'd made the decision a month ago, staring at the contract extension his agent had sent over. He hadn't announced it yet, hadn't told his agent or his coach, not even his parents. This was his last season, and since the Raiders weren't going to make the playoffs, this was his last time playing against Rozanov.

Shane wasn't sure how to separate the two, Rozanov and hockey. They'd been intertwined for his entire adult life.

His eyes were blurry behind the plastic shield of his helmet as he got set up. Rozanov wasn't talking, wasn't chirping at him—he'd stopped bothering years ago, since Shane never responded, never even looked up.

He looked up now, though, and saw Rozanov bent down, his lips pressed around the mouthguard, eyes on the ice, brow pinched in concentration. Shane could let himself look, now, could take in the planes of his face, the roughness of his stubble, the sweat running down his neck. Shane could smell him, over the ammonia bite of the ice and the rubber of the Zamboni and the bacterial awfulness of hockey equipment in general; Rozanov stank, they all did, but somehow the specific chemistry of him had mixed with Shane's at some point, long ago.

The referee's hand was raised, the puck held high. Any second now, but Shane didn't look back down at the ice, instead at Rozanov's sweat-dark hair, at the small scar through his eyebrow that he hadn't had when they'd met, but it was there now, had been for years.

Rozanov looked up, and there it was—the infuriating smirk that had always charmed Shane almost as much as it enraged him. Shane wanted to savor it, even though he'd long since had it memorized, imprinted like an afterimage when he closed his eyes.

Rozanov saw him looking, his eyes widening, his mouth going slack around his mouthguard. Shane smiled, just a little, felt his eyes sting. His ears were ringing, so he didn't hear him say *Hollander*; but he saw his lips move around his name, saw his puzzled answering smile, saw his eyes soften.

The puck dropped, and muscle memory took over. Shane's stick moved, Rozanov's stick was already there, they battled for possession the way they done a hundred times before, a thousand. Rozanov got the puck, and then he was gone, skating away.

Montreal won anyway, 3-2.

Shane shook hands in the line, and when he got to Rozanov their gloves met with a muffled thud, palm to palm through the padding. Shane kept his eyes down, couldn't look at him like that again, not twice in a single night.

"Hollander," Rozanov said, loud enough to be heard.

Shane nodded at him, still not making eye contact. "Rozanov."

The apartment was dark when Shane got home; usually he left a few lights on so it would feel more welcoming, but he hadn't tonight. So he toed off his shoes, put them in the closet by the door, hung up his jacket, feeling his way in the darkness. He switched on some lamps, warm pools of light in the living room that made the shadows deeper in the corners. He took his bag into the laundry room, started the washer.

He made it to the couch before his legs gave out, his breath coming short and sharp. He pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes, kept the tears behind his eyelids, hot and stinging—though they leaked through anyway, and he curled forward, face in his hands, crying about Ilya Rozanov one last time.

Shane got out of bed when the sun came up, tired of lying there with the sheets twisted around him. He took Gordie on a run along the trail that encircled the lake, then gave him a wash in the downstairs shower that he absolutely despised, standing there shuddering in really very pleasantly hot water with his tail between his legs and a betrayed look on his face. For Gordie, water was only good if it smelled vaguely stagnant. Shane dried him off with a

towel, brushed him, and told him he looked very handsome, which set Gordie's tail happily wagging once more.

Shane showered again, on his own this time, shaved carefully, pulled on clean clothes, put last night's clothes in the hamper. He made himself breakfast, an egg and toast, made himself eat it, cleaned up afterward.

When there was nothing else to be done, he got in his Jeep. Gordie scrambled into the passenger seat even though it was against the rules, making the car beep incessantly until Shane plugged in his seatbelt for him. By the time he arrived at Stonefield's Estate, wedding preparations were well underway even though the ceremony wasn't until late that afternoon. It hadn't rained and it didn't appear that it would, so there were people wiping down the white chairs, tying up ribbons though it still wasn't time for the flowers yet, apparently.

Shane smiled and thanked everyone he saw, told them all how much he appreciated their work, it was so beautiful, thank you, thank you, oh that's so nice of you, thank you.

His mother and father were sitting at the table in the farmhouse, lingering over breakfast; David was doing the crossword puzzle, Yuna was frowning at the sports section. He kissed them both, released Gordie to his father's care.

"Did you have a nice time last night?" his mother asked.

Shane thought about Ilya and Scott exchanging insults over bocce, about Hayden attempting to shotgun a beer and spilling it all over himself, about JJ and Vaughan getting into it over Moombahton, about Ilya's look of abject terror, about how they had all been so comfortable together, how Ilya had fit into Shane's life so perfectly, as if there had always been a space carved out for him.

"Yes," he said, because it was the truth even though it was awful. "I had a really nice time."

He went upstairs to the room where he was supposed to be getting ready, where his suit hung in the closet and his shoes sat polished and waiting. Julian wasn't there yet, but Shane had a text from him:

Julian: sorry, running a little behind, be there in twenty. i'm so hungover

Twenty minutes became forty, and then Julian's car was pulling up the long gravel drive, his BMW gleaming in the late morning sun. Shane watched from the window as Julian got out; he didn't look hungover, was as perfectly groomed as ever, his hair styled, his clothes unwrinkled. There were footsteps on the stairs, quick and light, and then the door opened.

"Hey, baby," he said, "sorry I'm late, Nico's fault entirely, they wouldn't get the fuck out of bed—you okay?" he asked, frowning. "You look..."

Shane swallowed hard. His heart was pounding so hard he could feel it in his temples. “I need to talk to you about something.”

Julian’s expression shifted, went cautious, but then he shook it off, pasting the smile back on. “Sure, absolutely. Can it wait a little bit, though? I’m getting such a late start, and I need to check in with the photographer because I’m wondering whether we should actually do photos before the ceremony? What do you think? Don’t you think the light will be better then?”

“Julian.”

“—and your mom wants to do a thing where all the parents walk down the aisle together, which is sweet I guess, but—”

“Julian,” Shane said again, louder. “Please, can we just...can we take a walk or something?”

Julian’s face went carefully blank. “Yeah. Sure. Just a short one, though.”

They walked away from the house, thanking people as they went, down the driveway past the barn and the rose garden and the garden house, until they were walking down the lane outside the property, off to the side to stay out the way of the various catering delivery vans that rumbled past, kicking up dust.

Julian had his hands shoved in his pockets. He wasn’t talking, which was unusual—Julian knew how to fill Shane’s silences, how to make everything feel a little lighter, but he wasn’t doing that now. Eventually they were far enough away that Shane could breathe a little more freely, sure that they wouldn’t be observed. There was nothing around them but fields and trees and the endless blue sky of a perfect day for a June wedding.

“Okay,” he said, steeling himself. “Okay. Julian, I need to tell you something.”

“That you don’t want to get married?” Julian said flatly. “No shit.”

Shane stopped walking. “What? Of course I do.”

“Really. Because you’ve been treating this whole thing like a root canal.”

“I—no, I haven’t.”

“Every decision, Shane, every single one, I have made by myself.” Julian’s voice was rising now, taking on an edge. “The venue, the flowers, the food, the music—you’ve had an opinion on exactly nothing.”

