

Strawberries & Cigarettes (They Always Taste Like You)

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Strawberries & Cigarettes (They Always Taste Like You)

by [Keullala](#)

Summary

Troy's grin turned sharp and mischievous. "Alright then," he spoke up. "New bet."

"No." Ilya groaned. "Why is everything always a bet?"

"Because you hate losing," Wyatt answered as if it was obvious.

Troy clapped his hands together. "Okay, so," he started, his eyes gleaming. "Rozanov has to get Shane Hollander to fall in love with him."

Ilya stared at him, his brain's processing lagging half a second behind. "You think you are jokester, yes? You are joking."

or, in which hockey captain Ilya Rozanov drunkenly agrees to a bet to make the nerdy Shane Hollander fall in love with him

Chapter 1: remember when we first met? (you said "light my cigarette")

Chapter Notes

hello friendsss <3

first of all, thank you so much for all the support on my last (and first) hollanov fic!! And what can I say? Ship so good, it had me open my ao3 once more to write the next one immediately!! 🥹

You will see as more chapters come out that this fic is loosely based on the lyrics of the song “strawberries and cigarettes” by Troy Sivan, so maybe have a listen if you want to get into the right vibe 🥰 I’ve had this idea in my drafts for quite some time but I got inspired to actually write it when I saw a tweet on X with a similar prompt by @ellmercury!!

Also, please mind the tags because in the coming chapters I will mention some heavier topics (there won’t be excessive descriptions and I will put a trigger warning on the actual chapter but please proceed with caution).

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

Shane Hollander liked predictability. And right now, the campus library was quiet in the way he liked it best.

It wasn’t perfectly silent, it never was, but it was hushed enough that he felt at peace. Late evenings here were his favourite: Fewer people, fewer chances to run into someone he knew and be forced to make conversation. He could hear the low hum of the fluorescent lights above him, the soft clicks of a keyboard from someone a few tables away or the occasional rustle of book pages being turned. It was the sort of quiet that made it easier to disappear into his work.

The library was lined with rows of dark wooden bookshelves that stretched along the walls, that smelled faintly of dust and old paper, broken up by study tables worn smooth from years of use. Lamps cast small pools of yellow light across them, leaving the corners of the room in cozy shadow. Outside the tall windows, campus lay dim and still, reflected faintly in the glass.

Shane sat at his usual table near the window, shoulders slightly hunched, headphones around his neck in case he wanted to listen to some instrumental music when he needed to concentrate or wanted to block out his own thoughts.

Everything in front of him was neatly arranged. Three pens in the colours blue, black and red, aligned parallel to the edge of the table, a bright yellow highlighter placed underneath them. His notebook lay open to a page already half-written, filled with a bunch of messy notes that he had scribbled down in the past three hours on the book he was currently reading for his art history class. He stared down at the wild mixture of anecdotes about Renaissance iconography and some marginal sketches of fruit, halos and hands that he had added to visualise what he had learned. To his right sat a small plastic container of strawberries that he had bought at the grocery store earlier, cut carefully at home and sealed with a snap-lid. A bottle of ginger ale stood just beyond his elbow, label turned away because the ugly design distracted him – it was like an insult to his art-loving heart. Usually, he preferred sweet things, but for drinks he enjoyed the fresh kick the ginger gave him.

Shane breathed out slowly and rubbed his eyes. He had always liked studying because he liked it when things made logical sense. If he followed a certain set of steps, things stayed in their lanes and the world seemed to stay quiet enough to exist in.

Something that didn't make sense to Shane, for example, were college parties. The thought crept into his mind uninvited, as it always did on Friday evenings. He often found that there were too many eyes and too many chances to embarrass yourself by saying the wrong thing. People packed too close together, laughing loudly, always seeming to know exactly what to say. Shane, on the other hand, didn't even know where to *stand* at these things. The smell of alcohol clinging to your clothes and skin, the way conversations overlapped until words became noise instead of meaning... Shane pressed his lips together and underlined a sentence in his book harder than probably necessary.

He told himself that he didn't mind that he preferred nights like this, quiet and alone. And most of the time, that was true. Maybe if he drank alcohol, it would be easier for him to relax at such events, but since he didn't really, he usually just tried to avoid them to begin with. That was, if he could escape from his friends that always tried to drag him with them.

He popped a strawberry into his mouth and focused on the sweet, yet fresh taste and a satisfied smile stretched on his lips.

Suddenly, a shadow fell across the table, coming from behind him.

"Wow," a voice said brightly. "If I breathe too hard in here, will you glare at me?"

Shane startled, yanking his head around as his heart jumped. But it quickly settled again when he recognised his best friend Rose standing there, hands on her hips and a grin already plastered on her face. Her golden auburn hair was slightly frizzy from the cold outside, her coat half-unzipped, cheeks flushed pink.

"Breathing? Don't you dare," Shane joked, stretching his arms above his head to give her an awkward over-the-chair welcome hug from his seated position. "Hi."

Rose hugged him back laughing and then dropped into the chair next to him without asking. "You love me."

"I tolerate you at best," Shane replied, but there was no real bite to it as he smiled at her.

She leaned forward, eyes flicking over his setup with a suspiciously mischievous expression glinting in her face. “Let me guess... You’ve been here all night, haven’t you?”

“I haven’t!” Shane exclaimed defensively. “Only since after dinner and I took a break in between, so technically maybe like three-ish hours?”

“Which, in Shane time, *is* all night,” Rose sighed dramatically. “You are aware that it’s Friday, right?”

“Yes,” Shane said easily, playing dumb. An innocent smile played on his lips. “What about it?”

“So... There’s this thing—”

“No,” the black-haired man interrupted her immediately.

Rose clicked her tongue, leaning her elbows on the table in front of her. “Come on,” she whined. “You didn’t even let me finish.”

Shane rolled his eyes, playfully annoyed. “Because I know what comes next, Rose. I know *you*.”

“There’s a party,” she finished anyway, undeterred, leaning back in her chair and folding her arms in front of her chest like a parent having the last word. “Just an hour, Shane. Please... For me.”

Shane sighed as he looked down at his notes, even though the words weren’t even registering anymore. “I don’t really— Rose, you know I don’t like parties,” he tried appealing to his friend.

“I know,” Rose said, more gently now. “But it’s so much more fun when you’re also there! I promise I’ll stick by you. Hayden will also be there! And I swear you can leave whenever you want.”

He hesitated, fingers tapping lightly against the edge of the page. This right here was the problem: He could never say no to Rose because he hated that little disappointed frown on his best friend’s face when she thought he was shutting himself away too much.

“I don’t know,” Shane said honestly. “I always feel like I’m kind of in the way.”

Rose’s expression softened at that, and she let out an exaggerated gasp. “You are *never* in the way. You just haven’t met the right corners to stand in yet!”

That earned a huff of a laugh from Shane.

He took another sip of his ginger ale, then reached out for his strawberry box, eating one and offering another to Rose. *Maybe for a little bit*, he told himself. He didn’t have to drink or talk much and if he hated it, he could always leave.

After a moment, he finally sighed in defeat. “Okay,” he said finally. “But just one hour. Maximum.”

Rose’s face lit up instantly, pulling Shane into a tight hug. “Yes!”

She sprang to her feet and leaned down, careful not to be too loud to disturb the other people in the library. “You won’t regret it. I promise.”

“I probably will,” Shane muttered, but he was smiling.

Rose snatched one more of his strawberries as she made her way toward the door, winking as she popped it into her mouth. “Fuel up and get ready. I’ll meet you outside in twenty.”

The heavy library door swung shut behind her, and the quiet from before settled again. Shane stared at his notes for a moment, then nudged one of his pens back into place without thinking. He took a steadying breath, closed his strawberry box and pinched the bridge of his nose.

He gave up on studying for the rest of the day and made his way to his room to change into at least some more presentable clothes.

The house was loud the moment Shane and Rose stepped through the door. Music thumped against the walls like a heartbeat, fast and insistent, and the smell of sweat and spilled alcohol hit them immediately. People pressed together in clusters, talking and laughing so hard it echoed, voices layering over one another until it was impossible to tell what anyone was actually saying. Coloured lights spun in the corners, bouncing across the furniture and the hardwood floor, making the space feel simultaneously huge and claustrophobic.

Shane tugged at the hem of his white shirt, smoothing the fabric over his stomach before tucking it neatly into his wide light-blue jeans. He wasn’t exactly flashy, but he liked to look presentable at social gatherings. His navy cardigan hung just right over his shoulders, soft against the shirt, and his white sneakers were polished, though scuffed from wear. He had tried to fix his hair that had been a bit unruly after hours at the library but without success: His black hair was still perfectly parted, but the strands had become slightly wavy and framed his face a bit messily, some of them loosely hanging in his eyes. Shane wasn’t trying to impress anyone –not really– but he appreciated the quiet confidence that came from knowing he looked good... even in a room full of people.

Now, Rose led the way through the crowd, her hand curled tightly around Shane’s hand, nodding and smiling at familiar faces as they threaded through the people to get to Hayden, who was stood next to the door to the kitchen. Shane kept his head down, trying to make himself as small as possible as they squeezed through, a can of ginger ale clutched in his

hand that he had brought with him. He rarely drank, and the fizzy kick of it felt like something he could easily hold onto.

“Here,” Rose said suddenly, sliding a small pink lighter into his palm. “Can you hold onto this for me while I get drinks for me and Hayden? I’ll be right back.”

Shane nodded, grabbing it carefully and sliding it into his pocket. He let Rose disappear into the masses, watching her smile and laugh as she made her way inside the kitchen.

“Hey, man! You alright?” Hayden greeted him, his head tilting toward Shane, before pulling him in a warm hug.

“I’m fine,” Shane murmured. “Just... taking it all in.”

Hayden chuckled quietly. “Yeah, it’s a lot. I know.” He clapped Shane lightly on the shoulder. “I told Rose not to drag you here but I’m glad you came... even if not so willingly.” He grinned but something sweet and understanding stood in his eyes. “We’ll stick together; it’ll be fun!”

Shane nodded again, thankful. A few moments later, Rose came pushing back through the crowd, balancing two red plastic cups in her hands. “Here,” she said, sliding one to Hayden who accepted it gratefully. “Vodka lemon for me, one gin tonic for you. And don’t worry – nothing for you, Shane,” she added with a teasing grin, giving him a quick wink.

They moved through the dancing people, finding a little patch of empty floor near the wall where they could stand and observe for now. Shane sipped on his ginger ale and scanned the full room, as his friends started catching up about their days. People danced and shouted, some leaned over furniture in conversation. The chaotic energy pressed around him, but with Hayden and Rose nearby, it was manageable.

As he let his eyes wander, they got stuck on one specific person.

Ilya Rozanov.

He was leaning against a wall near the beer pong table, laughing with a group of his frat brothers and teammates, red cups raised in their hands and voices loud even over the music. The noise around them didn’t even seem to overwhelm him. If anything, he carried it easily, soothing into it like this chaos was right where he wanted to be. His long light brown curls fell slightly over his eyes, his broad shoulders filling out the varsity jacket he wore casually over a white t-shirt, sleeves slightly pushed up as he gestured with his hands animatedly. He had a wide, unguarded grin on his face as someone said something that made the entire group erupt into laughter.

Shane only knew him by reputation – the hockey captain, the golden frat boy, everyone wanted to either be him, get with him, or be a part of his group of friends. He was the kind of person who took up space without ever having to ask for it. He didn’t even have to do much for girls and boys alike to throw themselves at his feet, but contrary to what you’d expect, he was rarely ever seen actually engaging with anyone romantically. Not even a drunken make-

out at a party here or there. The Russian scholarship student, while super loud and sociable in every other instance, was rather an enigma in that regard.

Shane had only ever seen Ilya Rozanov from afar: Crossing the quad with his friends, leaning against buildings between classes with a cigarette in his fingers, always surrounded by a bunch of people.

Right now, he stood beside Troy Barrett who was loudly telling a story, already a little unsteady on his feet. Luca Haas was slung half over his shoulder, while Wyatt Hayes was grinning as he nudged Ilya with his elbow. They were all sloppy with laughter, comfortable in their bodies and each other's personal space, joking with the easy confidence of people who were used to being admired and forgiven. A few other hockey players hovered close by, faces Shane barely recognised but instinctively grouped together in his mind as *part of that world*.

Somewhere behind them, close to the couch, leaned Svetlana, it-girl and Ilya's known best friend. She lingered slightly apart from that group, arms folded loosely, eyes tracking the room with a calmer, more observant expression. She didn't seem to be paying attention to whatever teasing was unfolding next to her at the table. Shane only really recognised her because Rose had been partnered with her for a group project this semester and hadn't stopped gushing about her ever since. Shane thought it was really cute that his best friend had a crush.

As his gaze scanned over the group of popular students, he felt his stomach tighten just a tad. It was a mixture of curiosity and that familiar, cautious hesitation. He strengthened the grip around his ginger ale, the can cool against his palm, and stayed close to Hayden and Rose. He let the noise wash over him while he watched the people around him from a safe distance.

Ilya Rozanov moved naturally through the chaos, like he was exactly where he belonged and Shane noticed every annoying detail – the tilt of his head, the way his loud laughter seemed to pull people in, the effortless energy that made it hard to look away.

Shane admonished himself not to stare too obviously. Because staring meant admitting that yes, he thought that Ilya Rozanov was very, very attractive.

Unbeknownst to Shane, at the same time on the other side of the room he was far more noticeable than he thought. And his presence had caught more attention than he was aware of.

Ilya Rozanov was three drinks past the point of caring, drunk enough to feel pleasantly unbalanced.

He leaned against the wall, red cup sloshing slightly as Troy talked far too loudly about something that might have been about hockey, might not have been. Maybe he was complaining about missed passes and unfair refs again. Ilya wouldn't know. Someone had

turned the music up again, bass rattling through the floor and right into his bones. The house was packed, air thick with sweat, alcohol and noise, but in a way that Ilya usually welcomed and thrived in.

His teammates were loud and messy around him, voices overlapping, shoulders bumping, laughter bouncing off the walls with familiar locker-room ease. Wyatt laughed too loud at a joke that wasn't funny, Luca bumped into Ilya's arm for no apparent reason at all. Ilya steadied himself on the beer pong table, snorting.

"You will break something," he said, his words coming out just a little slower than usual.

"Relax, captain," Wyatt grinned. "You're the one that's wobbling."

Ilya scoffed at that, lifting his cup in mock offense before taking another sip.

That was when his eyes drifted –unfocused at first– and landed on someone near the wall on the opposite side of the room. Ilya spotted him immediately, not because he was loud or trying to be seen, but because he wasn't. He frowned slightly as he squinted his eyes, trying to make them focus.

There was a guy standing half-hidden at the edge of the room, almost like he had been placed there by accident. Shane Hollander hovered at the edge of the party, posture careful, like he was taking up as little space as possible while still trying to look like he meant to be there. He held a can of something that Ilya couldn't quite pinpoint, but it definitely wasn't beer, body angled protectively toward a light brown or copper-haired girl and a tall guy beside her. Ilya recognised the girl as someone he had seen with Svetlana before, but right now, he could not remember her name for the life of him.

Ilya found himself watching without quite meaning to. The way the other man shifted his weight from one foot to the other, the way his eyes darted across the room, alert but curious too, like he was cataloguing everything around him, the way he smiled faintly at something the girl had said, though it was small and fleeting like it took effort. It stuck out more to him than any loud laugh or dramatic gesture would've done.

His eyes weren't super sharp anymore, alcohol blurring his vision ever so slightly, but even then, he could tell that the other man looked almost out-of-place soft – neat cardigan, dark hair falling into his eyes, face open and earnest in a room full of people that wore confidence like armour.

"Earth to Rozanov?"

Ilya blinked and turned as Troy leaned into his space, grin already forming on his face. "What?"

"You with us, captain?" the other man asked, already knowing that Ilya had blanked out.

"Yes, of course," Ilya said automatically, taking a sip from his cup. The weird vodka mix Wyatt had made him tasted awful, but that might've come from just how bad Canadian vodka was to Ilya's poor tastebuds.

“Why are you staring like that?” Troy continued to tease him.

Ilya’s brain buffered for a second before he opened his mouth again, feigning cluelessness. “Staring at *what*?”

His teammate followed his line of sight and barked out a laugh. “Or should I say at *who*,” Troy corrected himself. “You checking out the art nerd?”

Wyatt also turned to blatantly peer into the same direction. “Oh! That guy.”

Ilya shrugged, taking another chug of his drink. He didn’t like how his friends were all up in his business like that. “Was not staring,” he simply murmured.

“Sure,” Troy said, unconvinced. “He kind of looks like he got lost on the way to the library.” The guys laughed at that, not in a mean way particularly, rather in drunken thoughtlessness. Ilya didn’t laugh with them and just rolled his eyes instead. The room swayed a little when he shifted his weight.