“Because you like that stuff! You like colors and fabrics and music and seating charts. I don’t even like cake, Julian! You can’t expect me to—” he stopped, took a breath, knew he had absolutely no right to be frustrated. None of this was Julian’s fault. He started walking again, tried to find his footing, to say what he needed to say. “I slept with someone last night. Had sex, I mean. Not—” he stopped himself just in time, knew that Julian did not actually want to know about the particularities.

Julian walked beside him in silence. The road was paved, but in that loose asphalt sort of way where there were still small rocks that skittered ahead of them, kicked up at their ankles.

“Who was it?”

“It...it doesn’t matter. I’ll never see him again. I’m so sorry, but I promise, it will never happen again. I will make it right, I swear. I will be such a good husband to you—”

Julian made a harsh, disbelieving sound. “I’m not fucking marrying you now—what the *fuck*, Shane? The night before our wedding?”

“I’m sorry, I know I fucked up. I know I hurt you. We can go to couple’s therapy”—Shane had planned that much, had remembered that Julian had wanted them to go a few months ago, had brought it up and Shane had asked, blankly, *what for?*--“Whatever you need, I’ll do it, I promise.”

“Shut up, just shut your fucking mouth—you *asshole*, you absolute fucking cockstain—” Julian took off his sunglasses, threw them on the ground, ran his hands through his hair, messing up the careful styling. He took a heaving breath, another, before he spoke again. “You’re going to do all that, just for me? Because you’re such a good guy, right?”

Shane swallowed hard, bent down to pick up Julian’s sunglasses. When he didn’t accept them, Shane put them in his pocket.

“Well, you know what, Shane?” he said, his lip curling with disgust. “A good guy doesn’t cheat on his fiancé. Guess you’re not such a good boy after all.”

Shane colored, his shoulders hunching, thinking of all the times Julian had called him that when they fucked, how much it had always humiliated Shane that he got off on it.

“What, nothing to say? Not going to beg me? Did you beg Rozanov?” Shane flinched, and Julian’s eyes flashed vindictively. “Yeah, I know it was him, I’m not fucking blind. Did you even try to pretend you aren’t such a whore for it, or did you just spread your legs the second he looked at you?”

Shane’s face was on fire, his eyes stinging, and Julian...Julian’s shoulders sagged.

“I’m sorry. That was...that was out of line.”

“No,” Shane forced himself to say. “You’re...you’re angry. You have a right to be.”

“Oh, thank you for that,” Julian said sarcastically. “Yes, I’m really fucking angry, but...” he took a breath, let it out slowly. “That was hurtful, and it wasn’t even true.”

Actually it was, Shane thought, horribly. *It was*.

Julian must have seen something of that on his face, because he grimaced and looked away. “Well. It’s never been true with me, anyway. You’ve never been like that about me, not really.” Shane tried to protest this, because they had a good sex life, he’d enjoyed it, he’d thought they both did, but Julian just shook his head. “I just mean...yes, we like fucking each other. But you’ve never looked at me like I’m the only person in the room.”

“I’m sorry,” Shane said. He didn’t try to deny it.

Julian shrugged, trying for casual and missing by a mile. “I could have asked him to leave, when he showed up here. I didn’t, I don’t know why not.” He was patting around his pockets now, distracted, searching for something. “I was using him as a test maybe, to see if...” he gave a bitter laugh. “I guess we failed, huh?”

“I failed.”

“You did, yes, but...Fuck, I wish I had a cigarette.”

“I didn’t know you smoked.” It really felt like the sort of thing Shane ought to have known.

“Yeah, well.” Julian gave him a humorless smile, sharp-edged. “I don’t love you either, you know,” he added, almost conversationally. “Not really. I thought maybe I did, but it’s not...” he gestured vaguely “...whatever the fuck it is with you and him.” Julian closed his eyes, and for the first time since they’d started this conversation, Shane saw something on his face besides anger or resentment. Hurt, probably, and regret. “I liked you though,” he said quietly, painfully. “I liked what we had. I thought we could have been good together.”

The silence stretched between them, broken only the the sound of their feet shifting on pavement, the cry of grasshoppers in the fields, the distant beeping of the florist’s van backing up the drive. “I’m sorry,” Shane said again. “I...I liked it, too.”

“Just not enough, huh?” Julian sighed. “You’re probably right. Not for cheating on me, fuck you very much forever for that. But I should have wanted better than that. I feel like I deserve better than that.”

“You do,” Shane said earnestly. “Better than all of this. You’re a good guy, Julian. Better than me.”

It was true, was the thing. Julian wasn’t perfect—he could be shallow sometimes, a little self-absorbed—but neither was Shane, and when it came down to it, Shane was the shittier of the two of them. Nothing was going to change that: it was just something he’d have to live with.

“Low fucking bar,” Julian muttered.

“I really am so sorry—”

“Stop fucking apologizing!” Julian snapped, whirling on him. His eyes were red, a little damp. “You’re not forgiven. I’m not going to tell you it’s okay, because it’s not. I don’t want to deal with your guilt, understand? It’s not my problem. *My* problem is that I have to figure out how to tell three hundred people that they shouldn’t bother showing up for a wedding in six fucking hours, okay? My problem is that I have to explain to everyone why all of a sudden, you don’t want to marry me anymore.”

“I...I can handle all that. If you want.” Julian laughed at him, derisive, until he saw that Shane was serious. “It is the least I can do.”

For a moment, he thought Julian wasn't going to agree, that he would dig in his heels and deal with all of this because he thought it would make Shane feel worse (it would) or because he thought Shane couldn't handle it (he could, probably). But after another minute of turning pebbles beneath his shoes, he nodded. "Yes. It literally is the least you can do." He held out his hand, and Shane tried to take it, thought they were maybe going to shake on it or something. "No, you dumbass. I want my sunglasses."

"Oh." Shane dug in his pocket, wiped them on his shirt before handing them over. Julian swiped at his eyes with his knuckles before putting them on.

"I'm taking the honeymoon," he said.

"That's fine. You should."

"And I'm taking Gordie."

"I understand, of course you—" Shane's brain caught up with him, and his heart seized.

"Wait. No, you can't—"

"I'm kidding, fuck." Julian's mouth twitched, almost a smile but definitely not all the way there. "I hate that dog."

Chapter End Notes

hashtag justice for julian i guess?

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

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

Hayden was much quieter on the drive away from the cottage, back to Ilya's hotel. He looked askance at the dishtowel Ilya held over his lap to hide the wet spot but didn't say anything, for which Ilya was profoundly grateful.

He probably should have just helped himself to yet another item of Shane's clothing, but all he'd wanted was to get out of there as quickly as possible. No one had argued with him when he'd come upstairs and told them they had to leave; he could only imagine what he looked like, lips swollen, shirtless, with red-rimmed eyes and come-soaked pants.

Actually, JJ looked like he might have asked questions, and Vaughan, too, had that expression people got when they were trying to work out a puzzle—but Kip had taken the situation in hand, bundling them all out the door, distributing keys to the soberest and making sure they'd locked the cottage door behind them.

"Please don't ever give me any details," Hayden said, after they'd been driving in silence for about half an hour. "But that was you, wasn't it? Lily?"

Ilya looked out the window at the trees flashing past, dark against slightly less dark sky, didn't answer.

"Right." Hayden blew out a breath through his lips, drummed his hand against the steering wheel. "Well. Your timing is for shit, but..."

"But what," Ilya said dully, when it seemed like Hayden wasn't going to finish.

"He loved you, I think. Back then." Hayden shrugged, rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand. "I always thought so, anyway, and I figured one day he and Lily would work it out, whoever she was. So, I don't know. I have no idea what happened tonight and I'd really like to keep it that way, but...maybe this is that time, you know? Maybe you'll finally work it out."

"No," Ilya said, and slid down in the seat, closed his eyes. The seatbelt was uncomfortable against his bare chest, and he shifted it under his arm, gripped his cross on its chain. "No. I made him worse, you see. I make him worse."

Hayden grunted, a very hockey-player noise, and one that Ilya knew from long experience meant that a guy was going to say something he thought was pretty damn profound. "Maybe Shane needs that, though. Maybe he needs to be a little bit worse sometimes."

The road curved, and Ilya let his head roll with it, turning to look at Hayden.

“Shane’s always been kind of perfect, you know? The best. Best player, best teammate, best friend I could ever ask for. It always seemed like, with Lily—with *you*—he wasn’t trying to be the best. He was just himself.”

“He did try,” Ilya said, irritated. “He always tried to beat me. It wasn’t like that, not ever—”

“No, I get that,” Hayden said quickly. “That’s not what I meant. I wasn’t talking about hockey. I don’t know, maybe I’m wrong.” He laughed shortly, and Ilya realized Hayden was actually a little hurt. “It’s not like he ever talked to me about any of this.”

“There wasn’t,” Ilya said carefully, “ever anything to talk about.”

Hayden gave him a look then, an eyeroll, and Ilya felt that he probably had a lot coming to him, but he didn’t really deserve derision from Hayden fucking Pike of all people.

They were quiet for the rest of the drive. When they arrived at the hotel—a fucking Marriott Express, all that had been available on such short notice—Hayden put the car in park by the door, left it running. He got out and, absurdly, opened Ilya’s door for him, like they were on a date or something, and Ilya stumbled out. The evening air was cool on his bare chest, raising goosebumps on his skin. He lifted the dishtowel away cautiously, decided that even with no shoes and no shirt, he was presentable enough for Holiday Inn Express. If not, well, he was retired anyway.

“Thank you,” he said. “For the ride, and for...”

Hayden nodded. “Yeah, no problem, man. Best of luck. I guess.”

Ilya watched Hayden get back in the car, watched the door close and the brake lights flare red, watched him drive away, taillights disappearing in the dark. He went inside, ignoring the askance looks from the desk clerks, let himself into the hotel room because Kip had made sure he at least had his wallet and phone. Svetlana wasn’t back yet, and even with the state he was in, Ilya had a flicker of curiosity about that, about how fun, inquisitive, passionate Svetlana might possibly be spending her time with Rose Landry.

He booked himself on the first flight back to Boston, arranged a Lyft for 4am, packed his bag, shoving the nice suit he’d brought at the bottom because who the fuck cared. He changed, put on the clothes he’d wear on the plane, and lay on his bed, staring at the popcorn ceiling with the water stain in the corner while the air vents clicked on, off, on again. The elevator dinged and voices drifted past his door, a car alarm went off and was silenced.

Eventually the door clicked open, and Svetlana came in. Ilya didn’t look at her, tried to decide what the water stain looked like. A map of some faraway island, maybe, or the face of a regretful old man. He heard her intake of breath, the soft thud of her heels coming off and hitting the carpet. The bed dipped as she sat down beside him, and with a small sound he rolled over, put his head in her lap. Her nails were long and a little sharp as they dragged against his scalp, and he nuzzled into her thigh, let himself be comforted, just a little.

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” he said at last, in Russian. “Early.”

“I’ll go with you,” she told him.

Eventually she fell asleep. He packed her bags for her, probably did a shitty job. Her phone lit up with a text from Rose that made him smile before he remembered he should probably look away. When everything was ready, he climbed back in bed beside her, but he didn’t sleep; he closed his eyes and thought about Shane, thought about *I tried so hard, Ilya, so fucking hard*. He thought about how defeated Shane had looked when at last he’d told Ilya to go.

He ought to wish that he’d never come. He ought to, but he didn’t.

Svetlana bought her ticket at the desk; there were plenty of seats to spare. The flight attendant offered coffee, tea, champagne at seven o’clock in the fucking morning. Ilya smiled and told him no thank you. Svetlana watched a movie; Ilya watched it over her shoulder, trying to guess at the plot without sound. The screen at the front of the cabin ticked down the miles, the air speed, the time. The flight ended before the movie did.

“Do you want me to come home with you?” It was the first thing she’d said to him in hours.

Ilya shook his head. “No. I am okay.”

She raised a skeptical eyebrow but didn’t argue. She pressed up to her tiptoes, kissed him. “You will be,” she said, like she had the power to make it true.

He paid the exorbitant parking fee, drove her home, left his car double-parked while he carried her suitcase upstairs for her, kissed her goodbye at the door. And then he went home.

It was almost 10am when at last he walked into his house, tapping in the code—1410, he’d never changed it—and shutting the door behind him.

In seven hours, Shane Hollander would be married.

March, 2017

Shane: Hey. Um. How are you?

Ilya: Okay. Not good. Probably bad. Thank you for taking my call.

Shane: It doesn’t...it’s not going to change anything, with you and me. That’s done.

Ilya: I know that.

Shane: Right. Sorry. I just wanted to be clear.

Ilya: We are clear.

Shane: *[brief silence]*

Shane: I'm really sorry about your father.

Ilya: Is it terrible that I am not? Everyone says how sorry they are, and I keep saying thank you, but... I don't feel it. I feel... I don't know. That makes me a bad person, probably.

Shane: You're not a bad person. I... I don't know anything about you and your father, what your relationship was like, but... you're not a bad person. If you're not sorry, then there's a reason for that.

Ilya: I... I *am* sorry, but... it's hard to explain. I can't do it in English, it's too much.

Shane: Do you want to tell me in Russian?

Ilya: What?

Shane: I mean, I won't understand, obviously. But then you'll have told someone. I can just listen.

Ilya: You would do that?

Shane: Sure. I want to help, if I can. If you want me to. You can talk to me about your father, your brother. About anything, really. Okay?

Ilya: Okay.

Ilya: *[long pause]*.

Shane: I'm still here.

Ilya: I know. I can hear you breathing.

Shane: Right.

Ilya, in Russian: I think about you every day. I have thought about you every day since I met you. I know I will get over this, I have to get over this. But I miss you. I lied when I said it wasn't different last time. I want that with you. I want everything with you. I want to wake up with you and cook you breakfast. I want to buy groceries with you. I want to talk about fucking gas mileage, it doesn't matter, as long as it's with you. It's stupid and pointless to want something like that, with someone like you. You should be with someone who can love you like you deserve, and I... I have nothing to offer anyone. My brother hates me. My father hated me, and now he is dead. I am all alone. I want to be with you always, all the time, but I know that eventually you would hate me, too. *[laughs]*. I know you already do.

Ilya, in English: Okay, I am done.

Shane: Did that help?

Ilya: *[laughs, or maybe sobs]* No. Not at all. Goodbye, Hollander.