“Leave him alone,” Ilya said, mostly because it felt like the thing a captain was supposed to say.

“You know,” Luca chimed in vaguely, like it was an afterthought. “He’s kind of cute, don’t you think? That’s Shane Hollander, right?”

“Maybe,” Ilya shrugged, not specifying which question he was answering to.

Troy’s grin turned sharp and mischievous. “Alright then,” he spoke up. “New bet.”

“No.” Ilya groaned. “Why is everything always a bet?”

“Because you hate losing,” Wyatt answered as if it was obvious.

Troy clapped his hands together. “Okay, so,” he started, his eyes gleaming. “Rozanov has to get Shane Hollander to fall in love with him.”

Ilya stared at him, his brain’s processing lagging half a second behind. “You think you are jokester, yes? You are joking.”

“That’s impossible,” Luca laughed.

“Exactly,” Troy grinned devilishly. “But if he manages to do it, we run extra drills for a week. Conditioning. No complaints.”

Wyatt groaned at that proposal. “That’s cruel.”

“And if I don’t?” Ilya asked, mostly for show.

“You carry everyone’s gear for a month,” Luca concluded cheerfully.

Ilya let out a disbelieving laugh, head tipping back slightly which made the room around him sway a little. “You are all idiots.”

Someone –he wasn’t sure who– snorted. “Just sleep with him or whatever. That should do the trick.”

The group erupted into laughter, the comment swallowed by noise and alcohol and poor judgement. Ilya shook his head, a little dizzy, a little amused.

“So?” Troy challenged, lifting his cup.

Ilya hesitated. He hated the idea of lugging gear around like a first-year and he knew his friends wouldn’t let it go. He took another drink, feeling the alcohol buzz warmly down his throat.

“Fine,” he said finally, waving a hand in defeat as the alcohol in his system loosened his tongue. “Whatever. I talk to him.”

The group exploded into hollering cheers.

“Oh my god, he said yes.”

“Captain’s got game.”

“Poor guy doesn’t know what hit him.”

Ilya just laughed along, shaking his head. “Relax. Is just talking.”

His frat brothers clinked their cups against his. “Nope, that’s agreeing.”

Ilya was too far gone to argue. Later, when his gaze drifted back across the room, it found Shane again without effort. He didn’t think about why. He told himself he was just curious and that it was just a dumb bet. That nothing about this mattered enough to think twice about. He had no idea that something careless had already been set in motion.

He emptied his cup with one long gulp and pushed himself off the wall. He needed a cigarette.

Shane barely noticed when the moment shifted, only that suddenly, Rose was no longer pressed comfortably against his side.

“Oh– There she is,” Rose said, breath hitching with unmistakable excitement. Shane followed her line of sight as she nodded toward the couch area. Svetlana was still sitting there, body relaxed against the cushions, talking to someone Shane didn’t recognise. His gaze

switched back to his best friend who was still lingering in place, her fingers tightly wrapped around her cup.

“You should go,” Shane encouraged her gently, already knowing the internal debate that was playing out on Rose’s face.

Rose grimaced in response. “I don’t know. She looks... busy, doesn’t she? What if I interrupt? And even worse, what if I say something stupid?”

Shane smiled softly at her. “You always say something stupid. It’s part of your charm!” After a look at her worrying expression, he added more seriously, “Look, you’ve been talking about her for months now. Just... say hi. I think she’ll be happy to see you. And Hayden and me will be right here.”

Rose hesitated one last second, before nodding decisively. “Okay. Okay! If I die, avenge me.”

Her two friends laughed at that. “I’ll write a strongly worded Yelp review,” Shane promised.

That elicited a laugh out of Rose. She leaned in to squeeze his arm gratefully and then she was gone, swallowed by the crowd with one last backward glance and a grin that gave her away completely.

Shane watched like a proud dad as she started a conversation with Svetlana, who hugged her almost immediately, seemingly more than happy to see her.

“Lesbians,” Hayden mouthed at him while playfully rolling his eyes, which earned him a light shove from Shane’s elbow, though there’s was no real force behind it.

After a long conversation about where Hayden had travelled with his girlfriend Jackie over the Christmas break, he slowly started shifting from one leg to the other. “I’m going to hit the bathroom real quick before the line gets worse, okay?” Hayden said, eyes already darting to the queue in the hallway. “Will you be fine? Or do you want to come with—”

“Hayden, I will *not* come to the bathroom with you, jeez,” Shane exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air. “We’re not fourteen anymore. I’ll be fine! I’ll just... wait here.”

Hayden nodded, and by the look of how he almost dashed through the people to the hallway, it must’ve been very urgent. “I’ll be back in a sec,” he screamed over the heads of the people he was passing, and Shane couldn’t help but giggle.

And just like that, he was alone.

At first, everything was fine. He wasn’t a child that needed his best friends to babysit him at all times. He took a steady sip of his ginger ale and focused on people-watching. But without Hayden or Rose anchoring him, the party seemed to swell around him all at once. The music felt louder, the bass pressing against his ribs; the air felt thicker and heavier, like it wasn’t moving anymore. A group of people brushed too close behind him then, sweaty and careless, while another body bumped his shoulder without apology. Another person squeezed past him, and before he could react, he could swear a hand not only brushed but *lingered* against his

ass. Shane stiffened, stomach dropping, twisting away with a sharp, disbelieving *what the fuck* flashing through his mind.

It simply became too much in a single moment. Coloured lights flashed too brightly against the walls, streaking across his vision and blinding him. The laughter around him seemed to spike suddenly, sharp and overwhelming, and Shane felt his chest tighten in response. His breathing became quicker, and his fingers curled tighter around the can in his hand, knuckles turning white.

Okay, he needed to get out of here. Just a minute, so he could calm down.

He slipped through a narrow gap between people, hushing apologies that no one heard, and made his way toward the back door. When he pushed it open, the cold air hit his face instantly. The noise dulled, and the music muffled into a distant thrum as the door fell shut behind him.

Shane sucked in a long breath, deep and grateful. The night was crisp, the kind of cold that stung just enough to feel real and to snap him out of his anxiety spiral. He leaned lightly against the brick wall, his shoulders loose as he exhaled, his breath fogging faintly in front of him in the cold.

As his heartbeat slowed down, he let his eyes wander over the backyard. It was dimly lit, strung with a few weak fairy lights that barely cut through the dark. A handful of people stood scattered around, but far enough apart that Shane didn't feel crowded anymore. He closed his eyes for a second, grounding himself in the quiet, the only sounds coming in as a distant hum of the traffic and the muted party noise bleeding through the walls.

A metallic clicking sound made him realise he wasn't alone.

Merely a few meters away, half-shadowed near the fence, stood none other than Ilya Rozanov.

A cigarette was already hanging from his lips, unlit, the paper darkening slightly where it rested between them. He had one hand cupped around it, shoulders hunched just a little against the cold as he continuously flicked a lighter with his thumb, trying to shield the flame from the wind. It sparked once, twice, then nothing.

He cursed out in Russian under his breath, frustration evident in his voice as he tried again, shaking the lighter once before flicking it uselessly. And still nothing happened.

Shane noticed then that the other man's varsity jacket was gone, probably tossed somewhere out of sight, leaving him in just a white t-shirt despite the chill. Out here, he looked different somehow, less like he was performing. And definitely smoke-less because his cigarette was still stubbornly dead between his lips.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Shane hesitated, suddenly hyper-aware of himself again... and of the way his heart sped up because of how small the space between them felt despite quite a bit of distance. Ilya glanced

over then, eyes catching on Shane with slow, lazy curiosity.

The silence stretched almost uncomfortably, charged in a way that Shane couldn't quite name. Ilya exhaled through his nose, lowering his useless lighter and glancing down at it once more before slipping it into his back pocket and looking back up at Shane.

"You have lighter?" he asked directed at the other man.

Shane's hand instinctively reached up to his trousers where Rose's pink lighter was still resting comfortably in his pocket. Before his brain could think of a response, he just nodded sort of dumbly.

Ilya tipped his cigarette up with two fingers, the corner of his mouth twitching faintly.

"Light my cigarette?"

Chapter End Notes

Ahhhh I'm actually so excited for this fic to get going!! I hope you are too 🙄 I'm just the biggest sucker for college aus, they might be my favourite after all 🙄

Please let me know your thoughts in the comments, I love to read through them! Kudos are of course also always appreciated <3 Also, feel free to follow me on X (@wooziunivrse) if you want to maybe see some sneak peeks already ahead of a chapter being posted hehe

See you guys in the next chapter! (Coming soon!!)

Chapter 2: blue eyes, black jeans (lighters and candy)

Chapter Notes

Welcome back besties!! ☀️

I hope you're ready for some hollanov fluff today!! We're picking up right where we ended in the last chapter, let's see how it goes 🙄

Also, I sprinkled one or two lines from the show in here, so keep an eye out for that 🤔

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

"Light my cigarette?"

The words repeated themselves and doubled over in Shane's head before he fully processed that they had been spoken aloud.

He startled slightly, shoulders tensing as he turned his head toward the voice, realising a second too late that Ilya Rozanov was now standing closer than he had thought. Nearer than what was reasonable, really. Shane hadn't even noticed the other man stepping toward him at all. One moment he had been leaning against the brick wall, trying to calm his breathing, and the next Ilya fucking Rozanov was right there, within arm's reach, with a question hanging between them.

"Oh—" Shane spluttered as if waking up from a trance, but nothing else came out. His brain frantically scrambled for anything useful to say, but instead his hand moved on instinct.

He fumbled slightly as he reached into his pocket, fingers brushing the familiar plastic shape of Rose's lighter. He pulled it out and held it up, the bright pink standing out almost comically against the dark night and Shane's muted clothes. The edges of it were chipped, one corner melted slightly from overuse.

His hands shook faintly as he held it out. *Just because of the cold*, he told himself.

Ilya's gaze dropped to it and for a moment, he simply looked at the lighter with a cocked eyebrow, then he lifted his eyes back up to Shane's face. A smile appeared on his lips, amused and almost fond.

"Pink," he observed mildly, no judgement but simply a statement.

Shane opened his mouth to explain himself, but was immediately shut up by Ilya leaning forward, cigarette still resting between his lips. His gaze stayed on Shane the entire time.

The movement was slow and deliberate, bringing him well into Shane's space. Shane sucked in a shallow breath as he watched dumbfoundedly as Ilya bent at the waist, the cigarette angling closer. His face was close enough that Shane could see the faint dimple at the corner of his mouth and the shadow of a stubble along his jaw. *He's too close.* The proximity made Shane's thoughts short-circuit and for a moment he just stood there staring, blissfully unaware that Ilya was waiting expectantly for him to give him a light.

When his mind finally snapped back into reality, he flicked the lighter with his thumb. It sparked, then caught, a small flame flaring into life. All the time, Ilya's eyes didn't leave Shane's face. The intensity of the eye contact made Shane's chest feel tight. Ice-blue eyes, startlingly clear even in the dim light, fixed on him without discretion, present and focused. Shane had never been looked at like that before. At least, not this closely and definitely not this intently. He looked away first, unable to bear the weight of it for more than a second longer.

His hand was trembling as he held up the flame. Ilya dipped his head, drawing the cigarette into the fire. Smoke bloomed almost immediately, sharp and acrid, floating into the air between them. Shane couldn't help but stiffen instinctively, shoulders tensing at the smell, but he didn't move away.

Ilya straightened up again, stepping back just enough to give Shane room to breathe. He finally took a long-awaited drag from the cigarette and exhaled slowly, smoke spilling from his mouth in a thin stream that disappeared into the cold night.

"Thanks," he said to which Shane just nodded, pulling the lighter back to himself and staring at it a second too long before storing it back in his pocket. His heart was still racing, his brain not quite comprehending the reality of what just happened.

That was goddamn Ilya Rozanov.

I just lit Ilya Rozanov's cigarette.

The absurdity of the situation made his head feel light. They stood there in silence for a few seconds, and Shane became acutely aware of how close they still were, even with the small step of distance Ilya had taken.

He glanced up without thinking... and immediately regretted it. Ilya caught him looking. Shane's gaze flicked down in an instant, heat creeping up the back of his neck.

After a moment, Ilya spoke up again, voice casual and almost curious. Seemingly, *thankfully*, misinterpreting Shane's prior stare in his drunken state. "You want one?"

Shane blinked in surprise. "Oh. No, thank you," he said quickly, shaking his head. "I don't smoke. It... uhm. It makes it kind of hard for me to breathe."

Ilya tilted his head to the side, his brows knitting faintly with confusion, his thought process still undermined by alcohol. "You have lighter," he pointed out the obvious, glancing briefly down at Shane's hand before looking back up at his face, "but you don't smoke..."

He said it so matter-of-factly that Shane could practically see the small gears turning in his mind, and he found it oddly endearing. “It’s my friend’s,” he explained. “Rose. You might’ve seen her with your friend Svetlana. She asked me to hold onto it earlier.”

Ilya nodded slowly, as if he was filing that information away somewhere in the back of his mind. He took another drag, then hesitated. After a moment, he lifted the cigarette from his mouth and stubbed it out against the brick, exhaling the last of the smoke away from Shane in the opposite direction.

It took Shane a second to realise that Ilya had put the cigarette out... and most likely because of him. That observation settled somewhere deep in his chest. You see, Shane had always expected Ilya Rozanov to be a little full of himself. He was the college’s golden boy, after all; everybody was obsessed with him. For some reason Shane had always assumed popular people were less... nice.

But standing here now, with the initial shock finally wearing off, he found himself noticing things that he hadn’t before. Ilya didn’t feel looming or overly loud. No – up close, he looked different than Shane had imagined. His eyes looked kinder and less sharp, crinkling at the edges when he smiled, like it was something he did often, and genuinely.

Absentmindedly, Shane let his eyes trail down. Ilya stood relaxed, his weight settled comfortably into one hip. The black jeans were hanging low on his waist, while his white shirt clung tightly to his torso, revealing a hint of his muscular stomach. He had worn a varsity jacket earlier, but Shane didn’t mind the sight of Ilya’s thick, tanned arms out in the open, that should’ve been cold in this weather yet showed no signs of goosebumps at all.

The backdoor behind Shane opened abruptly, loud music suddenly echoing through the quiet as a few drunk girls stumbled outside to get some air. It was over in the blink of an eye before the door closed again, but Shane couldn’t help but jump a little.

“You okay?” Ilya asked next to him.

Shane startled again, caught off guard by the trace of concern threaded through the question. “Yeah,” he said and then hesitated a little. “I just... had to get out for a bit. Needed some air.”

Ilya hummed in understanding, his head nodding once. “Parties can be... a lot, yes?”

Shane huffed out a quiet laugh. “That’s one way to put it.”

“I can get overwhelmed sometimes,” Shane vaguely admitted, downplaying the obvious anxiety attack he’d had but still surprising himself with his honesty, “when it’s too loud, too many people, you know?”

Ilya listened. *Actually* listened. He didn’t interrupt, didn’t laugh it off or try to minimise it.

“Yes,” he said instead after a moment. “I get that.” He glanced back at the door briefly. “Sometimes you need quiet.”

They stood there together in the cold, two people pulled temporarily out of the same chaos, neither quite sure what to say next. After another few minutes of comfortable silence, Shane excused himself and went back inside to find his friends.

Days later, Shane was exactly where he always was when he wasn't in the library.

The campus café buzzed softly around him: Espresso machines hissing, chairs scraping over the floor, low conversations blending into a steady hum of white noise. He had claimed his table near the window early on, back to the wall, laptop open and annotated articles spread out beside him. A half-finished cup of coffee with lots of milk and sugar steamed gently at his elbow.

For the most part, everything had slipped back into place, life resuming its usual rhythm without ceremony. Classes, studying in quiet corners of campus – it was almost as if Friday night had never happened at all. The brief, strange intimacy felt almost unreal, like something his brain had pushed away as a half-remembered dream.

Almost.

Shane was mid-sentence in a paragraph he'd already rewritten twice when a person stepped next to his table. Shane frowned, wondering if the waiter had come to check if everything was still fine, looked up and froze.

Ilya Rozanov casually dropped into the chair across from him like it was the most normal thing in the world. Without hesitation, without asking – just a scrape of metal legs against tile and the solid presence of him settling in, long legs stretching out underneath the table. He was dressed down today: Black hoodie, sleeves pushed up slightly, hair still damp like he'd come straight from practice or the shower. He looked painfully out of place in Shane's quiet little bubble of colour-coded notes and carefully aligned pens.

Why is he here?

Ilya glanced at the scattered papers between them, eyes skimming the page upside down. After a second, he tilted his head slightly.

"Looks intense, Hollander."

The use of his last name hit Shane out of nowhere. *How does he know who I am?*

"Oh," he said kind of off guard, not knowing how to reply.

He realised, with a strange sort of detached awareness, that he hadn't told the other man to leave. The thought hadn't even crossed his mind. Usually, he hated when people interrupted

his studying; he didn't even like studying with his friends. His hands stayed where they were on the table, fingers still curled around his pen, his eyes still fixed on his laptop screen.

Ilya leaned back in the chair, crossing his arms loosely as he let out a long sigh. He looked comfortable, and annoyingly so.

"What?" Shane asked slightly irritated, gesturing vaguely to the articles. "It's... required reading."

"For fun?" Ilya asked, one eyebrow lifting unimpressed. "Or punishment?"

Shane huffed before he could stop himself. "Some people like studying, you know?"

"Hm," Ilya considered that for a moment, eyes flicking back to Shane's notes. "Debatable."

Shane shook his head, gaze dropping back to his laptop in a weak attempt to reassert normalcy. This situation was absurd to say the least. At a party, with Ilya drunk out of his mind? Maybe. But even then, it was weird. On a normal Monday afternoon in broad daylight? Shane's whole sense of reality was flipped upside down and he didn't know how to act. He typed a few meaningless words on his laptop, then deleted them again.

"So," he said, still not looking up. "Did you need something?"

When Ilya didn't answer immediately, Shane dared to glance up. He found Ilya watching him. Not in that intense way from the party, but softer and more curious, like he was trying to place him in a new context.

"Ah, no," Ilya said. "I just saw you." The brunette man said those words as if they magically explained everything. Ilya Rozanov had never before even thought about sitting anywhere close to Shane, let alone speak to him. He was sure of it. God forbid, Shane could swear Ilya Rozanov hadn't even known he *existed*.

Shane swallowed. "Right."

Another pause stretched between them, not quite awkward but not comfortable either. Around them, the café carried on like normal. Someone in the back laughed too loud, a barista called out an order, but Shane felt oddly separate from it, like the table had become its own contained space.

"You always sit here," Ilya added, and Shane couldn't tell if it was a question or an actual observation the other had made. He hadn't thought that anyone ever really took notice of him.

Shane blinked. No. None of this made sense to him. "How would *you* know?" he asked, the question coming out a bit meaner than he intended it to.

Ilya just shrugged one shoulder. "Hard not to. You always look like if someone talks to you, you will bite them... like angry kitten."

"I do not—" Shane started, but then he stopped. He *did not* like people addressing him while he was studying and it probably showed on his face sometimes. "...Okay, maybe a little. I

just don't like being distracted."

That earned him a small smile. Not the cocky kind Shane was used to seeing plastered on Ilya's face at games or parties. This one was quick and genuine, gone almost as soon as it appeared.

They lapsed into silence again. Shane tried –unsuccessfully– to return to studying, but every line in front of him blurred together. This whole situation was just so *odd*. And on top of that, he was acutely aware of Ilya's presence: The faint smell of cologne and cold air clinging to his clothes, the way his foot annoyingly bounced restlessly against the floor. How was a boy supposed to concentrate under these conditions?

After a minute of trying to ignore the elephant, Ilya, in the room, Shane closed his laptop with a soft click and sighed.

"If you're going to sit there," he said, more resigned than angry, "you might as well tell me why."

Ilya's lip twitched at the sight of Shane's slightly annoyed reaction. "Maybe I just like company."

Shane just stared at him, unconvinced. "I think you have plenty of friends for that."

Ilya held his gaze for a second longer that felt like ages and then finally sighed, giving up. "Okay. Maybe I wanted to see if you were still real."

Shane's mind blanked. "What does that even mean?"

"It means," Ilya explained slowly, choosing his words with surprising care, "you disappeared at party. I thought maybe I imagined you."

Shane opened his mouth, then closed it again. A betraying heat crept into his cheeks. "I... I just went back to my friends."

"I figured," the other man replied. "Still, had to make sure."

Ilya shifted in his chair, seemingly deciding to switch the topic of conversation now, pointing his finger at Shane's closed laptop. "I won't bother you," he said, almost sincere. "You can study."

"Debatable," Shane recalled what Ilya had said earlier, "with you talking my ear off like that."

Ilya just looked at him pointedly, almost with puppy eyes. And Shane? Well, Shane was a weak man.

"Okay, fine you can stay. Just—" He put his index finger over his mouth. "Quiet."

Ilya's triumphant smile this time was unmistakable. "Deal."

Over the next week, it would happen multiple times again without ever being discussed.

Shane would settle into his usual corner of the campus café, same table, same window, same careful arrangement of books and notes, and at some point, inevitably, Ilya Rozanov would appear. Not dramatically or by announcing himself, no. He would just... be there. A chair was casually pulled back and the familiar presence settled across from Shane like he belonged there.

At first, Shane thought it was a coincidence. The café *was* popular, after all. But coincidences didn't bring a second cup of coffee to the table without comment. Or a nod in place of a greeting. Or a quiet '*Can I sit?*' that came only after he was already halfway there.

Ilya learned quickly.

He didn't interrupt when Shane was deep into reading, and he didn't ask any questions. He didn't even poke at his notes or comment on all the colour-coded tabs. Most of the time, he would sit back, long legs lounged under the table, scrolling through his phone or staring out the window, pretending –poorly– not to watch Shane study. Or the way his pen drifted from words to shapes in the margins, little sketches and half-formed ideas spreading as thoughtless lines in Shane's notebook when he stopped overthinking.

Cute, Ilya thought once, before catching himself and looking away.

Shane, for his part, tried very hard to ignore him.

He kept his eyes on the page; he didn't initiate conversation. He pretended that the faint smell of musky cologne and cold air didn't register, that the quiet presence across from him wasn't unnervingly loud in its silence. Somehow, it was worse when Ilya *didn't* talk, and he simply existed there, patient and unbothered, like he had nowhere better to be.

It left Shane quietly puzzled more than anything. Because mostly, he could not understand why Ilya would bother. Nothing about himself felt particularly worth lingering over and he couldn't think of a single reason why Ilya Rozanov would want to be here with him, when there were so many other places he could be.

One afternoon, Shane had been writing notes for over an hour before he realised, he still had his glasses on. They perched low on his tall nose, black and thin-framed, the kind he normally only wore when text started blurring together after reading for too long. He noted it absentmindedly but didn't bother removing them in his focused and comfortable state.

Until a familiar voice cut through his concentration.

"You wear glasses?" Ilya asked as he sat down in his usual spot, cleanly skipping over formalities such as greetings or 'how-are-you's.

Shane flinched, blinking up in surprise.

“They’re just for reading,” Shane said, quickly reaching up to take them off already, like he’d been caught doing something embarrassing.

“No,” Ilya said, leaning back into the chair. Then, after a beat, he continued more deliberately, “Put them back on, please.”

Shane paused wearily, glasses already halfway off his face. “Why?”

Ilya just looked at him and shrugged lightly, as if it were no big deal. “They look pretty.”

Shane stared at him in disbelief for what felt like forever, heat blooming faintly in his cheeks. He didn’t trust his voice, so he decided to just not comment on Ilya’s shenanigans at all. He simply slid the glasses back into place and looked down at his notebook again, jaw tight.

“I’m trying to study,” he muttered more to himself than to Ilya.

“I know,” the other man said easily. He raised his hands in surrender. “I will be quiet.”

Shane nodded, as if that settled it, and forced his attention back to the page in front of him. The words swam for a moment before sharpening again. He underlined a sentence, wrote a note in the margin and tried very hard not to think about the fact that Ilya was sitting there, watching him from behind lowered lashes, saying nothing at all.

They didn’t really talk after that. They just coexisted together, two bodies sharing a space silently, the quiet stretching comfortably between them.

The library was hushed in the way it only ever was after sunset.

Most of the students had filtered out by then, leaving behind a handful of night owls and deadline warriors tucked into corners between shelves. And Shane Hollander was one of them, of course. Lamps cast warm pools of light over long wooden tables, the air smelling faintly of old paper and dust and something metallic from the heating system. Outside the tall windows, the campus had gone dark, the glass reflecting rows of books and bent heads instead of the world beyond.

Shane had claimed his favourite spot on the second floor, wedged between two shelves in a way that felt deliberately hidden. His backpack rested neatly at his feet; cardigan carefully folded over the back of the chair. He’d been there for hours already, deep into reading, pen moving steadily across the page.

He didn’t notice Ilya at first.

That was becoming a pattern.

It wasn't until a shadow fell across the edge of his notes that Shane glanced up, pen pausing mid-word.

Ilya Rozanov stood at the end of the table, hands shoved into the pockets of his leather biker jacket, scanning the spines of the books behind Shane with mild interest. He looked almost... restrained in here. His hair had escaped its usual chaos, curls falling softly around his face, catching the warm light in a way that made them look almost golden.

Shane stared for a moment too long.

"How do you keep finding me?" he asked before he could stop himself.

Ilya turned his head, clearly surprised, then pleased by the sound of Shane's voice. A grin tugged at his mouth as he slid into the chair across from him without asking. He made sure to be more careful this time since they were in a quiet library, his movements intentionally slower and quieter.

"I am very observant," he said mildly. "Also, you are not as hidden as you think."

Shane huffed, gaze dropping back to his book. "This is the library. You never come here."

"Yes," Ilya agreed. "But you love it here."

Shane opened his mouth to argue but stopped. He frowned at the page in front of him instead.

Ilya leaned back lazily in his chair, arms crossing loosely. "I read this thing earlier," he said after a moment, lowering his voice to match the quiet of the library. "About modern art. Like... how it suddenly got really weird after war."

Shane's pen paused mid-word. "That's not why," he said immediately, not even looking up. The words came out sharper than he meant them to, reflexive in a way that surprised even him.

Ilya blinked, then leaned forward a little, interest flickering across his face. "No?"

Shane sighed softly and finally looked up. "It didn't *suddenly* get weird. Artists were already moving away from realism before that. The war just made people more accepting of it. It accelerated things, but it wasn't the cause."

Ilya stared at him for a bit. Then a grin appeared on his face, not teasing but clearly pleased, like he had gotten exactly the reaction he was hoping for.

"Okay," he said easily. "So you say I am wrong."

"Yes," Shane replied, calm and certain. "Because you are."

"There you are," Ilya said quietly.

Shane frowned. "There I am... what?"

"You talk," Ilya replied, triumphant. "I knew you would eventually."

Shane rolled his eyes, but the corner of his mouth betrayed him. "You were wrong," he muttered. "I can't just let misinformation stand like that."

Only much later would it occur to Shane that Ilya Rozanov – hockey captain, frat boy, human embodiment of varsity jackets and loud parties – had voluntarily read about art history at all. At the moment though, he was far too busy being right to notice.

"I like being corrected," Ilya said. "Especially by you."

Shane wasn't sure what to do with that, so he ignored it.

They settled into a quieter rhythm after that, conversation unfolding slowly, carefully, like neither of them wanted to scare it off. Ilya asked questions and actually waited for the answers. Shane found himself responding without thinking too hard about it.

At some point, Ilya pulled a crinkled bag out of his jacket pocket and set it on the table between them.

Sour candy.

The kind that made Shane's tongue ache just looking at it.

"You want one?" Ilya asked, already popping one into his mouth. He didn't even flinch at the sour taste, just chewed thoughtfully, expression unreadable.

Shane grimaced in response. "Absolutely not."

His facial expression made Ilya laugh under his breath. "Weak."

"I prefer sweet things," Shane shot back. "Like strawberries or chocolate. Things that don't feel like they're punishing me or punching my tongue."

Ilya nodded slowly, as if committing this to memory. "Interesting."

Shane narrowed his eyes in confusion. "Why is that interesting?"

"It tells me something," Ilya said simply.

"About what?"

"You," he replied, and that shut Shane up.

He looked back down at his notes, pen hovering uselessly over the page. His thoughts drifted despite his best efforts, tugged away from the words and toward the man sitting across from him. Toward the way Ilya leaned over the table now, chin resting in his hand, curls falling forward just enough to brush his cheek.

Shane wondered fleetingly, *traitorously*, if they were as soft as they looked.

The thought startled him enough that he blinked hard and refocused on the page. In the meantime, Ilya watched him with quiet amusement, not saying anything.

And for the first time, Shane didn't really mind that Ilya had found him.

Chapter End Notes

Things are starting to pick up!! 🤗

I hope you enjoyed this new chapter of hollanov slowly getting to know each other better :) I can't wait to hear your thoughts!! I'm very excited for you to see the next chapter, because *spoiler* that's where the romance might start kicking in a little more and we learn a bit more about the characters 😏😏

But for now, I hope you enjoyed the buildup so far! Looking forward to your comments and of course, as always, kudos are appreciated as well <3 See you soon!!

Chapter 3: long nights, daydreams (sugar and smoke rings)

Chapter Notes

hello my loves <3

thank you so much for the support on this fic so far and all the sweet comments 🥰 I love reading them and I'm replying to you all!!

get ready for a whole new chapter of tooth-rotting fluff - I'm speaking of yearning, hangouts that might feel a little too much like dates and more!! Buckle in, we're about to go on a journey! 🥰

Also, this might be the right time to reveal that I'm pretty sure this fic will have 6 chapters total, so with this chapter we are hitting the halfway mark!! But trust me, we still have a long way to go 🥰 And now, enjoy!!

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

By the time Shane realised something had changed, it had already been happening for weeks. It no longer startled him when Ilya kept showing up, and it had stopped feeling strange. The way his presence slipped so easily into Shane's routines didn't feel like an intrusion anymore. It almost felt... expected. And Shane loved predictability. Even if it came in the form of Ilya Rozanov.

It started quietly, almost invisibly. Study sessions stretched longer than they used to, bleeding from afternoons into evenings without either of them remarking on it. Ilya would show up without warning and sit across from Shane like it was a habit, the only difference being that now he brought Shane's coffee with too much milk, always sweetened just the way he liked it, though neither of them ever addressed how he knew.

Studying together became normal. They never officially talked about meeting up, but somehow it always happened inevitably. Shane read and annotated, muttering under his breath from time to time; Ilya leaned back in his chair, half-watching, half-doing, occasionally glancing at Shane's notes in a mix of disdain and fear like they might bite him. Sometimes he asked questions, sometimes he didn't, but he never distracted Shane – at least not on purpose. Most days, Ilya barely spoke at all, content to exist in Shane's orbit while he worked. The silence between them felt familiar and comfortable.

Ilya watched Shane more than he let on.

He liked the way Shane's reading glasses slid slightly down his straight nose when he was focused, how he'd push them back up with the knuckle of his finger without breaking concentration. He liked how the frames sat just above the dusting of freckles scattered across Shane's cheeks and the bridge of his tall nose, faint and uneven, like they'd been placed there

accidentally. The freckles made Shane look softer somehow. Ilya found his gaze lingering more often than it should have, following the line of freckles like a constellation he hadn't memorised yet but wanted to. And every time he caught himself, he looked away with a small, private smile.

He learned that Shane chewed on the string of his hoodie when he was thinking or that he underlined things twice when they mattered. Ilya told himself he wasn't staring. But he told himself a lot of things. The glasses, though... from all the things he noticed, those were the hardest to ignore. They somehow made Shane look even more like himself. And Ilya liked that a lot.

At some point, studying turned into studying until closing. And studying until closing turned into walking together afterward.

The campus at night was a different world entirely. It was quieter and calmer, stripped of the chaos and noise that ruled during the daytime. Their footsteps fell into an easy rhythm as they crossed paths lit by tall lampposts casting warm halos onto the pavement as their breath fogged faintly in the cool air. Shane loved being outside at nighttime, the dark and quiet solitude of it all, the untouched, fresh air feeling like taking your first breath for the very first time all over again.

Ilya started walking him home without ever asking if he should. It was never announced or negotiated; he simply did it. And Shane never told him not to.

They would pack up their things, sling backpacks over their shoulders and drift into step beside each other like it had always been that way. Sometimes they talked. About classes, about nothing, about things that didn't matter enough to remember later. Other nights, they walked in companionable silence, close enough that Shane could feel the warmth of Ilya's arm when it brushed his own.

Sometimes, somewhere between the library doors and Shane's apartment building, Ilya would pull a cigarette from his pocket.

Shane never said anything, but he could feel his own gaze flicking to it automatically. He noticed the way the paper crinkled between Ilya's fingers, the soft scratch of the lighter, the curl of smoke that followed. Shane didn't like it. Neither did he like the smell and the way it lingered on Ilya's clothes afterward. His mouth would tighten at the sight, his expression giving him away just enough.

Ilya caught it one time.

"Sorry," he said quietly, carefully exhaling away from Shane. "Is a habit." After a pause, he added, more subdued, "Sometimes... On days like today, I need this."