Five o'clock came and went.

Ilya knew because he was watching the clock on his nightstand, the fancy one that had a lamp feature that slowly brightened to mimic sunrise, a purchase from six years ago when he'd been trying to pretend Seasonal Affective Disorder was his problem.

He wasn't sure he'd ever felt more alone.

He saw the rest of his life stretching out in front of him, identical in almost every way to what had come before: women, eventually some men too probably, lots of money, success, everything he could want. Shane had taken up so little of it, really—an hour or two here and there for a few years, and then nothing except what little Ilya could breathe in of him on the ice. So very little, and yet Ilya was hollow without him.

He was still in the clothes he'd worn on the plane. He'd meant to shower, should probably have eaten something at some point, but his stomach wouldn't settle. He had shut his phone off, at least, had left it in the living room so he wouldn't be tempted to go on Instagram, search #holleeeveswedding, and scroll through photos of Shane with a ring on his finger until he blacked out.

He'd save that for tomorrow, the day after, the rest of his fucking life probably.

He threw the alarm clock lamp on the floor, smashed it.

Some time later—long enough that it was dark out—the doorbell rang, followed closely by a knock on the door.

He didn't move. It wasn't Svetlana, she would just have let herself in. Marly also had the door code, but it wouldn't be him, either—he'd walked in on Ilya naked and with company too many times to drop by without texting first. It was probably fucking Amazon or something, though he couldn't remember ordering anything.

Another ring, another knock, as if just one or the other wouldn't do.

Go away, Ilya thought dully, and rolled onto his stomach, choking himself a little with his necklace. He buried his face in his pillow. *Whoever you are, whatever you want. Just go away.*

Three more knocks, louder, rapid-fire.

“Fuck off,” he yelled, but it was muffled by the pillow. He dragged himself up, reeling a little as his vision went back—he’d been lying down for too long—before slumping his way to the door.

There was a window beside it; he could have looked out. But since he didn’t think it was likely to be a gunman or a Mormon—too late in the day for Mormons, probably—he just yanked the door open. “What the fuck do you want?”

Shane was standing there, his fist still raised, his mouth open on whatever he’d been about to say.

Ilya stumbled backward in shocked surprise as his numbed brain struggled to catch up, processing in fragments rather than a whole: Shane, in a wrinkled tuxedo but no tie, white shirt untucked, collar undone and showing the hollow of his throat, sleeves rolled up over his forearms. Shane, with heavy shadows under his eyes. Shane, slightly out of breath and wearing nondescript white sneakers that clashed absurdly with the tux, *Shane*.

Ilya’s heart detonated, pure undiluted joy flooding through him so fast it was almost violent, almost brought him to his knees.

“Hi,” he said stupidly, and reached for him.

“Don’t touch me, don’t—” Shane shoved past him, walked inside, then whirled around, eyes blazing, and Ilya realized belatedly that Shane was absolutely furious. He paced along the windows toward the living room, running his hands through his hair, chest heaving. He hadn’t stopped to take his shoes off, something Ilya dimly registered as probably a bad sign.

Ilya let his hand fall, closed the door. “You’re here,” he said, because apparently he wasn’t done saying stupid, obvious things.

“Yeah, I’m fucking here,” Shane snapped, throwing his tuxedo jacket on the bench by the door. “Did you think I wouldn’t be?”

“I thought,” Ilya said slowly, “you would be eating cake by now. What flavor did you end up not choosing?”

“Go fuck yourself,” Shane said, and Ilya’s heart, which was very confused, had been dropping and soaring like it was on a bungee cord, gave a little leap because Shane sounded angry, yes, and extremely stressed, but not at all brokenhearted.

Ilya felt a smile creep across his face, knew he might get punched in the mouth for it, didn’t care. “You called off your wedding.”

“*Julian* called off the wedding, actually, because he didn’t want to have anything to do with a guy who treated him like shit.”

“You did not treat him like shit.”

“What the fuck do you call last night? We—” he stopped, took another heaving breath, paced back and forth along the windows. Ilya heaved himself up on his kitchen counter, sat

patiently with his hands folded in his lap, his feet kicking slightly. “I just spent a day telling three hundred people not counting staff that I’m an absolute douchebag—”

“You told them you cheated? That seems unnecessary.”

“No, you asshole, I—”

Ilya smiled again, couldn’t help it. Shane had red splotches on his cheeks, daggers for eyes, and he was wonderful.

“My mom did most of the talking,” Shane admitted, “along with the wedding planners. Apparently they have contingencies for this sort of thing. We explained there wasn’t going to be a wedding—turns out almost everyone already knew that, because most of them were Julian’s friends and he’d spent the day telling them just what an awful person I am.”

“Ah. I’m sorry.” Ilya thought he should probably not be smiling anymore, wasn’t sure if he was succeeding. “That sounds terrible.”

“Then we had a party. There was all the food and everything, not like we could return it. I didn’t stay.”

“Sounds like fun?”

“Fuck you.”

“Okay.”

“The point is,” Shane said, his voice rising again, “that I just blew up my entire life, and—” he stopped pacing, marched over so that he was standing right in front of where Ilya’s feet were dangling against his cabinet, hands fisted at his sides, his eyes seething. “Are you in love with me?”

Ilya’s brain flatlined. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

“You know what, that’s not—” Shane shook his head sharply. “Do you want to be with me? For real. Because I—” his voice broke, and he swallowed, visibly steadying himself. “I wanted to get married. Not to Julian, obviously. But I wanted...the relationship. Partnership, I don’t know. I wanted to share my life with someone. And I just threw it all away because of you.”

“Shane—” Ilya croaked, trying to make useful words come out of his mouth, failing.

“Well, not for you exactly. For me, because I shouldn’t be marrying someone when I...” He sighed heavily, started pacing along the windows again. “The point is, I want that. I want a marriage and forever, I want all of it, and I want it with *you*—but if that’s not something you can handle, or you’re not ready for it, or you just don’t think—”

“Yes,” Ilya said.

Shane stopped mid-pace, looked a little puzzled. “What?”

“Yes.” Ilya jumped down from the counter, took a step toward Shane. His heart was hammering so hard he could feel it in his throat, his fingertips, it was compressing his lungs, taking up all the space in his chest, his entire body.

“Yes, what? Which part? Because I asked you multiple—”

“Yes, I will marry you.” He could feel how widely he was smiling, big enough to squeeze his eyes nearly shut, making it hard to see. “I accept your proposal. Very kind of you to ask me.”

Shane stared at him like he’d gone insane; fair enough, Ilya felt like he had. “I wasn’t—I didn’t *propose*,” he sputtered, outraged.

Ilya shrugged, stepped closer. “Sounded like it to me.”

“Well, I fucking didn’t!”

“Okay.” Ilya held his hands up in surrender, took another step and another, until he was standing close enough for them to touch. “Still, my answer is yes. Yes, I am in love with you. Yes, I want to be with you. Yes, I want marriage and forever and all of it.” He took Shane’s chin in hand, held him still, made him look at him with those shining brown eyes, devastating. “Yes to everything, Shane. Yes, yes, yes.”