Shane just nodded, noncommittal and absentminded. He didn't pry or lecture Ilya about how smoking was bad for him, especially as an athlete. The brunette man wasn't stupid; he probably knew that already anyway. It was rather his choice of words that made Shane sink deep into thought. *On days like today, I need this.* They settled somewhere deep in his mind,

heavier than they should have. Shane wondered briefly, what kind of days made someone need that.

He let the thought go, knowing fully well that some things weren't his to ask just yet, and they kept walking.

Ilya matched Shane's pace easily, free hand tucked into his jacket pockets, posture loose and unguarded. He waited when Shane stopped to adjust his bag strap and slowed down when Shane did. When they reached Shane's building, Ilya lingered just a moment longer than necessary, like he was making sure the door closed behind him before turning away.

"Text me when you are in," he said once, like it was nothing.

Shane had stared at him for a second too long before nodding. "Okay."

Somewhere between the library stacks, the quiet walks and the glow of cigarette embers disappearing into the dark, Shane stopped asking himself why Ilya kept finding him... and started wondering when he had begun to miss it if he didn't.

The locker room smelled like sweat, deodorant and adrenaline. It was familiar and grounding in a way Ilya hadn't realised he had missed. The noise was loud, voices overlapping as guys taped wrists, adjusted pads, tugged jerseys into place. Someone had music playing from a big red speaker, bass thudding against metal lockers. It was the kind of chaotic noise that allowed Ilya to block out his thoughts for once, the kind he wanted to drown out and suffocate until he couldn't hear them anymore.

He sat on the bench, lacing his skates with practiced ease, jaw set and focus already narrowing.

"Rozanov," one of his teammates, Brad, said loudly from the bench next to him, nudging him with his knee. "So."

Ilya didn't bother to look up. He didn't particularly like this player. "So?"

The other man grinned. "How's the bet going? Did you sleep with Hollander?"

A couple of heads turned immediately. Ilya's fingers halted mid-way in the air, arms tensing in anger. Before he could speak up and defend himself that that wasn't what the bet had been about, someone else beat him to it.

"Oh my god," Wyatt chimed in. "Is this still a thing?"

"You're right! It's very much still a thing," Troy said cheerfully, suddenly appearing in front of Ilya out of nowhere. "I saw you with Hollander at the campus café a few days ago. We

need updates. Is he in love with you yet?"

Ilya finally glanced up, his face controlled and unimpressed. "You are all obsessed."

"You agreed to it!" Luca yelled from the other side of the room. "That's what makes it interesting."

Ilya tugged his skate laces tight, then straightened up slowly, looking at his friends one by one. "I said I would talk to him"

"And?" Troy pressed, joy and anticipation sparkling in his giddy eyes.

"And I am talking to him."

A second of silence followed. "Boo, boring!" Wyatt jokingly shouted. "We wanted to know if Shane Hollander is in love with you and if you are skipping through flower fields hand in hand."

Ilya huffed out something like a disbelieving laugh, trying to keep his expression neutral. "Things take time."

Brad squinted at him. "You're not getting soft about it, right?"

Ilya shot him an irritated glare, a flicker of something unreadable crossing his face before he masked it again.

Before it could escalate further, their coach came into the locker room and clapped his hands, cutting through the moment. "Gear up, boys. It's game time!"

The conversation dissolved, but the words lingered longer than Ilya liked. He shoved his helmet on, teeth clenching around his mouth gear as he stood.

It was time to focus.

Shane had never been to a hockey game before.

That fact alone already made this whole situation feel surreal.

The arena buzzed with energy long before the puck dropped: Crowds were filtering in, jerseys could be seen everywhere and the sharp scent of popcorn and fried food hung in the air. Shane trailed behind Rose and Hayden as they climbed up the steps to their seats, trying not to look overwhelmed.

“I still can’t believe we’re going to a hockey game with Shane Hollander,” Rose said, glancing back at him with a grin. “Literally what is reality anymore?”

Shane shot her a look. “I lost a bet.”

“You don’t make bets,” Hayden said flatly.

“I do now apparently,” Shane muttered, tugging his cardigan closer around himself as they sat down.

It had been a stupid, throwaway bet. Hardly even a real one.

They had been in the café, Ilya watching Shane doctor his coffee with an alarming amount of milk and sugar.

“Is not coffee anymore like this,” Ilya had said, visibly offended.

“It absolutely is.”

“No,” Ilya replied. “Is like dessert. You want to bet?”

Shane had looked up, unimpressed. “Are you always this competitive?”

“Come on, Hollander. Me and my friends have bets all the time.” Something unreadable passed his face like a shadow then but it was over so quickly Shane thought he’d imagined it. “If I win, you come to one of my games.”

“And if I win?”

“I stop commenting on your awful food choices.”

Shane had agreed without hesitation.

He had, unfortunately, been wrong. Something about ratios and technical definitions that Shane hadn’t bothered to look up.

And that was how he had gotten himself into this situation. The ice gleamed below them, impossibly white and bright under the lights. The first few players skated warm-up laps, bodies blurring with speed, sticks snapping softly against the ice. Shane leaned forward without meaning to, elbows resting on his knees. Then he spotted him.

Ilya cut across the ice with sharp, effortless precision, movements all power and control. There was nothing soft about him out there. No lazy grin, no relaxed posture that Shane had gotten to know him with these past weeks. His focus was absolute, eyes locked forward, jaw clenched, body coiled like he was built for this exact environment.

He looked... different. He was fierce to a degree that was almost intimidating. Alive in a way Shane hadn’t seen before.

“Oh,” Rose said quietly, wiggling her eyebrows. “Okay. I get it now.”

Shane flushed. “That’s not–”

“I didn’t say anything,” she smirked.

The game started, and Shane found himself pulled in despite his usual preferences. The speed, the aggression, the roar of the crowd when a play went well, it was overwhelming, but in a way that made his pulse pick up rather than close in on him.

Then, sometime during the second period, Ilya glanced up into the crowd. It was brief – a quick scan of the stands between shifts – but their eyes locked. For a split second, the noise around Shane fell away, the distance between ice and stands collapsing into something intimate and electric. Ilya’s expression shifted when he saw him, surprise drawn all over his face as if he didn’t expect Shane to actually show up, then it changed into something like quiet satisfaction.

He nodded once and Shane’s betraying breath caught stupidly. He nodded back before he could think better of it, blatantly ignoring the knowing look Rose was shooting him from the side.

From that moment on, Ilya played like something had unlocked inside of him. He skated harder and faster, precision as clean as his skates cutting through the ice. He successfully took risks he usually wouldn’t and fought for the puck with a renewed kind of ferocity. The crowd noticed, the energy spiking every single time Ilya hit the rink.

“Is he always this good?” Shane asked, barely tearing his eyes away.

Hayden whistled. “He’s always good. But today? He’s on fire!”

The final buzzer sounded to a thunder of applause. Shane stood with the crowd, clapping until his hands stung, heart racing in a way he hadn’t expected. He didn’t see Ilya again until a bit after.

Shane excused himself from his friends as they were heading for the exit, to which Rose smirked at him with an aware glint in her eyes, but she didn’t press. The arena had mostly cleared when Shane felt a presence behind him near the exit tunnel.

“I played better today,” Ilya said, voice still slightly breathless, chest rising and falling a little faster than usual. His hair was damp and curling at the edges, strands sticking to his sweat-wet skin at his temples and forehead. His cheeks were flushed a warm pink, and Shane couldn’t tear his eyes away. The arena lights caught the damp glint of Ilya’s skin, the sharp line of his jaw and the muscles moving beneath his soaked, skin-tight training shirt that he must’ve been wearing under his protective gear... He was impossibly and painfully *hot*.

Now Ilya smiled, tired, genuine and a little proud. And *oh my god*, Shane was going to die right then and there. “Was because you were there.”

Shane’s brain blanked, only a soft ‘*Oh*’ escaping past his lips.

Ilya shrugged, like it was obvious. Like it made perfect sense.

“You are... How do you say? You are my good luck?”

“Lucky charm?” Shane offered.

“Ah, yes. This.” Ilya nodded enthusiastically. “You are lucky charm.”

And for the first time, Shane didn’t immediately argue with him.

Hayden knew something was suspicious the moment Shane said no to hanging out at the café with him.

“I’m sorry, I can’t,” Shane repeated, tugging his coat a little closer around himself as he packed his bag. “I’m busy today.”

Hayden froze mid-shoe-tying and looked up slowly. “You already went to the library today,” he pointed out. “Come on.”

Shane didn’t dare to look at him. “Who said I’m going to the library?”

Now that caught Hayden’s attention. He straightened fully, eyes narrowing like he was staring down a stranger. “You, Shane Hollander, have other plans than studying?” he asked slowly. “Who are you and what have you done to my best friend?”

Shane sighed and rolled his eyes at Hayden’s antics. “Calm down. I’m going to the museum. There’s a new exhibit. So it’s... still kind of like studying.”

Hayden blinked at that. “With who?”

Shane zipped his bag shut a little too aggressively. “Why does it have to be with someone?”

Hayden leaned back against the counter, arms crossing, smugness already settling in. “Because you’re being bitchy and defensive. And when you get defensive, you’re always lying. So. Who is it?”

Shane gave him a deadly glare but finally exhaled through his nose in resigned defeat. “Okay, okay, asshole. I’m going with Ilya Rozanov.”

The silence that followed was deafening, Hayden’s mouth hanging wide open in disbelief. Then he exploded.

“*The* Ilya Rozanov is going to a *museum* with you?” he blurted out so loud he almost yelled, his eyes wild. “Wait— Oh my god. Is this a *date*? Are you going on a date with *the* Ilya fucking Rozanov??”

Shane's ears burned instantly, a traitorous blush creeping up his cheeks. "I don't know," he muttered, already reaching for the door.

Hayden gasped comically loud. "Oh my god. So it totally *is* a date!"

"It's not—" Shane tried but gave up halfway. "Shut up, Hayden."

"Have fun on your date," Hayden sang unwavering, grinning as Shane fled hurriedly through the door and slammed it shut behind him.

The museum was quiet in a typically reverent and intentional way. People talked only in hushed voices or whispers and footsteps softened against the polished stone floors. Light from the afternoon sun filtered down from the high ceiling, diffused and gentle, catching on glass cases and frames. The air smelled faintly of old paper, canvases and dried paint, that elicited something timeless and calm.

Shane felt himself settle into it the moment they stepped inside, tension draining from his shoulders and relaxing like he'd been holding his breath all day. Ilya stood beside him, both hands shoved into the pockets of his leather biker jacket, looking a little lost and out of place.

"So," he said quietly. "You come here a lot, yes?"

Shane nodded to that, his eyes sparkling as if he was right where he was meant to be. "I like to come here when I need to think," he explained. "Or when I don't want to think at all."

Ilya let out an understanding hum. He watched the way Shane's posture shifted as they walked deeper into the galleries, the way his hands came alive when he gestured, the way his eyes lingered on pieces he particularly liked. He glanced from wall to wall as they continued moving through the rooms slowly and unhurried, not knowing what exactly to look for.

"This is my favourite art epoch," Shane whispered to Ilya in awe as they stepped into a hall washed in warm light. "Impressionism."

Ilya let his eyes wander around. The paintings on the walls were full of soft colours, blurred edges and visible brushstrokes. Scenes that felt half-remembered rather than precisely captured. Of course this was his favourite, Ilya thought, it felt very *Shane*.

Nonetheless, he asked, "Why?"

Shane smiled to himself, eyes jumping from painting to painting as if they were old friends. "Because it's honest, don't you think? It's not trying to be perfect. It's all about light and *feeling*, the moment something looks like something before you can even really focus on it." He stopped in front of a large canvas, showing a hazy evening scene covered in light blues,

muted pinks and purples, colours melting into one another. “It’s like the art trusts the viewer to understand.”

Ilya came to a halt next to him, tilting his head as he listened and looked at the painting in front of him.

“I don’t always... get it,” Ilya admitted after a moment.

Shane turned to him, his eyes soft and a small smile playing around his lips. “That’s okay,” he said immediately. “That’s the beautiful thing about art. You don’t always have to understand it. Sometimes it’s just about what it makes you *feel*.” As he said the last word, he placed his hand on Ilya’s chest—right above his heart—as if to underline his point. As if the meaning lived there. Ilya hoped that he couldn’t feel how fast his heart was racing. He looked back at the painting, then at Shane.

As though the latter was snapping out of a trance, he pulled his hand back and quickly averted his eyes, tucking a strand of hair behind his ear in embarrassment. “Sorry,” Shane quickly said. “I can get a little carried away when I can nerd off about art.”

“I like to hear you explain,” Ilya replied truthfully.

Shane’s eyes widened in surprise. “You do?”

The curly-haired man shrugged, a little bashful. “You look different when you talk about things you love.”

That did something dangerous to Shane’s chest.

They walked on, drifting through the museum rather than walking. Their shoulders brushed now and then, hands grazing each other accidentally, and then a second time less so. Each small contact lingered, charged but gentle, with neither of them commenting on it. Shane continued to animatedly talk about symbolisms and techniques, face lighting up without meaning to. His words flowed easily, enthusiasm bleeding through every sentence.

At one point, he paused in front of a marble sculpture. It was beautifully smooth and balanced, caught mid-motion.

“You know,” Shane said absently without thinking, “you kind of skate like that.”

Ilya blinked in confusion, looking at the carved stone before their eyes. “Like... statue?”

Shane flushed, scrambling to search for the right words. “No! I mean— It’s more about the posture and the balance. The way everything looks relaxed and dynamic but is still controlled. It’s very... classical.”

Ilya stared at him for a second with his mouth slightly open, then he grinned. “You just compared me to art.”

Shane’s cheeks were dusted a dark pink that made his freckles stand out prettily. “I’m sorry...”

“I am not complaining,” the other smirked. “I like it.”

They stayed in the museum until an announcement echoed softly through the galleries, reminding them that the building was closing soon. They walked reluctantly through the exit into the cold evening air. Outside, night had settled fully over the city, the air crisp and fresh. They stood there for a moment, neither of them quite ready to leave – Ilya to his motorcycle, Shane to the bus station.

“Well,” Shane said eventually, rocking from his heels to his toes indecisively. “Thanks for coming.”

“No, thank *you*,” Ilya countered. “I liked this. Surprisingly.”

Shane playfully shoved his arm. They should’ve said goodbye then and there, but something ushered them to stay, stalling, looking anywhere but each other.

“This was kind of like date,” Ilya said finally, voice careful, almost hopeful.

Shane swallowed. “I guess so, yes.”

Ilya smiled at Shane’s awkwardness, crooked and teasing. “So what? No kiss, Hollander?”

Shane scoffed, the laugh coming out slightly breathless, giving him away. And then he did something that surprised them both. His heart was racing as he stepped closer before he could overthink it. He rose onto his tippytoes and pressed a quick, warm kiss to Ilya’s cheek.

Ilya froze, eyes wide.

Shane pulled back just as fast, heart pounding hard against his ribs. “Goodnight,” he said quickly, already blushing.

He turned around and walked away before he could second-guess himself, before he could fully see the other man’s reaction. Though if he had, he might’ve noticed the way Ilya stood there for a long moment, hand touching the spot where Shane’s lips had brushed his skin, smiling to himself like an idiot. Like the whole world had just quietly turned around on its axis.

Chapter End Notes

Ahhhh this might actually be my favourite chapter I have written so far, I am just too soft for them I swear 😭😭 I can’t help putting them in cute date situations 🙄

But consider this the calm before the storm because the hurt/comfort tag is begging me to finally get to her and the next chapter might be the time to let her shine 🙄 Maybe not in the ways that y’all are expecting...

This chapter was a bit shorter than the other two but I hope you still enjoyed it, I will make sure to make up for it with the next one <3

Until then, leave kudos and comments if you like and I'll see you soon!!

Chapter 4: headlights on me (racing to sixty)

Chapter Notes

okay so I know I said it before with the last chapter but I lied, THIS ONE is my absolute favourite I think. At least so far from what I've written 🥺😭

After my last author's note, many of you thought we'd already get to the big angst bet reveal, but you might be surprised I have something else in store for you today 🤫

Also, since the last chapter was a bit shorter, you're in for a treat because this one is the longest yet!! I hope you enjoy the ride ;)

⚠️ TW: Please be aware that this chapter plays into the tag "implied/referenced sexual assault". I promise it will be VERY mild, there will be no detailed description of it but there will be a mention of attempted SA, so please if this triggers you, proceed with caution! ⚠️

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

Shane had lost track of time in the worst possible way.

For once, he wasn't in the library close to his department building. He had needed a change of environment to not go crazy trying to finish his assignment and his usual campus café was not open on Sundays, especially not at this late hour.

That was why earlier in the day, he had decided to take the bus to the other side of their huge college grounds to a common room that he knew stayed open late for finals week. He had only been here once before, the day of Ilya's hockey game, because the ice rink was close by on this side of campus and back then, he had wanted to get some studying done before meeting with his friends. He liked the warm, dim ambiance and the hushed murmurs of other people blending in with the low whirring of the overhead lights. And more in general, he enjoyed the atmosphere of not being the only one stressing over a paper, several students sitting hunched over their books and laptops, desperately trying to gather information for their exams last minute.

Shane had claimed a small single table near the window hours ago, laptop open, notebooks spread out in careful rows. At first, he had told himself that he would leave after finishing just one more paragraph. Then one more sentence. Then just one more citation.

By the time he finally threw a glance at the clock, his stomach dropped. "Oh shit," he cursed out under his breath.

He stood up so abruptly, his chair almost fell backwards to the floor, gaining some wide-eyed looks from the other students around him. He mouthed an embarrassed 'sorry'. He proceeded

with quickly shoving his things into his bag with uncharacteristic clumsiness, fingers fumbling with the zipper as he yanked on it too fast. A girl at the table next to him gave him a sympathetic look that said *good luck*, as he grabbed his bag and ran to the door.

As soon as he got outside, the air hit him in the face, sharp and cold. He sprinted over to the bus stop where the campus shuttle had dropped him off earlier and hurriedly checked the schedule with wild eyes.

Last shuttle: 11:00 p.m.

Shane ripped out his phone from his pocket, thumb hovering as he checked the current time. 11:12 p.m. *Fuck*. He stared at his screen like it might change its mind and turn back the clock if he just looked at it angry enough.

Walking back to his apartment building wasn't exactly unsafe. Not necessarily. But it was long, and it was late. The path led past buildings that thinned out the farther you went, lampposts spaced out just a little too far apart. Let's just say it wasn't *great*.

Shane cursed once more to himself, thinking about how he could've been so stupid not to check the bus schedule before. He hesitated on the sidewalk, unsure of what to do, anxiety creeping in like the cold wind sneaking under his jacket. He couldn't call Hayden or Rose; they also lived on the other side of campus and neither of them had a car or *anything* to pick him up with.

It's fine, he told himself. *You've walked this way before*.

Never when it was this late or dark though, a voice chimed in from the back of his mind.

Shane lingered, stuck in place, slight panic rising in his chest. But that was when he heard it. Voices and laughter echoed through the night, unmistakably from a bunch of people.

He turned his head just in time to see a group of hockey players spilling out of the practice rink across the street, gear slung over their shoulder, some of them still wearing their jerseys after a late-night practice. And at the centre of them—

Ilya.

His skin was still glowing from practice, but it looked like he had showered, his damp curls plastered to his forehead, cheeks red from exertion. He carried his helmet under one arm, jacket unzipped despite the cold, exhaustion written all over his body and the loose roll of his shoulders.

Ilya spotted Shane almost instantly. His steps slowed down before stopping completely, his teammates looking at him in confusion. When they followed his line of sight, some of them nudged his side, hollering about something that Shane couldn't hear from where he was standing.

"Shane?" he called out, peeling away from his friends without hesitation and jogging over to him to the other side of the street.

Shane's heart did an unhelpful, pathetic jump in his chest. "Hey."

Ilya frowned slightly, eyes flicking to the study room behind him and back to Shane. "Why are you still here? Is late."

"I- Uh..." Shane adjusted the strap of his bag, mainly to occupy his nervous fingers with something. "I was studying and lost track of time."

Ilya glanced down the street and at the bus stop sign, understanding settling in. "You miss last shuttle," he concluded.

"Yep," Shane laughed humourlessly, mostly about himself.

For a moment, Ilya stayed quiet, looking at him with an unreadable expression. His mouth twitched as if deep in thought.

"I can take you," he finally said.

Shane blinked once, twice, unsure what the other was suggesting. "Take... me?"

Ilya jerked his chin toward the parking lot next to the practice rink, where a familiar motorcycle sat under a streetlight, black and sleek and objectively *terrifying*. "I take you home."

Shane's gaze followed his, and his stomach flipped at the sight of the bike. "Oh," he said weakly. The idea hit him all at once: The speed, the noise, the complete lack of control. He swallowed thickly. "I don't know if that's... I mean—" He fumbled with the hem of his jacket's sleeves.

"Is okay," Ilya assured quickly, already sensing Shane's hesitation. "If you don't want, is fine. I just thought," he shrugged, "is cold. And late. And dark..."

Shane looked at him pointedly, he knew exactly what the other was trying to do. But then he imagined the long way home if he decided to walk. He could see the empty sidewalks in front of his inner eye, the way his chest already felt tight even just thinking about walking on them by himself.

"I..." He exhaled, steadying himself as he made up his mind. "Okay."

Ilya's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Really?"

"Yes, okay," Shane repeated, nerves buzzing under his skin. *What the hell did I just agree to?* "Let's just go before I can change my mind."

The helmet felt too big and too heavy, pressing down over Shane's ears, the padding muffling the world as Ilya carefully adjusted the strap beneath his chin. His fingers were warm and gentle, brushing Shane's jaw as he secured it, lingering just a fraction longer than strictly necessary.

"Hold on to me," Ilya said, voice louder now, already edged with the promise of noise from the engine. "Tight."

Shane nodded, throat too dry to respond with anything out loud. His hands trembled slightly as he wrapped them around Ilya's waist, fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt like it was the only solid thing in the world that could ground him right now. The cotton was warm from his body, slightly damp from being put on after a shower. Shane tightened his grip without really meaning to, knuckles pressing in, anchoring himself in place there.

The machine roared to life beneath them, a deep, vibrating sound that went straight through his chest. And then they started moving.

The sudden acceleration stole the air from Shane's lungs. Wind rushed past his face, sharp and cold, tearing at his breath and flooding every exposed inch of his skin. The city came alive around them in flashes: Buildings stretching and slipping past, windows glowing gold and white, streetlights smearing into long streaks of brightness as they sped through intersections. The noise of the motorbike swallowed every thought Shane had been holding onto.

Headlights of other vehicles rushed toward them, flaring up brightly before vanishing in blinding spurts. Cars blurred at the edges of Shane's vision as they accelerated again, the speed climbing so quickly his stomach flipped and the wind drew a tear from his eye. The numbers on the dashboard meant nothing to him, but he could feel it in his body: The pull, the rush, the way everything went weightless for half a second before settling again.

His grip around Ilya tightened instinctively as he pressed their bodies even closer, his helmet bumping against Ilya's shoulder when he squished the side of his face against the other's broad back. His heart was hammering so loudly behind his ribs that he was sure Ilya could feel it. With his head so close to the other man, he could smell him beneath the rush of the air. Leather and soap, faint traces of sweat and something lightly metallic from the rink. The smell was familiar to him now, grounding him in a way that surprised him.

Shane's fingers grabbed harder into Ilya's shirt, bunching up the fabric in his fists as the bike leaned into a turn. The movement was smooth and powerful, controlled in the same way Ilya was on the ice – confident, precise and utterly unhesitant. Shane's heart slammed against his chest, adrenaline burning hot in his veins, his pulse syncing with the vibration of the engine underneath him.

He should've been terrified. And *oh boy*, he was. Every instinct in his body screamed at him about speed and danger and the lack of control. But beneath that fear, buzzing and electric, was something else entirely.

Exhilaration.

It was the kind that didn't leave much room for overthinking. There was no space for spirals or second-guessing or carefully built walls. The wind stripped his thoughts bare, the noise drowning out every worry he normally carried like a second skin.

For once, Shane wasn't analysing or thinking ahead. He wasn't cataloguing risks or mapping out possible consequences. He wasn't worrying about tomorrow, about his deadlines or what any of this meant.

He was just there in the moment, holding on.

Feeling everything at once.

The bike slowed beneath them as Shane's apartment building came into sight, engine easing down into a low, satisfied purr before Ilya turned the key and shut it down completely. The sudden quiet rang in Shane's ears, like for a second the world had forgotten how loud it had just been.

He swung his one leg over the machine, jumping off in one swift motion, stumbling just a little bit when his feet found the solid pavement again. He let out a short laugh, breathless and a little unhinged.

"Oh my god," he said, pulling off the helmet with shaking hands. His usually neat black hair stuck up in every direction, cheeks flushed pink from the chill and adrenaline, eyes bright and sparkling like he'd just been newly dropped back onto earth from somewhere higher. "That was— This was crazy! I've never been on a motorcycle before. This was— Wow! Just wow."

He ran a hand through his messy hair, letting his hand rest at the back of his neck as he shook his head in bewildered disbelief.

"You liked it," Ilya observed, not a question.

"I think," Shane laughed again, breath still uneven, legs wobbling slightly when he shifted his weight, "I might still be moving."

Ilya chuckled as he watched him with something dangerously soft in his expression, helmet tucked under his arm, lips curved into an easy smile. Seeing Shane like this —unfiltered and glowing, a little undone— did something warm and reckless to his chest. He tilted his head as he looked at the man in front of him, eyes glinting in sudden inspiration.

"I have idea," he said out of nowhere. And before Shane could even ask what he meant, Ilya reached out and took his hand. He grabbed it without hesitation, just like that, probably not even thinking about the action as he dragged Shane with him. His fingers felt warm and secure as they wrapped around Shane's, palms squeezing softly together in a way that was safe and electric all at once.

“Come with me,” Ilya said as he led them in a specific direction, pulling Shane behind him.

Shane’s heart jumped as he let himself follow Ilya with blind trust; he didn’t pull away. If anything, his grip around the curly-haired man’s hand tightened instinctively, curiosity buzzing under his skin. It was almost midnight. It was finals week. The campus was mostly asleep.

“Where could you possibly be taking me at this hour?” Shane interrogated him, though his feet were already moving with Ilya’s.

The other man only turned around to look at him and grinned as he continued to tug him along.

The campus’ grocery store glowed like a beacon in the dark, fluorescent lights whirring softly inside. It was open 24/7 on every weekday, but right now it was nearly empty, just a bored cashier on his phone and the quiet hum of the refrigerator units filling the space.

“This,” Ilya announced while grabbing a small basket, “is very important post-near-death experience tradition.”

“I was never near death,” Shane protested weakly, a smile already creeping onto his face as he looked at the man in front of him.

“You were emotionally,” Ilya shot back, already tossing a bag of sour candy into the basket.

Shane made a face at the sight of the bright green packaging. “That stuff still looks like it’s trying to hurt you.”

“And yet,” Ilya countered solemnly, “I live.”

Shane just rolled his eyes at Ilya’s antics as he followed him into the next aisle. The *chocolate* aisle, as he discovered shortly after. Ilya wandered around the shelves, looking through them as if he was searching for something specific. He stopped and his eyes lit up as he seemingly found the object of his desire, then reached out and let a chocolate bar dotted with strawberry pieces drop next to his sour candy.

Shane’s brain connected the dots immediately, a warm blush sneaking into his cheeks. “You don’t have to—”

But Ilya didn’t even let him finish that sentence as he sternly made his way to the cashier. “I want to,” Ilya persisted, his smile widening. “It just feels very... on brand for you.”

He dumped the two things onto the conveyor belt, adding a ginger ale and a coke as well, and drummed his fingers against the edge like he had nowhere else he would rather be. He paid

for everything at the counter, earning himself another *you-didn't-have-to* glance from Shane. He looked over to the other man then, eyes glistening with something wild and free.

He looked beautiful like that, Shane thought, and he could feel it too: That same lingering energy from the ride, still humming underneath his skin like the rules had loosened. Like the world had tilted just enough to make room for whatever this was. Shane looked at Ilya, and he felt free in a way that he had never felt before.

They left the store and sat on the curb outside, backs against the cool brick, snacks spread between them. Shane broke off a small piece of chocolate and let it melt slowly on his tongue, smiling at the sweet taste, while Ilya winced dramatically at his own candy.

“You are unbelievable,” Shane said, laughing as Ilya playfully sucked air through his teeth as though the sourness had hurt him.

“Worth it,” the other replied immediately, joining Shane as he started laughing too.

They talked about everything and nothing all at once: About classes, ridiculous campus rumours... Laughter came easily to them, but so did comfortable silence. Eventually, it settled between them, not in an awkward way, just... full. Shane tiredly leaned his head against Ilya's shoulder, a content sigh escaping his lips.

The brunette man turned his head slightly, careful not to disturb Shane's comfort, studying his profile in the harsh white light spilling from the store windows. He watched the way his long lashes cast shadows against his cheeks. The straight line of his nose, perfect in a way that made Ilya's heart ache, and the scatter of freckles across it that he'd grown embarrassingly obsessed with. God, those beautiful freckles that Ilya found himself counting without meaning to, while noticing the faint rise and fall of Shane's chest as he breathed.

“This,” Ilya murmured quietly, “was very good idea.”

Shane glanced up at him, smiling softly. “Yeah. It was.”

The moment lingered with the both of them just looking at each other, studying each other's faces in a manner that felt delicate and heavy at the same time.

Ilya moved first.

He lifted a hand slowly, like he was asking permission without words, fingers brushing Shane's cheek and tracing over his freckles before cupping his face fully. His hands felt warm and steady on Shane's skin, almost reverent in the way his fingertips grazed it so lightly. Shane's breath caught as his eyes searched for Ilya's, that were already looking at him like he was a piece of art.

Then Ilya leaned in and kissed him.

It was gentle at first. He pressed his lips carefully against Shane's, as if he was something fragile and precious, like Ilya was afraid of startling him if he moved too quickly. His lips were warm and unhurried, moving slowly against Shane's, his thumb brushing faint circles

onto his cheeks. It was so delicate and chaste, Shane felt like a sculpture made from glass that could break any second.

He melted into it for a few seconds, languishing in the soft gentleness of it all – until his heart kicked hard against his ribs.

Because this was *Ilya*. Infuriating and magnetic hockey captain and most desired bachelor *Ilya fucking Rozanov*. And Shane was done pretending he wanted only half of this. He wanted the whole thing.

He shifted even closer, fingers curling into the front of Ilya's jacket, and kissed him back, deeper this time and more certain. When Ilya startled slightly in surprise and a stunned noise escaped his mouth, Shane took the chance and parted his lips, pressing forward with intent.

The kiss changed instantly. Ilya made a quiet, pleased sound in the back of his throat and responded without hesitation, mouth opening as if he had been waiting for this, meeting Shane's energy with sudden hunger. Their tongues brushed, then tangled, curious and uncoordinated at first, learning about each other in sloppy strokes that made Shane's head spin. The carefulness dissolved into something messier: Stuttering breaths, lips chasing after one another, a soft clash of teeth that made Shane laugh into the kiss before diving back in, deeper this time.

Ilya enthusiastically swallowed the sound of other man's angelic giggle with his mouth, his hand sliding from Shane's cheek to the back of his neck. His fingers threaded into his hair, holding him there like he never intended to let go. Shane's own hands roamed over Ilya's body without thinking, gripping hard at Ilya's jacket, then sliding up. One of his hands found its way to the soft fabric of his shirt at his shoulder under his jacket, the other travelled up to his hair. He finally felt the golden-brown curls then, warm and impossibly soft beneath his fingers, just like he had imagined on more than one distracted evening. Ilya shivered at the touch, kissing him impossibly harder, like that alone had unlocked something in him.

The world narrowed to heat and closeness and the taste of chocolate and citrus between them, flavours that shouldn't go together but undeniably somehow did. Just like Ilya and Shane who felt like they came from two different worlds entirely, finding themselves entangled with each other, hands exploring and mouths learning, the shared, breathless realisation dawning upon them that neither of them wanted this to stop.

When they finally pulled apart, foreheads resting against each other, both of them were breathing hard, their chests rising and falling rapidly.

Shane laughed softly, still kind of dazed. "Wow," he murmured again, like the word had taken a whole new meaning tonight.

Ilya smiled, wide and unguarded, eyes bright in a way Shane had never seen before. He tried to engrave the image in his mind.

"Yeah," Ilya agreed quietly. "Wow."

They stayed sitting on the curb long after the sugar rush dulled and their hearts stopped pounding against their chests, knees brushing, shoulders touching in that absentminded way that felt anything but accidental. The night had gone quiet around them: No cars driving on the streets anymore, the streetlights humming softly overhead, the grocery store behind them glowing too bright and too empty, like a different world they had briefly stepped into and out of again.

Shane picked at the edge of his chocolate wrapper, folding it, unfolding it. His legs still felt a little weak, like the adrenaline hadn't fully drained out of his body yet. But Ilya sat close enough that their sides touched fully now, solid and warm, grounding him in an unspoken manner.

After a moment, Ilya cleared his throat. "So, uhm. There is this party next week after exams finish... Would you come with me? As my date?" he asked, carefully casual, like he hadn't rehearsed it in his head at least twice. "I will stay with you whole time. Promise."