Shane’s tears spilled over, and Ilya leaned in, pressed his lips to them, brushed them away with a kiss. “I love you,” he whispered. “Always I have loved you.” Shane, who had been keeping very still, shuddered, and then his arms were around Ilya’s shoulders, his face in his neck, breath coming fast and uneven. “I love you,” Ilya said again, because now that he could he never wanted to stop saying it.

“I love you, too,” Shane mumbled. “I love you so much.”

They stood there along the wall of windows for a long time, and Ilya stroked his hands down Shane’s back, watched their reflections against his dark windows, watch them vanish and reappear as his motion-sensor outdoor lights came on, went off, came on again, taunted by squirrels. Shane stank, a little, of the remnants of anxiety and airplane sweat; Ilya was probably worse. When was the last time he’d brushed his teeth? He couldn’t remember.

Eventually, when Shane’s breathing had evened out and his grip had loosened slightly, Ilya said, “What day is today? Saturday?”

“Um.” Shane’s voice was muffled against Ilya’s neck. “I think so. Yes.”

“Courthouse will probably not be open on a Sunday,” Ilya said regretfully. “Boston is a very Catholic place. We could fly to Vegas?”

“I hate Vegas. It’s so loud and bright and crowded.”

“I know you do, душила,” Ilya said, stroking his back. “It is only in emergencies.”

Shane lifted his head at last, eyebrows coming together in confusion. “What emergency? A Las Vegas emergency?”

Ilya kissed the tip of his nose. “It’s where Elvis is,” he said, because a confused Shane was very adorable.

“Ilya,” Shane said, beginning to get exasperated. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Ilya kissed his mouth, his freckles, his chin, his mouth again. “Elvis can marry us. I saw it in a movie.”

Shane stared at him, and then he began to laugh, his shoulders shaking, and then—at last—they were kissing properly, Ilya forgetting all about his probably terrible breath, because Shane tasted like shitty airplane coffee and that was also wonderful, everything in the world was wonderful.

“I am not,” Shane said, still giggling, “getting married in Las Vegas.”

“Okay,” Ilya said agreeably. “We have big wedding then, invite all of Canada. Maybe we do it in Bell Centre, get Commissioner Crowell to officiate, he seems like nice guy—”

“No, fuck you—”

“No? But you love hockey! I am just trying to be romantic.”

“Shut up,” Shane said, pulling Ilya’s mouth to his, sliding his hands beneath Ilya’s shirt. “You know what would be romantic right now?”

Ilya was too giddy, couldn’t shut up now that he’d started, because there was, probably always would be a part of him that worried all of his happiness would disappear if he slowed down enough to let it. “I could light candles everywhere—my house smells like sad person—I don’t know how many I have, not a lot. I don’t have roses, either. What is romantic? I do not actually have much experience with this.”

“Ilya.” Shane put his palms on either side of his face, held him still. “I would find it extremely romantic if you would make love to me right fucking now.”

Ilya caught his breath, suddenly speechless. “Yes,” he choked out. “Yes. I can do that.”

He led the way to his bedroom from behind—which is to say he kept his arms locked around Shane’s waist and propelled him down the hallway, pressing kisses to the back of his neck, his shoulder through the wrinkled shirt, anywhere he could reach.

“What did that lamp do to you?” Shane asked, puzzled, unbuttoning his shirt and draping it carefully over the back of the chair in the corner, toeing off his shoes. He undid his zipper and stepped out of his wrinkled suit pants, folded them in thirds.

“It was not you,” Ilya said, watching him so fondly he thought he might break with it.

Shane beamed at him. “Lamps usually aren’t.”

Ilya lay Shane down in his bed, stood back to look at him. “I love you,” he said again.

“Yeah,” Shane said, smiling, blushing. “I love you, too.”

It was nothing like the night before, nothing like any other time they’d ever been together, because Ilya no longer had to pretend this didn’t mean the world to him. He didn’t have to pretend that he’d never wanted anyone as much as he wanted Shane, couldn’t imagine how he could get through the next minute, the next breath, without touching him. It was intimate and fun and somehow also reverent, because beneath the stomach-twisting eroticism of seeing Shane Hollander open up for him, of watching his fingers slide inside, slick and searching, watching him writhe and pant, arching his spine and moaning so very prettily—there was also something like grace. Because loving Shane, like this, with his body and his mind and his soul, felt like worship, like sanctuary.

Maybe, in that way, it was exactly the same as it had always been.

“Ilya,” Shane gasped, “please—”

“Please what?” Ilya pressed kisses along the inside of Shane’s thigh, up the side of his leaking cock. “Tell me what you want.”

Shane scowled at him, best as he could with his pupils blown and his lips swollen where he’d bitten them. “You know what I want.” And Ilya did, of course he did, but he loved to hear Shane say it, loved to watch him squirm. He curled his fingers, pressed hard, and Shane let out a choked cry. “*Fuck*. Just—Christ, Ilya, will you please just fuck me?”

Ilya swallowed Shane’s cock, pulled up once, twice, before letting him go. “Sure you are ready?”

“I have been ready,” Shane said tightly, “for a fucking decade, you asshole. Get up here.”

Ilya laughed, but it came out a little ragged, a little painful, catching in his chest. Shane’s face softened, and he reached out a hand. Ilya kissed his palm, settled himself between his legs. “Forgive me,” he said softly.

Shane shook his head, smiling though his eyes were wet again, shining in the dim light. “I could have fought harder, could have responded when you reached out to me. It was both of us, Ilya. We just weren’t ready.”

Ilya smiled, still a little sad, still a little sorry. He lifted Shane’s ankle and kissed the knob of bone before placing it on his shoulder. “I thought you said you were?”

“Oh, for—” Shane broke off with a gasp when Ilya pushed inside.

He moved slowly, watching the way Shane’s eyes fluttered, the way his hands ran up his own thighs, gripped at the sheets, unable to settle. Ilya set a slow, deliberate rhythm, pulling out until Shane whimpered at the loss, pushing back in until Shane was shaking with it.

“Harder,” Shane demanded, and his head fell back when Ilya obliged, exposing the line of this throat, and Ilya wanted to drag his teeth down it, scratch red lines across his chest like he

was carving an invocation into Shane's skin, into his own, because it had to be written all over both of them now: that they were finally together, where they belonged.

"Like this?" Ilya panted, fucking into him faster now, chasing the sparking heat building at the base of his spine. "This what you want?"

"Yes—*fuck*, yes—"

Ilya shifted his weight, pulled Shane's hips up higher, and the new angle had Shane nearly sobbing, his whole body going taut as Ilya nailed his prostate over and over again, relentless. "Touch yourself," he ordered, and Shane obeyed immediately, stroking himself in time with Ilya's breathless thrusts.

He knew that Shane was close, could feel his body tightening, clenching rhythmically, trying to pull him deeper. Ilya gritted his teeth, focused on Shane even though that wasn't likely to help, watched his mouth moving soundlessly, his hand flying over his cock. "Come for me," he said, or maybe begged. Because this was ecstasy, this was rapture: to see Shane like this, to love him like this.

He came with Ilya buried deep inside him, painted both their chests with it, his whole body seizing, his eyes flying open, dark and wrecked and so full of love it made Ilya's chest ache.

"Love you," Shane gasped, "love you so fucking much—" and that pushed Ilya over the edge, made him come apart at the seams, every cell, every atom breaking open and spilling out until there was nothing left of him but the feeling of falling and being caught all at once.