Shane's fingers stilled as his eyes stared aimlessly ahead. There was a painfully long pause where he hesitated, not sure how to respond.

"I don't really... do parties," he settled on at last, voice quiet.

Ilya tilted his head, brows furrowing just a little in confusion. "But we met at party."

Shane huffed out a small, humourless laugh. "Yeah. I know."

Ilya continued looking at him, trying to find the missing puzzle pieces in Shane's face, like he could find all the answers of this world in his eyes. The latter just stared out at the empty street in front of him for a second, gathering himself, before something determined sparked in his expression. When Shane spoke up again, his voice was softer, barely above a whisper but the most honest it ever sounded. That change made Ilya perk up and listen intently.

"I wasn't always like this, you know? Careful, I mean," Shane swallowed. "During my first year, I loved going to parties. Going out with my friends, meeting new people. I was..." he paused to search for the right word, "...open. I trusted everyone and I really believed that people only ever meant well, that they only ever had the best intentions at heart."

Ilya felt like he was frozen in place, unable to move as he hung on Shane's lips with every word he spoke, listening.

"Maybe that was naïve," Shane went on. "But I liked who I was back then. I liked being a people person." He pulled up his knees to his chest and wrapped his arms around his legs, hugging himself tightly. "And then... There was this one night. I drank too much. And I didn't realise how bad it was until it already was."

His chest felt tight now, but he pushed through. It had been a long time, since he had told anyone about this. All the while Ilya didn't interrupt him, closing his eyes in anticipation, as if he was bracing for impact, scared of what Shane would reveal next.

"That one night, someone wouldn't take no for an answer," he said, almost under his breath. "I remember thinking at first that I was overreacting, that I was being dramatic but... At one point, the guy touched me even though I didn't want him to and then I only remember being so, so scared..." He exhaled shakily. "Thankfully, Hayden and Rose found me before anything... worse happened. They got me out and stayed with me all night."

Ilya let out a breath he didn't know he was holding, his fists clenched tightly at his sides. Finally, Shane turned to him, eyes glassy.

"I just— After that, parties stopped feeling harmless to me. And I couldn't really trust anyone new anymore." His shoulders lifted in a small shrug. "So I stopped going all together. But this was many years ago. With time, I learned how to go unnoticed in rooms full of people and every now and then, I'm okay now to join my friends and it's fine, really, but... let's just say I don't necessarily seek it out."

Ilya's expression had changed completely. There was no teasing glint in his eyes, no easy smile on his lips. Just something open and serious and careful, like he was holding Shane's words securely and safe with both hands.

"I am so sorry," he said immediately. "Forget what I asked, you do not have to come." His eyes were honest when he looked at Shane, as if he was trying to convey so much more than he could say with words. "Not for me. Not ever."

Shane searched his face, then surprised even himself by smiling. It was small, but it was real. He took Ilya's hand in his, drawing soft circles on the back of it.

"I know," he said. What Ilya didn't expect, were the next words that left his mouth, "But I think... I want to. Go with you, I mean." He tentatively squeezed the other's hand. "If you're there with me, I don't think I will be scared."

Ilya nodded once, slow and steady, taking the words in. "I will be there," he assured. "Always."

They sat with that for a moment, the air between them thick but gentle. Shane took a deep breath. "Can I ask you something?"

"Anything," Ilya replied immediately and he meant it. Whatever Shane wanted to know, he would lay his heart bare right here and now.

"Can you... tell me something about you?" Shane asked, hesitant but determined. "Something no one else knows?"

Ilya's jaw tightened. For half a second there, he almost confessed it all. The bet, the guilt, the thing that had been sitting like a stone in his chest ever since the beginning. He looked at

Shane's face instead. His eyes were open and trusting and so vulnerable after what he had just told Ilya, his cheeks and eyes still a little red from the cold, the ride and the kiss.

He just couldn't do it. Not here and now. Not after all that.

So, instead, he told him the other truth – the one that never left him. It was the first thought that came to his mind, because it was the one thought that was *always* on his mind, no matter the day, time or place.

"My mother died when I was young," he said so quietly, it was barely a whisper. "Too young."

Shane's breath hitched at the honest and raw confession, but he didn't dare to say a word.

"My dad..." Ilya shook his head slightly. "He was so hard on her, he is so hard on *me*. He only knows how to push, push, push. He needs me to succeed with hockey. Is everything to him." His mouth twitched. "And I love hockey. I really do but..." He rubbed at his eyes, then lay his face into his palms, exhaling raggedly. "Sometimes it feels like prison. Like if I stop skating, I stop being worth something. At least to him."

His fingers curled into fists.

"This is also why I smoke," he admitted, almost embarrassed. "Is stupid habit, I know. But sometimes I need something that is mine. Something that stops stupid thoughts and slows things down."

His vision blurred suddenly. He blinked hard, jaw setting as he felt the heat behind his eyes. He turned his head away when the first tear betrayed him anyway, rolling down his cheek.

"Hey," Shane said softly.

Ilya shook his head. "Sorry," he said helplessly, hating the way his voice cracked.

"Hey," Shane repeated, even quieter this time.

Before Ilya could react, Shane had shifted – in one smooth, decisive movement– settling onto his lap, knees bracketing Ilya's thighs. His hands came up gently, cupping Ilya's face like it was something precious.

Then he kissed him. It was careful and slow, nothing like the hunger from before. Ilya leaned into it instantly, like he needed the contact to stay upright. When Shane pulled back, he pressed soft kisses to Ilya's cheeks, catching the remaining tears before they could fall, mouth warm and sure.

They rested their foreheads together, breathing the same air. Ilya exhaled shakily, the sound breaking something open in his chest. No one but Svetlana knew any of this and even she didn't know the whole story. And with her, he had never cried.

Shane wrapped his arms around him then, pulling him into a hug, one hand settling at the back of Ilya's neck. Ilya's arms slung around Shane in return, tight and instinctive, like he

was afraid Shane might vanish if he loosened his grip ever so slightly.

He buried his face against Shane's shoulder and sniffed once, laughing weakly at himself. They rocked back and forth slowly, barely moving, holding each other in the quiet of the night.

Their hearts lay out in the open, vulnerable and sincere, and for the first time in a long time, neither of them felt alone.

Chapter End Notes

What an emotional rollercoaster you guys, I am SO sorry. I took the title "racing to sixty" too literally I fear because this chapter sure rocked me like I was on that motorcycle with them 😞 Even just writing this sent me on an emotional odyssey I swear 😭

I hope their first kiss was everything to you because it definitely was to me 😞 And for what came after... well, I hope the mild hurt/comfort was to your liking. It for sure tore me to shreds as I was writing it 😭😭

Ilya didn't open up about the bet, was that the right decision in that moment? We are about to find out... because chapter 5 is where shit is going DOWN. Hold on tight besties, because what comes next might milk that angst tag DRY I hope you're prepared (I'm not 😞)

Chapter 5: and even if I run away (give my heart a holiday)

Chapter Notes

heey so... there's really just one thing I want to say in advance: I AM SO SORRY for what you're about to read... you might want to grab some tissues :D
honestly, that's all I'm going to say...
Well, uhm... Enjoy? 🤪

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

Ilya had been waiting outside the house for a full two minutes, phone in hand, when it buzzed.

Shane: *almost there!*

Ilya: *okay. waiting out front.*

He leaned back against the low brick wall by the front steps, the bass from inside the house bleeding through the walls in dull, rhythmic thuds. Music rattled the windows, laughter bursting out every time the door swung open to release another wave of heat and noise. He adjusted the collar of his jacket, eyes flicking up instinctively every time someone passed, already tuned to the idea of Shane appearing any minute now.

Then he stepped into his vision, and Ilya stopped short.

“Wow,” he said before he could help himself, eyes dragging slowly over Shane like he was seeing him for the first time all over again. A grin spread across his face, warm and unmistakably pleased. “Mr. Handsome.”

Shane huffed out a laugh, cheeks already warm, but he couldn't stop the small, pleased spark that lit in his chest. He had put more thought into his outfit than he wanted to admit: He had chosen wide-leg jeans sitting low on his hips, a white t-shirt cropped just enough that when he lifted his arms, a strip of soft stomach showed. A necklace rested against his collarbones, half lined with pearls, half a silver chain. His black hair was a mess, intentionally this time around, falling into his eyes in a way that made him look effortlessly untouchable. Or at least, that was how it felt when Ilya looked at him like that.

“You're staring,” Shane laughed, nerves and excitement mixing in his eyes.

“Because you look unfair,” Ilya said easily, pushing off the wall and stepping closer. He opened the door with one hand, gesturing Shane in first. “Ready?”

The party swallowed them the second they stepped inside. Music thudded through the house in heavy bass lines that vibrated in Shane's chest the moment Ilya pushed the door open,

warm air spilling out to meet them. The place was packed: Bodies everywhere, laughter spilling over itself, the sharp scent of alcohol and perfume hanging thick in the air. Coloured lights pulsed from somewhere deeper inside, turning faces into flashes of blue and red and gold.

Ilya stepped in front of Shane and reached for his hand without thinking, fingers closing around his like it was instinct, anchoring him before the noise and movement could do it first.

Ilya stayed close as they moved through the crowd, one hand firm at Shane's lower back, guiding him, shielding him from bumping shoulders and careless elbows. Every time someone got too close, Ilya shifted subtly, placing himself between Shane and the rest of the room without making a big deal out of it. It felt protective without being possessive, and it made Shane's stomach flip.

He was also suddenly very aware of where he was... and *who* he was with. Of the way people kept glancing over, curious and surprised, because Ilya Rozanov didn't usually arrive with someone. Didn't hover protectively at their side. Didn't look at anyone the way he kept looking at Shane. Shane could feel the weight of it, the quiet attention, the unspoken questions hanging in the air.

And beneath all that, quieter but heavier, was the realisation that had hit him back on the curb outside the grocery store: He had *feelings* for Ilya, and those feelings were very, very real. Deep enough to scare him just a little, not in a bad way, but in a way that made his thoughts spiral if he lingered on them too long.

So when someone handed him a drink, Shane didn't overthink it. Then another. And then, somewhere between laughing at something Ilya said and shouting over the music, a shot appeared in his hand. He swallowed it quickly, barely tasting it, warmth blooming in his chest. *For liquid courage*, he told himself, because that was easier than standing still with the knowledge of how much he wanted this night, and *them*, to go right.

Ilya watched him carefully, brows furrowing just a little. "Hey," he said, leaning close so Shane could hear him. "Maybe slow down, yes?"

Shane smiled at him, wide and unfazed. "I'm fine," he promised, his words unbothered and still pretty clear. Ilya squinted his eyes slightly. He *did* look fine, steady on his feet, eyes bright. Ilya still hesitated a bit before he nodded eventually. He didn't know Shane's tolerance and so far, he seemed okay. He was keeping an eye on it, though.

By the time they ended up near the centre of the living room, the music had shifted. It was lower and heavier, the kind that settled deep in the body. Shane felt it immediately, the rhythm sliding under his skin, loosening something inside of him. He smiled, grabbing Ilya's wrist and tugging him closer.

"Come," he said, already moving, swaying a little. "Dance with me."

And who was Ilya to resist when Shane looked like *that*? Looked at *him* like that?

They danced together easily at first, bodies close but not quite touching. Shane lifted his arms above his head, the hem of his shirt riding up just enough to reveal tan skin flashing under the lights. Ilya's eyes darkened as he watched him, hands finding Shane's hips like it was the most natural thing in the world.

The skin-on-skin contact made Shane press closer, his arms finding their way to Ilya's neck, slinging them around. Ilya sucked in a breath, hands tightening reflexively as Shane moved with the beat, confident and fluid, grinding back into him like he knew *exactly* what he was doing. Shane's head tipped back slightly, hair brushing Ilya's jaw, his laugh beautiful and breathless.

Around them, a few curious glances landed on the two, lingering a bit longer than normally. Shane Hollander—quiet, academic, barely a blip on the social radar—was suddenly impossible to look away from. And Ilya Rozanov, who never stayed with anyone longer than a song, had both hands on him like he wasn't going anywhere.

Ilya leaned in, voice low against Shane's ear. "You okay?" he asked, fingers splaying wide against his waist.

Shane nodded a little too fast. "More than okay," he said, grinning. But his eyes were a little unfocused in a way that made Ilya's alarm bells ring just a bit. It was very hard to tear himself away from the other man, though.

Their hands were everywhere now: Shane's fingers curling into Ilya's shirt, Ilya's palm slipping briefly under the hem of Shane's tee, warm skin under his touch. The music thundered around them, lights blurring, the room closing in until it felt like there was nothing else but heat and movement and the way Shane fit against him like he'd always belonged there.

Shane, on the other hand, didn't even notice how unsteady his steps were becoming. How the room tilted just slightly when he moved too fast. How his head felt a bit light, floating somewhere above the noise. All he knew was that Ilya's hands felt solid and safe on his body and that for once, he wasn't thinking about anything.

Ilya carefully watched the flush in Shane's cheeks and the glassiness of his eyes, feeling a flicker of something uneasy beneath the want. He tightened his grip on Shane's hips just in case, keeping him close.

When someone accidentally bumped into them all of a sudden, Ilya could not react fast enough to stop Shane promptly sloshing half of his drink down the front of his shirt. He froze, blinking down at himself like what happened needed a moment to register in his brain. "Oh no," he said faintly.

That was enough for Ilya to get a hold of himself. Without hesitation, no questions asked, he took the cup from Shane's hand, set it aside, and guided him out of the crush of bodies with a steady arm around his shoulders. Shane leaned into him without protest, slight embarrassment warring with the alcohol-heavy haze in his head.

The walk back was quiet. Shane swayed a little, apologizing too much, but Ilya murmured sweet reassurances in his ear the whole way. He kept him upright, jacket shrugged off and draped over Shane's shoulders against the chilly night air. Ilya led them to his own apartment because it was closer to where the party had taken place and he wanted Shane to be back in a warm space as soon as possible.

As they stepped inside, the noise of the party felt like a different lifetime, a thousand miles away. Ilya found a clean shirt easily enough – soft and definitely too big for Shane, smelling faintly like Ilya's laundry detergent. He helped him out of the sticky one with careful hands, eyes deliberately averted, movements gentle and respectful. Shane mumbled a *thank you*, voice thick with exhaustion rather than flirtation now.

They ended up in Ilya's bed not long after, both of them more or less fully dressed – Ilya didn't like sleeping with a shirt on, so his upper body stayed exposed. The lights were off except for the glow from the streetlight outside, shimmering vaguely through the curtain. Shane curled onto his side almost immediately, breathing evening out as sleep took over him. Meanwhile, Ilya lay beside him on his back, hands folded over his chest, staring at the ceiling. After minutes passed that felt like hours, Ilya turned his head slightly, studying Shane's sleeping face like he wanted to file it away somewhere deep in his memory. He smiled, watching the rosy tint of his cheeks that made his freckles stand out even more starkly against his skin. The way his lips were faintly parted as his chest rose and fell in a calm rhythm. He didn't dare to touch Shane or move closer. He just stayed next to him, listening to Shane's slow, steady breaths, making sure he was safe, until the night finally went quiet around them.

The next morning came slowly and cruelly normal at first.

Shane woke up to the first pale rays of sunshine filtering through unfamiliar curtains, tiny dust particles floating lazily in the air. For one disorienting second, his mind was blissfully blank, sleepy eyes scanning the room around him as he rubbed his face.

Suddenly, it hit him. He bolted into an upright seating position, heart slamming against his ribs as the panic flooded in with full force.

“Oh shit,” he cursed under his breath.

This wasn't his room.

The bed was too big, and the sheets smelled all wrong – not bad, but just *different*. The walls were too bare where his would have been plastered all over with posters and self-drawn sketches. He could feel his sudden movement catch up to him as his head throbbed in a dull and insistent way, like someone had wrapped his skull in cotton and noise at the same time.

He pressed his palms against his eyes as his memory slowly came back in fragments. There had been music and light. He vaguely remembered Ilya's hands steady on his hips, a warm flush creeping up his face as his mind sent him snippets of them dancing and grinding closely together on a dancefloor that Shane barely remembered. There had been laughter, then cold air, a sound of a door closing behind them. And eventually, the feeling of warmth and safety again. Random flashes of last night slipped in and out of Shane's pounding head, but he couldn't grasp the single pieces and arrange them into one big picture.

A movement next to him made his head turn slowly to the other side of the bed. Ilya was lying there, still sound asleep next to him.

The sight of the man hit him all at once. The rise and fall of his chest, hair mussed against the pillow, one arm thrown carelessly above his head. Shane's initial panic stuttered for a second, confused, then softened into something more fragile and aching. Okay. Okay. This part made a little more sense. They had gone to the party together. Shane wrecked his brain trying to remember everything, but to no success. Did they go home together? That sounded plausible, he guessed.