When he could breathe again, gasping, he realized he was crying, tears streaming down his face and falling onto Shane's chest, mixing with the sweat and come. Shane pulled him down, held him close, pressing kisses to his temple, his cheek, his mouth.

"I've got you," Shane whispered. "I've got you."

Ilya believed him.

Chapter End Notes

душила: stuffy person, nerd

Chapter 8: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

bonus chapter!

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

One Month Later

The thing about marrying Ilya Rozanov, Shane had quickly learned, was that it required an almost supernatural level of patience.

“No,” he said for the third time that morning, “you may not arrive by boat.”

“Why not?” Ilya was sprawled naked across their bed, magnificent and magnificently unhelpful, tossing Gordie’s squeaky loon in the air and catching it. Gordie, who had learned to fetch due to the lure of the squeak, was tracking the trajectory with the focus of a heat-seeking missile, his whole body quivering. “I could stand up in it like those guys in Venice—is it Venice? And I could sing to you, it would be very romantic.”

Shane had come to regret that Ilya had ever learned the word *romance*. “You’re an awful singer.”

“And you would be waiting for me on the dock,” Ilya continued, unperturbed, “like a pretty princess—”

“Go fuck yourself.”

“—and I will say to you, Shane Hollander, I love you for how well you do your taxes. I will never have to hire an accountant again.”

They were getting married at the cottage, over Shane’s half-hearted objections.

“It’s a mess,” he’d complained, which was in fact true: Ilya had unpacked very few of his many boxes, and they were stuck in various rooms like a cardboard maze, each one labeled with helpful descriptions like STUFF and IMPORTANT???. But after some discussion (read: after Shane had started opening them himself and attempting to throw out some of Ilya’s more egregious/beloved shirts) they agreed to shove them all into one of the downstairs guest rooms and shut the door for the time being.

“It is not my fault you are always demanding sex,” Ilya said in his defense. “When do I have time to unpack?”

There was also the problem of all the art. Ilya had taken a brief detour down to New York on the drive up to Ottawa, to go to art galleries with Kip. The whole thing had mostly been in an effort to annoy Scott—and it was quite successful—but unfortunately Ilya had also been all too successful with his purchases. Shane thought they'd probably end up having to buy another place just to hang it all.

In the meantime, it was stacked against the wall of the second guest room.

“No one should be staying in them anyway! We are in the honeymoon phase, it is not safe for guests!”

This, Shane had to admit, was perfectly true. They did spend quite a lot of time fucking, so much so that he had spent yesterday evening frantically overturning the furniture rounding up all the bottles of lube that had ended up stashed all over the place. (Including the storage room? Shane wondered, and then remembered with a pleased flush how very impressed Ilya had been with Shane's filing system).

Now, however, he wanted Ilya to put some fucking clothes on. “People are going to start arriving in an hour.”

Ilya tossed the loon into the closet, sending Gordie scrambling after it in a delighted scramble of nails on hardwood. “I can be ready in twenty minutes.”

“You haven't even decided what you're going to wear!”

“I am considering my options. You, meanwhile, have had that very boring suit hung up on the back of the door—”

“It's Tom Ford, and you helped me pick it out.”

“—and you look beautiful anyway, because you are always beautiful even when you are boring.”

Shane felt heat creep up his neck, hated that Ilya could still make him blush so easily. “I hate you.”

“No, you don't.” Ilya stretched luxuriously, all lean muscle and golden skin, and Shane took a moment to quietly resent that people were going to be here soon, even if it was for their wedding. “You love me. You are marrying me today.”

“And I'm about to reconsider if you don't fucking get dressed!”

“Too late now,” Ilya said cheerfully. “I already have the ring.” He held up his hand, wiggling his fingers to show off the frankly gaudy gold band he'd been wearing since approximately 48 hours after Shane had (not) proposed.

“Get dressed,” Shane said, and walked out of the room before he did something unhelpful like push Ilya into the sheets, take his dick in his mouth and tongue it until it got hard.

“Please. I'm begging you.”

“I like when you beg,” Ilya called after him, and Shane heard Gordie trot back into the bedroom, squeaking away.

There really wasn’t that much to do; one of their favorite restaurants was dropping off food about an hour after the ceremony, because Ilya had refused to allow Shane to spend the evening grilling for everyone. Rose and Yuna had spent yesterday helping Shane and Ilya string the yard with lights while Hayden and Marleau had bonded over fighting with the sound system. They had brought in more chairs, comfortable ones with cushions, and a few picnic tables. There was beer and wine in the refrigerator and in the chest outside, along with plenty of sodas and juices for Hayden’s kids, “and also for you, шанежка.”

Shane’s phone buzzed.

Kip: don’t tell Ilya but Scott’s actually really nervous. it’s sweet.

Shane smiled, shaking his head.

Kip: he’s practicing in the mirror. i’m pretending not to notice.

Shane: he’ll be great. tell him we appreciate it.

Shane: maybe that won’t help. tell him I appreciate it.

At first it had seemed like a joke, Ilya’s insistence that Scott be the wedding officiant; he’d certainly treated it that way when he’d asked.

“But you have been such an inspiration to us. You are—what did you call it, in your speech? An inspiration to queer youth.”

“Fuck off,” Scott had said, scowling.

“You are what, turning fifty this year? I have looked up to you for so long, Mr. Hunter—”

“I’m 46, you asshole.”

“—and it only makes sense that you, as a respected elder statesman of the community—”

“I swear to god—”

“—would want to support the next generation in their journey toward marriage equality and ___”

“Fine!” Scott had thrown his hands up. “Fine, I’ll do it, just—shut up! I’m ten fucking years older than you.”

“So wise. So experienced. We are blessed by your presence.”

“Get the fuck out of my house, Rozanov.”

When, later that night, Shane had listened to Ilya tell him, gleefully, how it had gone, he’d had to wonder if Scott had heard what he did: that this really meant so much to Ilya, to both of them.

Shane pocketed his phone and went to check on the yard one more time, to make sure birds hadn’t shit on anything or that bears hadn’t overturned the furniture or raccoons hadn’t wrecked everything just for the hell of it. He frowned, wiped at a nearly-invisible smudge on one of the picnic tables.

“It looks perfect,” Ilya said from behind him, and Shane jumped.

“Jesus, you’re like a cat.”

“Cats are very sexy.”

Shane spun around to dispute the point (just for the hell of it) and his jaw dropped. “That’s... you look...where did that come from?”

Ilya spread his arms, an unbearably smug expression on his face. “I told you, Kip took me shopping.”

“For art, I thought, not...” Shane’s eyes roved up and down, across the breadth of Ilya’s shoulders, the length of his legs. He’d seen him in a suit before, obviously, dozens of times, and he always wore them well. But this—

This was bespoke, custom-tailored to every inch of Ilya’s body. The fabric was a deep blue, with the faintest sheen, probably a silk-wool blend, and the jacket fit like a second skin, cut aggressively slim through the torso with peaked lapels that drew a sharp line down Ilya’s chest—and the trousers were even worse. They sat low on his hips, so tight that Shane could see the shift of muscle underneath when Ilya moved. The shirt was mustard gold silk with a subtle paisley print, definitely a little tacky, so tight the buttons pulled a little at Ilya’s chest. The collar was open, several buttons undone, his cross bared.