Shane's stomach twisted in a painful way, and also his head seemed to hurt even worse now. He groaned quietly, trying not to wake up Ilya who looked so peacefully dozed off. Shane already started sweating slightly when he spotted a glass of water on the nightstand next to him, two painkillers beside it. Ilya must've put them there before falling asleep. It was this small, domestic sort of kindness that made his heart flutter unexpectedly. Shane took the pills gratefully, washing them down and draining the glass in one go.

He then swung his legs over the edge of the bed, the room tilting just ever so slightly as he stood and he had to pause for a second to adjust. He steadied himself, massaging his temples while reassessing his surroundings once more. He noticed, distantly, that he wasn't wearing his own clothes from yesterday – just his underwear and a soft, oversized shirt that hung off loosely from his shoulders.

Ilya's shirt, he realised.

A familiar heat crawled up his neck as he absentmindedly let his fingers trace over the fabric while his eyes searched the room for his own clothes. He found them at last, neatly folded on the couch, though he had no memory of putting them there.

Shane moved slowly as he dressed, every motion careful, like his body was still trying to catch up with his mind. He tugged on his jeans from the night before, the denim stiff and cold against his skin, then reached for his shirt... only to pause when he saw a darkened, sticky stain blooming across the front, dried unevenly and faintly sweet-smelling. He frowned at it, fingers brushing the cotton as if that might jog his memory, but nothing came. There was just a blank space where the spill should've been, where the moment should've lived. A quiet unease curled in his stomach as he decided to just keep Ilya's shirt on and placed his dirty one back on the sofa. He doubted that Ilya would mind seeing him in one of his way too big shirts, anyway.

He yawned as he put on his shoes, already plotting in the back of his mind to get some coffee and fresh croissants for the two of them from the café around the corner. He could already

imagine Ilya's face when he would wake him up to breakfast in bed and it made Shane smile to himself.

Trying to not wake the other man up, Shane moved quietly, gathering himself, reaching for what he assumed was his phone on the dresser. His fingers closed around it automatically, muscle memory doing the work while his brain lagged behind.

The screen lit up when Shane pressed the button on the side, but to his confusion it wasn't his wallpaper that showed up. He frowned, squinting through the lingering haze that was still clouding his mind, when suddenly the notifications loaded.

Text after text appeared on the lockscreen, seemingly just now coming through from last night, in a group chat that Shane had never seen before. The *hockey team* group chat, he realised as he recognised the names popping up without even trying. The messages stacked on top of each other, a scroll bar barely visible on the side.

Shane's stomach dropped when he finally comprehended that he had picked up Ilya's phone by accident. He was about to put the phone back to where he took it from, not wanting to invade Ilya's privacy, when suddenly the text at the very top of the pile caught his attention. Because it was his very own name that was staring back at him.

hockey bros:

ayooo rozy just left the party with hollander

oh my god he actually did it

Shane's breath caught as he couldn't stop his fingers from scrolling further down to unveil more messages. Ilya did *what*?

hockey bros:

can't believe rozanov finally grew a pair

told you nerdy boy would fall for you

No. What were they talking about? Shane's fingers went cold when his eyes caught a glimpse of the following text.

hockey bros:

guess we lost the bet, boys

The word *bet* pierced his chest and rang through his head like a gunshot as it echoed and doubled over in his mind. All the worst-case scenarios suddenly crashed into his thoughts with brutal force, like a tsunami wave that couldn't be stopped. But it was the last few messages that gave him the final deathblow before he drowned.

hockey bros:

wait wait! did you sleep with him??

you better not say no, loser

this counts, right guys?

The phone slipped slightly in Shane's grasp as his hands started to shake uncontrollably, and his vision turned blurry.

It had been a bet. All of this had been a fucking *bet*.

From one moment to the next, the room felt too small, like it was closing in on itself, the air getting thick and hard to breathe. His pulse roared loudly in his ears as the puzzle pieces rearranged themselves in the worst possible way, slotting into place with horrifying ease.

His mind reeled backward, replaying everything that had led him here: The sudden hangouts and study dates at the café that had felt so random and out of nowhere, the hockey game, the museum, the *kiss*... That night that had felt so unreal and real all at once. He thought of how open he had been with Ilya, how much he had shared without hesitation because he had felt safe. He had been so vulnerable with him, had confessed his darkest secret of what had happened to him. Shane had *trusted* him. And now all of it had twisted into something sinister and ugly.

His gaze dropped down to himself then, the realisation hitting too late. He had woken up in just his boxer briefs and an unfamiliar shirt hanging off his frame, the quiet, sickening implication wrapped up in it. The assumption that his teammates in the chat had already made for him.

The thought barely formed before it folded in on itself, sharp and dizzying, as it sent him reeling. Shane snapped his head to the side, heart slamming violently against his ribs as his eyes landed on the bed again. On Ilya.

He was still asleep, sprawled on his back across the mattress, chest bare underneath the sheets, dark lashes resting against his cheeks like nothing in the world was wrong. He was shirtless. Unmistakably shirtless.

For a split second, Shane couldn't breathe.

His mind twisted in on itself, jumping to conclusions faster than he could stop them, his brain filling in the gaps faster than logic could keep up, propelled by the weight of the assumptions from the messages he had just read. If Ilya wasn't wearing a shirt – and Shane was wearing *his* – then where had it gone? Had it been taken off? Had Shane taken it off? Had *Ilya*? A cold, nauseating panic spread through him as the questions stacked on top of each other, each one worse than the last. He couldn't remember. That was the worst part. The empty space where memory should have been yawned wide and terrifying, and his brain filled it in with the only explanation that seemed to make sense.

Oh God.

His chest felt tight, like he was hyperventilating and couldn't get quite enough air. Was Ilya naked under the sheets? Did they...? Had they slept together? The lack of answers was worse than anything else. It left room for doubt to fester, for fear to sink its claws in deep, and suddenly every tender moment from the nights before felt corrupted, rewritten into something he hadn't agreed to.

The quiet room suddenly felt unbearably loud as his thoughts spiralled completely out of control. Shane's head spun and he felt sick. He threw the phone back onto the dresser like it had burned him.

The clattering, loud sound shattered the silence.

"What—" Ilya stirred behind him, voice thick with sleep. "Shane?"

But Shane didn't answer. He was already moving.

He grabbed his *actual* phone and ran out of the bedroom, his hands fumbling with the knob of the front door, while his heart pounded so hard it felt like it might crack his ribs open. He didn't grab his own shirt, didn't grab his jacket when he frantically bolted out of the apartment. All he could think of was to *get out, get out, get out*.

Shane felt incredibly stupid, naïve and humiliated. He was a goddamn idiot for believing him and Ilya had something real. He should've known from the very start that their worlds just didn't mix, that people like Ilya could never be truly interested in someone as pathetic as him.

He hurried through the long hallway that was thankfully still empty since it was an early Saturday morning. Only *fools* fell for Ilya Rozanov, the unattainable golden boy, and now Shane knew why: If you dared to step a foot into a star's orbit, you were destined to crash and burn. And he hated himself so much for letting himself be blinded by the other man and falling for it. Falling for *him*. Shane Hollander never gave his heart away easily and if he did, it meant that he thought you were something special. Oh, how wrong he had been. And how fucking painful it was to find out in the hardest way imaginable.

Suddenly, he heard a door open and slam close behind him, followed by fast and bare footsteps that chased after him.

"Shane, wait!" Ilya yelled behind him as he caught up.

The hallway was cold and echoing, high ceilings amplifying every ragged breath as Shane continued stumbling forward until he reached the stairwell. He stopped for one second, hands braced on the railing, shaking so badly he could barely stand.

"Shane, please—" Ilya who had been quick to run after him, reached Shane, his hair wild, eyes still hazy with sleep and suddenly sharp with alarm. He was only wearing boxers, chest naked and barefoot, breathless like he had sprinted without thinking.

He managed to grab Shane by the sleeve of his shirt, trying to make him halt. Shane spun around in highspeed, flinching away from Ilya's touch like it had burned him.

“Don’t touch me!” he shouted, his voice high-pitched and agitated. Ilya saw his eyes then. The look on Shane’s face was so raw, broken and... *terrified*? It made Ilya’s hand drop down instantly, no questions asked.

“What’s wrong?” Ilya asked, voice already cracking. He had no idea what was going on, what he had done for Shane to look at him like he was *scared* of him. Shane’s beautiful brown eyes that had always carried a sparkle with them wherever he went, were now wet with unshed tears, that he stubbornly tried to hold back, glaring at Ilya with shock and horror. “What happened?”

Shane laughed once, but it was short and almost hysterical. “A bet?” His voice rose as he said those words, shaking violently. “A fucking *bet*, Ilya?”

Ilya’s whole body froze in an instant. “Shane –”

Shane might’ve been fully dressed again, but he felt so unbearably naked in front of Ilya, who was looking at him with big, panicked eyes, that he felt like he was going to throw up right then and there.

“I can’t believe you,” Shane rambled, words tumbling over each other now, tears blurring his vision. “Please. Just tell me. Is it true? Did they say the truth?”

“Let me explain–” Ilya tried, but Shane didn’t even let him finish the sentence. He needed to know *now*.

“Answer my fucking question, *Rozanov*.”

The use of his last name landed like a slap to Ilya’s face. His whole body went still, unable to move. Maybe even his heart stopped, he wouldn’t know, because right now his whole existence was stuck in agonizing pain.

“Did you talk to me because of a bet?” Shane tried again, slower, failing miserably to control his ragged breathing that was coming out in trembling bursts. “Yes or no?”

The silenced stretched, heavy and damning. It was indication enough to guess the answer, but Shane needed to hear it out loud. From Ilya himself.

“Yes,” Ilya admitted quietly, his whole body visually slumping in defeat.

That one word alone crushed the air out of Shane’s lungs.

Every last bit of hope that Shane could’ve possibly been still holding onto, shattered right there in front of his eyes into a hundred million pieces. It was like the floor had been ripped away from under his feet as his whole world collapsed beneath him. He was exhausted and miserable, and the man, who he had just admitted to himself to have feelings for, was breaking his heart. No, *screw that*. He was ripping his beating heart out of his chest with bare fucking hands.

He stumbled back like the word had physically pierced through him.

“You’re dead to me,” Shane said hoarsely, not recognising his own voice. “Never touch me again. Never talk to me again.”

“Shane, please—” Ilya pleaded.

“And yesterday... I was drunk,” Shane choked out, his tears finally falling. “I told you about what happened to me before. Don’t you have any... any dignity?”

Ilya’s shocked eyes widened even more in horror as the implication hit him. Did Shane think something happened last night? How could he think that Ilya was capable of such a nasty thing?

“No!” he burst out immediately. “No, it’s not what you think. Shane, please. I swear to you—”

But Shane wasn’t listening anymore. “I hate you,” he whispered, more to himself than anyone. “I never want to see you again.”

Tears stung in Ilya’s eyes, spilling over despite his effort to stop them. “Shane, please. Listen. I didn’t—” He instinctively reached his hand out to the other man, wanting nothing more than to console him, hug him, tell him that he was sorry and that it was not what it looked like, but seeing Shane so utterly broken made his arm falter and pause halfway.

“Please,” Shane sobbed, his voice breaking completely. “Just let me go.”

And Ilya did, knowing that he could never deny Shane anything he asked him to do. Even if right now that meant going against everything his brain was screaming at him to do. Every cell of his body urged him to act, like his life depended on it if he didn’t.

Instead, Ilya’s hand clenched into a fist and dropped to his side. Slowly, *helplessly*, he took a step back to give Shane the space that he had asked for.

The black-haired man didn’t hesitate. He turned around and ran down the stairs, shoes slapping against the hardwood, each step carrying him further and further away until he was out of sight.

Ilya stood there alone in the hallway, bare chest heaving, tears tracking silently down his face as the sound of Shane’s footsteps faded. The door at the bottom slammed close.

And just like that, something that had started as nothing – something stupid and meaningless – had turned into the worst thing he had ever done.

Chapter End Notes

I had to hit you with a curve ball, it actually didn’t happen AT the party 🤖

IM SO SORRY GUYS pls don't hate me, it had to happen at one point, and today was the day... I PROMISE I'm going to fix everything in the next chapter!! It's angst with a happy ending after all!! But yeah trust me, writing this hurt me as much as it probably did for you reading it but I'm just suuuch a sucker for some good angst and misunderstandings 😞

Also, I know shane jumping to conclusions about the sex might seem drastic and unreasonable, but it's basically his trauma catching up to him :(Of course, if he thought about it logically, he would probably know that nothing of this sort happened, but he's already in shock and then he reads the text assuming they slept with each other and his brain just spirals 😞

I just wanted to make that clear, in case it didn't come through. He's jumping to conclusions here, not because he thinks Ilya is actually capable of doing such a horrible thing but because everything is happening at once and he's catapulted back to that one time something almost happened.

If you want to scream at me in the comments, pls do so but don't be mean, I'm also sad about this 😭😭 Or let out your frustration by punching the kudos button haha

Chapter 6: remember when you taught me fate (said it'd all be worth the wait)

Chapter Notes

uhm... SURPRISE??

this fic has always been planned as six chapters total, but as I've been writing these past days I realised that it just got longer and longer and longer...

SO!! I've decided to split it in half, which means that after this one, you will actually still get one more full chapter!! 🎉

Also, I'm posting this one day earlier than I usually would, because due to this change I'm not giving you the actual finale just yet and I thought I could make it up to you by already updating now <3 and you're in for a treat, because even though this is the last chapter split in half it's STILL the longest one yet aaaaaaah

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

It was the next afternoon when Ilya stood outside Shane's dorm room.

The hallway was too bright, too clean, lit by the kind of lighting that made everything feel exposed. His knuckles hovered in front of the door for a long second before he knocked, soft at first, then harder when there was no answer. His chest ached like it had been hollowed out, every breath scraping on the way in.

"Shane," he said, voice already breaking. "It's me."

He was only met with silence.

"I- Please," he tried again, inching closer to the door now, forehead tipping forward until it rested against the cool wood. "Please open the door. I know you are in there."

He opened his fist and slid his fingers flat against the surface, hand spread like he could feel Shane through the barrier if he just tried hard enough. He breathed out, his shoulders shaking and betraying him. When he spoke up again his voice sounded wrecked and raw, like he had been crying all day.

"Nothing happened Friday night," he said quietly. "I swear to you. Nothing happened."

And like a dam that broke, the words started tumbling out then, rushed and desperate, like if he stopped talking for even a second, he might lose his nerve entirely.

"You spilled a drink on your shirt, that is all. You were upset about it and I- I helped you out of it, yes? I gave you one of mine and we just... we slept. Next to each other. Not *with* each

other. I did not touch you, Shane. I would never. You were drunk, I know that, and I swear to you, I *promise* I would never—”

His voice cracked fully this time, splintering apart pathetically. He swallowed hard and pressed his forehead more firmly to the door as if the pressure might keep him upright. His legs felt like they were about to give in from how much his body was trembling.

“The bet,” he continued, quieter now, his face twisting into a pained grimace, as if saying the word itself hurt him physically. “God, I am *so sorry*, Shane. Is not what you think. It was never about sleeping with you. I don’t even understand how stupid Brad turned it into that in his head. But it wasn’t about *using* you, I swear. I could never do that to you. Not when I actually—”

He stopped, breathing in shakily. He couldn’t say the word.

“Not when I like you so much,” he finished the sentence instead, barely audible.

“All the bet ever was— was talking to you. Is all. Just talking,” he pleaded. “They *did* dare me to make you fall in love with me. I don’t even know why they wanted that. But I agreed to just talking. Nothing else.”

He let out an exasperated sigh. “It was stupid. It was stupid bet at stupid party. We were all drunk and I know this is not an excuse. I know it is not. But I need you to know that I never wanted to hurt you. I never thought—” His voice gave out entirely. “I thought talking to you would not hurt anyone. I never imagined it could end like this.”

He exhaled a broken, stuttering breath. “I did not plan anything. I did not expect anything. I just... talked to you.”

His voice softened at that as though he was thinking back to it like a fond memory, then continued raw and unguarded. “And I liked it. Every second of it. Watching you study, seeing you during my game, the museum... None of that was fake. None of it was a lie. Bet was first push maybe, but everything after... that was me. I wanted to be there, and I wanted to be *with you*. I still do.”

A quiet, humourless laugh slipped out of Ilya. “I did not pretend, Shane. I do not think I *could* pretend even if I wanted to. I really like you. And what we had... It was real to me. It still is.”