Shane slid his hands beneath the jacket, ran them up Ilya’s sides, around to his back. Ilya made a pleased sound, bent to give him a kiss, but Shane was busy tugging the shirt from the waistband, undoing the buttons.

“I thought you wanted me to get dressed,” Ilya teased.

“Shut up.” Shane tugged his head down, shoved his tongue in his mouth, kissed him hard and possessive. “Inside.”

“Why?” Ilya said innocently, but he strode quickly into the house, opened the sliding door and pulled Shane in after him. “We have...” he checked the clock on the stove “...a little more than half an hour, are you sure—”

Shane gave him a look, shoved him up against the glass door—gently, because the suit really was beautiful—and dropped to his knees. His hands shook as he undid Ilya’s belt, found the hidden closure, undid the zipper. “No underwear?” Shane looked up at him, incredulous.

“The line would show,” Ilya said, pulling aside the hem of his shirt to keep it out of the way. “I am thinking of the aesthetics.”

“Sure.” Shane took him in his mouth, and Ilya’s head fell back against the glass with a thunk.

Shane went slowly at first, taking his time despite the clock ticking down, hollowing his cheeks and swirling his tongue around the tip, gripping Ilya’s hips through the expensive fabric of his trousers.

“You are going to ruin me,” Ilya breathed, watching him reverently, “and then I will have to walk around with everyone knowing—”

Shane pulled off, used his hand to stroke him while he caught his breath. “That’s the idea.” He leaned forward again, licked up stripe up the underside, tongued at the slit until Ilya made a broken, pleading sound. “Want everyone to see you looking fucked out, to know what I just did to you.” He didn’t, not really, it would be horrifying—but there would always be a part of him that secretly did.

“*Fuck—*” Ilya’s hips jerked forward, and Shane let him, let him fuck deep into his mouth as Ilya gripped his hair, holding him in place. “I can’t—”

Come spurted down the back of Shane’s throat, and that’s when he pushed Ilya away, pulling off so that the rest of it came in his open mouth, on his chin. He looked up to see Ilya staring down at him, red-faced and reverent, chest heaving. “I love you,” he said, wiping a thumb across Shane’s lower lip, pushing it into his mouth.

Shane grinned, sucked hard, then sat back to wipe his face with a grimace. “I love you, too.” He went to get a paper towel from the roll on the counter, and wet it in the sink before wiping down his face, washing his hands. Ilya crowded up behind him, hands reaching around to Shane’s very hard, thus far very ignored cock, palming him through his dress pants.

“We only have fifteen minutes,” Shane protested half-heartedly.

“I think it would be worse,” Ilya said, undoing his zipper, “if everyone came in while you still had a boner.” Shane elbowed him in the side, and Ilya bit his ear, spun him around and dropped to his knees. “Besides,” he said, looking up coyly through his lashes, “it never takes you that long.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Shane said, or tried to say, breaking off into a moan partway through when Ilya’s mouth closed around him.

Ilya sucked him fast and hard, sloppily, and Shane braced himself on the counter behind him; Ilya reached up to grab his hand, lacing their fingers together, and Shane felt his heavy ring against his knuckles, and for some reason that was what put him over the edge. He bent over with a choked sound, knees buckling, Ilya swallowing around him, working him through it until Shane, gasping and oversensitive, had to tug at his hair to get him to stop.

Ilya released him and stood up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, looking insufferably pleased with himself. His lips were red and swollen, there was a wrinkle in his perfect jacket, and Shane decided he was also quite pleased with himself, wouldn't have preferred his husband any other way.

Ilya pulled him in for a kiss, tucking Shane's dick back in his pants and doing up his zipper, before pulling back and scanning him with a frown. "I think your mother would rather not see the come stain on your pants."

"*What?*" Panicked, Shane ran for the closet, scrambling to find another suit to wear, only to find Ilya standing behind him, grinning wickedly. "Oh, fuck you." He tucked his shirt in, smoothed down his perfectly clean suit. "You're an asshole."

"Yes," Ilya agreed, and kissed him once more, sweetly. "Come, I hear cars."

Rose arrived with Svetlana, both of them laughing and stunning in the mid-morning sunlight. Hayden's SUV pulled up next, his many children tumbling out before he'd even turned the car off; they had little to no interest in Shane, but went tearing off to find Gordie.

"Don't let him out of the house, or he'll jump in the lake!" Shane hollered after them.

When Yuna arrived, she immediately made a beeline for Ilya's collar, adjusting it, and Ilya winked at Shane over her head.

"You doing okay?" David asked. "Nervous?"

Shane thought about it, shook his head. "Not at all."

For a while, they all just stood around in the yard—some people sat in chairs, others collected on the dock, only to back away in a hurry when Gordie inevitably escaped and launched himself into the water. JJ, Scott, Kip, Marleau, Connors, some guy named Tyler that Shane didn't even know but that Ilya insisted was somehow the reason they were together—everyone they really loved was there.

"Where is Julian?" Ilya asked, looking around. "Did the invitation I sent get lost in the mail?"

"That's not funny," Shane said. "He's a nice guy."

"It's a little funny," Rose said.

"I also dislike you," Ilya told her. "I dislike everyone Shane has slept with, besides me. I mean, you are great, I love you, but it's the principle of the thing."

Shane took a moment to try to count all the men he'd slept with while they weren't together, realized he really had no idea, and let an anticipatory smile spread on his face, thinking of how annoyed Ilya would be when he told him, and how much Shane would enjoy the thorough fucking he'd get out of it. It would take hours, at least.

"Shane!" Yuna called, and he startled, flushed.

"Yeah?"

"It's time, are you ready?"

Ilya cleared his throat, raised his voice. "Okay! Everyone! We are doing the wedding now!"

There was a general murmur of laughter and movement as people gathered in a loose semi-circle, drinks still in hand, with Shane, Ilya, and Scott at the center. Scott opened his phone, scrolled through it, lips moving silently.

"Don't be nervous," Ilya told him. "You can do it, we believe in you."

"You can fuck right off, Rozanov," Scott said, putting his phone away with an aggrieved sigh. "All right. We're all here today because of these two guys. I've known them both for a long time, longer than I'd like probably. You especially," he told Ilya, to general laughter. "But yeah, a long time. And I remember, way back then, the way you looked at each other, the way you couldn't stay away from another. Eight years of All-Star games, I had to deal with you shitheads."

"There are children here!" Jackie called.

"Sorry," Scott said, flushing.

"Don't worry about it, they've heard way worse," Hayden said.

"Fuck yeah we have," Ruby agreed loudly.

"Anyway. I watched you two dance around each other for two decades, watched you break your own hearts, and I'm not going to lie, it was frustrating as hell." He smiled slightly. "But I also admired it, in a weird way. Because even when you were apart, it was so clear to me how much you loved each other, and I'm so glad—we're all so glad—you've finally pulled your heads out of your asses." There was a murmur of agreement, some scattered clapping. "I'm really fucking happy for you, both of you." Scott's voice cracked slightly. "You deserve each other, and I can think of no greater compliment, to either of you."

"Scott," Ilya said, his voice thick, and Shane looked over to see a tear rolling down his face, no effort to hide it. He squeezed his hand.

Scott cleared his throat, swallowed hard. "Yeah, well. Don't cry yet, you've got to get through your vows first. Shane?"

Shane drew in a shaking breath, turned to face Ilya, smiled at the crowd. Ilya's eyes were bright. "Ilya. You're an asshole."

Everyone laughed, and Hayden called, “Hear, hear!”

“I love you because you’re an asshole,” Shane continued. “I love you because you bring out what I used to think was the worst in me—you make me impulsive, foolish, emotional, make me feel things I’d spent my whole life trying not to feel.”

The breeze picked up, ruffling Ilya’s hair, carrying the smell of lake water and pine and wildflowers. “I love you because, in all the time I’ve known you, you’ve helped me understand that maybe that’s also the best in me. Being in love with you has made me so much better. And all the worst in you—how you have such a hard time trusting yourself to be happy, to be loved—I think maybe that’s your best, too. Because you love so much, Ilya, I’ve never known anyone who loves the way you do, with *all* of you, and maybe it’s not so surprising that it’s hard for you to believe anyone could love you that much, too. But I do, I love you so much, and I’m so glad I get to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Ilya took a deep, shuddering breath, didn’t look away. *I love you*, he mouthed.

“Okay,” Scott choked out. He took a moment to run the back of his hand across his eyes. “Fuck. This is why I didn’t want to do this, you know. Okay, uh. Your turn, Ilya.”

Ilya closed his eyes. He let go of Shane’s hand, and Shane watched as he gripped his necklace, whispered something in Russian. When he opened his eyes, he said, “My mother killed herself when I was young.”

There was a subdued murmur, and he gave a crooked smile. “I know, very romantic.” Shane held out his hands, and Ilya took them again, squeezed them gratefully. “I have wondered sometimes if she loved me. Most of the time, I know she did, but...I can’t always help wondering if she had loved me more, maybe she would have stayed.” His eyes on Shane’s remained clear and steady. “Or, and this was harder to push away, I wondered if I had loved her more, maybe that would have changed things. I don’t know, I can never know. I was always so afraid of losing something, I never wanted to have it in the first place.”

He reached up, brushed his hand across Shane’s cheek, catching a tear Shane didn’t realize had fallen. “I still think this sometimes. I probably always will. But being loved by you, Shane, helps me remember I am not alone. And I am so much more, for loving you. You make me so much braver. For twenty years, I have been afraid. Afraid to want you, afraid to have you, afraid to lose you—but I am done being scared.”

He snapped his fingers, and Gordie came trotting over, drool-soaked squeaky loon in his mouth, and Ilya carefully undid the ribbon he’d tied around its neck without Shane even noticing, pulled off a very simple, very understated platinum ring. “You would not wear this when I bought it for you—”

“Because it’s a *wedding ring*—” Shane sputtered.

“—but I hope you will wear it now, and for always. He held it up so that it caught the light, and Shane had to bite his lips to keep them from trembling when he saw the engraving Ilya had added. He had not progressed very far with learning Russian, but this he knew, because Ilya said it all the time, whispered it against his skin: я тебя люблю.

“You are my home, Shane Hollander, and you always have been.” Ilya slid the ring on Shane’s finger, pushing it over the bump of his knuckle, then lifting his hand to give it a kiss, his lips soft and warm against Shane’s skin. “I have loved you for twenty years, long before I realized it, and I will love you forever.”

There was a hush, the sound of Rose and David and Yuna and Marleau crying, and probably some others Shane couldn’t pick out, but he didn’t want to turn and look, *couldn’t* look away from Ilya.

Scott took a breath. “That’s got to be it, right? Can we call this? By the power vested in me by the internet, I now pronounce you married. For the love of God, kiss already.”

And they were, and everyone was cheering and applauding and Gordie was barking and leaping up on them excitedly, and Shane felt Ilya smile against his mouth, felt the warm metal of their rings as they laced their fingers together.

The day stretched out, golden and perfect. Yuna organized the catering delivery, called everyone in to serve themselves, and people drifted between the yard and the the house, laughing and talking. It was comfortable and easy, the sort of party Shane actually enjoyed. He found himself moving through it all in a pleasant haze, accepting congratulations and hugs, making sure everyone had enough to eat and drink, always aware of where Ilya was, their orbits constantly intersecting with a kiss to a temple, a brush of fingers, a shared laugh.

It got warm enough as the afternoon progressed that Ilya disappeared inside, emerging minutes later in swim trunks; Shane told him sternly that he hoped he’d hung up his beautiful suit, got a wicked smile in answer that he chose to interpret as agreement. Ilya jumped off the dock with Gordie and the kids, eventually joined by Marly and Hayden, and even Rose. Shane stood with Svetlana, watching.

“Thank you,” he told her. “For being there for him, all these years.” He didn’t know everything about their relationship—it had only been a month since she’d come to the wedding that wasn’t, and Ilya was still not, probably would never be, the easiest person to pry emotions out of. But he knew enough to understand that Ilya loved her, and that she loved him, and that was more than enough to make Shane love her in turn.

Svetlana smiled and shook her head, her expression uncharacteristically soft. “You are right,” she told him. “It is wonderful, to love like he does, to be loved. We should all aspire to this.”

“I do,” Shane said earnestly, meaning it with everything in him.

She stepped in close, went up on her toes to kiss his cheek. “You are succeeding.”

As the afternoon turned to evening, shadows stretching long across the grass, people began to drift away with tired smiles and tight hugs. Hayden rounded up his children, and to everyone’s surprise, probably including his own, gave Ilya a fierce hug. Rose and Svetlana left as they had arrived, together, after extracting promises from Shane and Ilya that they would come to Boston soon.

Shane found himself sitting in the grass between Ilya's legs, leaning against his damp chest, a blanket wrapped around them both. Most people had gone home by then, and those that remained—Yuna and David, Marleau—were sitting in a clump, talking in a low murmur beneath the rising birdsong. On the dock Gordie shook himself dry with a violent, joyful shudder that sent water droplets flying in an arc that caught the light of the lowering sun. Shane felt the steady rise and fall of Ilya's breathing against his back, the strange, grounding weight of the ring on his finger.

Ilya kissed Shane's temple, wrapped his arms around him. "Are you happy?"

The obvious answer was *yes*, but Shane decided to really think about it, to consider the lost time, the heartbreak, the missed chances. They had wasted twenty years...or maybe, Shane thought, it simply took twenty years to get here from there. Maybe there was happiness they'd missed along the way, and a wistful part of Shane would always regret that, but here now, in his husband's arms, he couldn't imagine ever wanting anything to be different. "So happy," he said. "More than happy."

"Good," Ilya said simply. "I am happy, too."

Shane turned his head, caught Ilya's mouth, kissed him slow and deep and thorough, tasting lake water and beer. The sun sank lower, and somewhere in the forest a barred owl called, echoing. Gordie wandered over and collapsed beside them with a contented sigh, exhausted. Shane closed his eyes, letting himself fully exist in this moment, with the weight of Ilya's love surrounding him, the feeling of finally, finally being exactly where he belonged.

Chapter End Notes

шанежка - shanezhka, sweet bun
я тебя люблю - I love you

Oh my goddddd I cannot bear my own level of fluff but I figure they deserve it after what this fic put them through

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