His voice was barely a whisper at this point, and he wasn’t sure if Shane – if he was even listening – could hear anything he was saying. He carried on nonetheless, determined. “Please believe me. You don’t know how sorry I am. Please do not think I played you. I swear on everything, I swear... on my *mom*. I could never do that to you. Not you.”

The realisation of what he had admitted with that last sentence, knocked the air straight out of his lungs. He cleared his throat, trying to switch the subject as still no reaction came from the other side.

“I brought your jacket,” he said. “And your shirt. You spilled drink on it, so I washed it. Are both clean now. I folded them.” There was a soft rustle as he placed the pieces in front of the closed door. “I didn’t know what else to do... I don’t know. I just wanted you to have them back.”

What Ilya didn’t know was that Shane stood frozen on the other side of the door.

His forehead was pressed against the same spot where Ilya’s rested, separated by centimetres of wood that felt impossibly thick. One hand was wrapped tightly around the doorknob, knuckles white, his fingers trembling like they might finally give in and turn it. But they didn’t.

Silent tears streamed down his face and all the way to his neck, soaking into the collar of his shirt. He had heard everything: Every word Ilya spoke through the door, every apology he offered, every small fracture in his voice when it broke under the weight of what he was trying to say. Each syllable landed heavy in Shane’s chest, sinking in, leaving no room for doubt or misunderstanding. And still, he couldn’t move.

Outside, Ilya waited. He counted his breaths without realising, stood there far longer than he should have, hoping for any sign at all – the turn of a handle, a shift of footsteps, even a single sound that would tell him that Shane was there and listening.

Nothing came.

Eventually, his hand slipped from the door. His shoulders sagged like something inside him finally shattered. He stood there for another second, forehead still resting against the wood, eyes squeezed shut.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered again. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

Then he stepped back.

Shane heard his footsteps retreat down the hall, growing quieter, until there was nothing left but the hum of the lights and the sound of his own uneven breathing.

That was when his legs finally gave out. He slid down the door slowly, his back against it, head tipping up until it knocked gently against the wood. There was a shirt on the floor next to him, *Ilya’s shirt*, the one he had woken up wearing yesterday. It still smelled like Ilya. He grabbed it before he could tell himself not to, clutching onto it, breathing it in without even realising he was doing it. He clenched it in his hands until it was wrinkled from his grip, pressing it to his chest like it was the only thing keeping him from falling apart.

“I can’t,” he whispered to the empty room.

And on the other side of the door, there was no one left to hear him.

Three and a half years earlier.

Canada still felt unreal to Ilya.

It was too polite, too quiet in the wrong places and unbearably loud in others. He had come here on a sports scholarship, joining a Canadian college for the first time, and he felt so out of place. He could still remember stepping onto campus with his duffel bag slung over one shoulder, his phone buzzing with messages from home that he didn't open right away. His father's voice lived in his head regardless, sharp and impossible to please: This is your chance. Don't waste it. A scholarship wasn't just an opportunity; it was a contract. Perform, or go back with nothing. So, he had to do his best.

And while hockey might've come easily to him, everything else didn't.

The first weeks blurred together in a haze of orientation events and lecture halls that all smelled faintly of coffee and silent hope. His English still tangled on his tongue when he was tired. People smiled at him and he smiled back, but there was a distance he couldn't quite bridge yet, a sense that everyone else had been handed a map that he was still trying to read upside down.

He was so glad when he met Svetlana. They met by accident: Two Russians gravitating toward the same corner of a crowded orientation mixer, both pretending not to hate it as much as they did. She laughed when she heard his obvious accent, and the relief that flooded his chest at hearing his own language again was almost embarrassing. From that night on, she became his best friend. With her, he didn't have to translate himself. They studied together, complained together, sat in comfortable silence together. Before the hockey team, before the attention, before the noise – there had been Svetlana.

And then... there had been Shane Hollander.

Ilya saw him for the first time in a lecture hall, three rows down and two seats to the left. It was during an introductory course that everyone had to take. He remembered it with an odd clarity: The way Shane leaned forward slightly as he listened, pen moving fast across the page like he was afraid of losing a thought if he didn't catch it in time. Dark hair falling into his eyes, even though it had been shorter back then, pushed back absently without ever really fixing the problem. He laughed easily back then, open and bright. The sound carried through the room, unguarded, all the way to Ilya's ears.

Ilya didn't know his name yet. He just knew that something about the boy captivated him. Enough that he couldn't look away.

There was nothing dramatic about it. No lightning strike, no cinematic moment. Just a quiet pull that he didn't question. It was like a fascination that settled somewhere low and steady in his chest. He started noticing Shane everywhere after that – crossing the quad with friends, sitting on the steps outside the arts building, gesturing animatedly as he talked.

Ilya never spoke to him.

It wasn't fear, exactly. Shane belonged to a life that Ilya hadn't quite earned access to yet. A life that seemed full, already crowded with friends and laughter and ease. Watching from a distance felt safer. He told himself that was all it was.

But maybe Ilya was just a coward.

Then first year ended. And when they came back after the break, something had changed.

It wasn't one big thing; it was all the little things: Shane stopped laughing so carefree, he stopped sitting in the middle of rooms and started choosing corners instead. The friends Ilya used to see him with drifted away, one by one, until Shane was mostly alone, except for his close circle of two best friends. From that moment on, you would see him with his headphones in, sketchbook open and eyes down.

People started calling him the art nerd or the quiet one, like that had always been true.

But that didn't stop Ilya from still admiring him from afar. He saw Shane leave parties early or not show up at all. He saw the way his shoulders stayed slightly hunched now, like he was bracing for impact even when nothing was happening. Something in him had folded inward, carefully and deliberately. Whatever had happened hadn't been loud; it had been private. And it had stayed with him.

Ilya wanted to ask. God, he wanted to ask so badly. But he knew it probably wasn't his place.

By then, hockey had claimed him fully. The team became his world, and when he was eventually named captain, it became his responsibility. He grew into his body and thus, into his reputation. People suddenly learned his name fast. Smiles were given freely, but they were shallow things, gone the moment he looked past them. At parties, girls and boys alike threw themselves at him, and while he relished in the attention, none of them were of real interest to him.

That was the cruel irony of it: The more visible Ilya became, the more invisible his real wants felt. Popularity built a wall he didn't know how to climb down from without disappointing someone – his father, his coach, his team, the version of himself everyone seemed invested in.

He heard rumours about himself in the halls because he never spared his admirers a second glance. They speculated that he was a virgin, that he was asexual or that he had secretly been dating Svetlana this whole time. That was the downside of popularity: While everyone was nice to your face, you were also an easy target to talk about behind your back. When he heard these things, he just shrugged them off, letting his friends tease him about it because it was easier than explaining a truth that he hadn't fully admitted to himself.

Years passed like that. Being observant but never intruding. Never choosing himself over the expectations pressing down on him from all sides. By the time the bet came – born of stupid and drunken carelessness – it didn't feel like a beginning to him; it felt like permission.

A push he hadn't known how to give himself.

And now, walking away from Shane's closed door, knowing how badly he had hurt him, the truth sat heavy and merciless in his chest:

Ilya Rozanov had loved Shane Hollander long before Shane had ever known his name.

He had loved him first. For years. Quietly and safely from afar. And somehow, he had still managed to ruin everything.

The air in the locker room was hot and humid, a sharp tang of sweat mixed with soap clinging to the walls long after practice had ended. Most of the team had already filtered out, laughter and noise trailing down the hall, leaving behind Ilya and his three closest friends, the low hum of the vents, and the distant echo of skates being sharpened somewhere deeper in the arena.

Ilya sat on the bench in front of his locker, elbows braced on his knees, hands hanging uselessly between them. He hadn't even showered yet. His jersey was still damp, clinging to his back, but he didn't seem to notice or care. His head throbbed, not from practice, but from the memories that kept replaying in his mind. The look in Shane's eyes, the way his voice had broken when he said *'I hate you'*.

Troy noticed first. He slowed as he was pulling on his hoodie, glancing over at Ilya with a frown that deepened the longer he looked.

"Hey, cap," he said carefully. "You good?"

Ilya let out a humourless laugh that didn't reach his eyes. "No."

That got Wyatt's and Luca's attention immediately. Wyatt paused mid-lacing his shoes, and Luca stopped rummaging through his bag, all three of them turning toward their captain in unison.

"What happened?" Luca asked. "You look like shit, man."

"Played like shit, too," Wyatt unnecessarily commented on their practice, earning himself Ilya's glove being thrown at him.

Ilya swallowed once. His throat felt tight, like the words were stuck behind something heavy and immovable, and he didn't even know where to start. When he finally spoke, his voice came out flat, stripped of its usual steadiness.

"I fucked up," he said quietly. "Bad."

The silence that followed was immediate and dense. Wyatt was the first to straighten slowly. "Okay," he said cautiously. "Start talking."

Ilya dragged a hand down his face. "Shane knows."

All three of them stilled. Troy's mouth fell open slightly. "Knows...?"

"The bet," Ilya said, sharper now, the word bitter on his tongue. "He saw your messages from the night of the party. He thinks—" His voice faltered, just for a second, and he had to look away. "He thinks I slept with him while he was drunk."

Luca swore softly under his breath, while Wyatt's face drained of all colour.

"Fuck," Troy breathed out. "Ilya—"

"I went to his dorm," Ilya continued, words spilling out now like he couldn't stop them anymore. "I told him everything. I begged him to listen. But he didn't open the door. He wouldn't even look at me." His hands clenched into fists. "Fuck, I hurt him. I hurt him so bad."

The weight of his words settled over the room like a physical force pressing down on them.

Wyatt was the first to speak again, quieter this time. "Shit. We didn't—" He stopped himself mid-sentence and exhaled hard. "That's not how it was supposed to go."

Ilya's head snapped up at that. "Then how did you think this would go?" His eyes burned. He really didn't want to cry in front of his friends. "Because from where I stand, it looks like you all thought this was *so* fucking funny."

Troy stepped forward instinctively. "No. No, man. Jesus, no. That wasn't—" He ran a desperate hand through his hair, searching for the right words. "Okay. Yeah. The bet was stupid and immature. I'm not going to pretend it wasn't. But it wasn't just a joke."

Ilya laughed, sharp and aghast, not believing them a single thing. "Could have fooled me."

Luca shook his head slowly, struggling for words. "Ilya, listen to us."

Wyatt sighed and sat back down on the bench, a sudden earnestness sneaking into his eyes. "Did you really think we never noticed?"

Ilya frowned at the tonal shift. "Noticed what?"

Troy gave him a look that was equal parts fond and incredulous, hands gesturing vaguely toward Ilya. "You."

That didn't help at all. The brunette man looked at his friends in confusion. "What about me?"

"You've been mooning over that guy since first year," Troy exclaimed, almost frustrated at how oblivious the other man was. "It's been years, dude. *Years*."

Ilya stared at him, mouth hanging slightly open because he was too shocked to close it. “That is not—”

His friends interrupted him immediately, not letting him deflect this time.

“You ‘accidentally’ took the same electives as him,” Wyatt cut in gently. “Picked the café with the shitty espresso because a certain Shane Hollander liked it.”

Luca snorted softly. “You stared at him like a lovesick puppy every time he walked past, captain.”

Ilya opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again when nothing came out. His heart started to pound, slow and heavy.

“At first, I told the others that they were making shit up. I thought you didn’t even know this guy’s name,” Troy added. “Meanwhile, you knew his schedule better than your own.”

“Is not true,” Ilya said weakly, but his bright red cheeks and wavering voice betrayed him in an instant.

Wyatt raised an unimpressed eyebrow. “You once rescheduled practice drills, just for me to later find out that you had secretly gone to the art department’s student exhibition, bro. You don’t even like art.”

The guilty silence blared deafening in the air, making Ilya’s ears burn. “I—”

“You were not subtle,” Luca said, smiling understandingly. “Like, at all.”

The room went quiet again, but this time it felt different. It was like they had taken the wind out of the sails, the storm had calmed down, and instead something more fragile, like a breeze, took its place.

Troy’s voice was gentle when he spoke up again. “We thought you were just... scared. Or stubborn. Or both.”

Wyatt nodded approvingly. “You never let anyone get close. At least not really. And yeah, we teased you about it, but we figured...” He shrugged helplessly. “We figured you just needed a little... nudge in the right direction.”

Ilya’s chest ached, understanding finally settling in his expression. “So you made it a bet.”

“Yeah,” Troy winced. “In retrospect, maybe not our brightest idea...”

“But we knew that your competitive ass could never back down from a challenge,” Wyatt argued, and Ilya hated that he could actually see where they were coming from. Because they were right. It had worked, after all.

“It was Brad who made it gross,” Luca added quickly. “But we all know he’s an asshole... He was the one who made it all about sex, when he wasn’t even in on our plan. I hope you know that that was never the point. Not from our side.”

“We shut that shit down as soon as we could,” Wyatt said, looking at Ilya with intent and sympathy. “But it seems the damage was already done by then...”

Ilya abruptly stood up, pacing for a few steps before stopping, bracing his hands against the lockers and letting his head hang, overwhelmed by the new information. “You don’t understand,” he said hoarsely. “He trusted me. He told me things... things he’s never told anyone. And now he thinks all of it was fake.”

All three of his friends let out a quiet *‘Fuck’* at the same time.

“We just wanted you to talk to him,” Troy said quietly. “That’s it. To make you finally stop watching from the sidelines. We didn’t think...” He shook his head in remorse. “We didn’t think it would escalate like this.”

“This whole time, I never imagined I could have him in the first place, so I didn’t even think about what it’d be like to lose him,” Ilya confessed, his voice breaking. “I didn’t think I *could*.”

No one really had an answer to that.

It was Luca who slowly stepped forward first, placing a reassuring hand on Ilya’s shoulder. He was the youngest on their team, usually a bit shy, a scholarship student from abroad just like Ilya. His voice was quiet when he spoke up next, but it was determined. “We’ll help you fix it, cap.”

His eyes were wide-open and honest.

Ilya let out a hollow breath, trying to give him a weak smile. “I believe you guys that you only had good intentions at heart, even if... plan was stupid. Is why I am captain and I make strategic decisions in team.” The others laughed at that. “And I forgive you. But I don’t think you can fix this.”

“Maybe not,” Troy shrugged. “But we owe you –and him– more than just standing around and feeling guilty.”

Wyatt nodded enthusiastically in agreement. “Whatever you need, captain. We’re in.”

Ilya looked at them – his friends, his team – and gave them a small smile. A real one this time. But even though he should have felt something like reassurance, all he could see in his mind were Shane’s tear-filled eyes.

He didn’t say out loud that he thought it was hopeless.

Shane didn't answer anyone for at least a week. Maybe it was longer than that, but he had lost track of time in the confines of his room, burying himself in his own four walls like a hermit.

He didn't reply to his friends' worried texts or calls and blissfully ignored it when Ilya's name would pop up on his screen for the hundredth time, trying to reach him. Shane simply couldn't do this right now. He couldn't do anything but hide away and sit in his own sorrow; he didn't want to talk to anyone about the massive shit show that was his life.

At least, all of it had gone down after finals week, because Shane – usually the most dedicated student in his courses – was skipping all of his classes. He emailed his professors short, apologetic messages about being sick, and thankfully no one questioned him. He had also skipped meals, which was normally not a thing he ever did, but on some days now, he just couldn't bring himself to swallow any food without feeling like he had to throw up. He let the world shrink down to the quiet of his dorm room, the steady ache in his chest never really going away and reminding him that he was still alive.

By the time he finally let Rose and Hayden into his room, he looked like shit.

There were dark circles marking the skin beneath his eyes, red-rimmed and swollen like he had been crying every day and not bothering to conceal it. His face had gone pale in that hollowed-out way that came from not eating enough, not sleeping enough and not being touched by sunlight long enough to remember what it felt like. His voice was rough when he spoke, scraped raw, like every word had to fight its way out of his throat.

They sat on the floor of his room with their backs against the bed, Shane protectively positioned in the middle of them, Rose leaning her head against his shoulder and Hayden holding him steady in an embrace. Three empty coffee cups cluttered the space before them, and the curtains were half-drawn against the afternoon light that came in muted and grey.

Shane sat cross-legged between his friends, hoodie pulled tightly around himself like it might keep his emotions from spilling out as he told them everything, staring ahead blankly.

He told them about the party, the messages and of course, the bet. He mentioned how he had woken up in Ilya's shirt and the humiliation that had burned through him when he realised what everyone in the group chat had assumed. He also told them about Ilya showing up at his dorm after, begging him to listen, recalling all the things he had said.

Shane didn't cry when he told them. He sounded emptied out and hollow, like he was numbly narrating something that had happened to someone else. Rose didn't interrupt once as she was silently listening to his words. Hayden swore a lot, quietly and under his breath, every time Ilya's name came up but especially when Shane got to the part of the bet.

When Shane finally finished and fell silent, the room stayed that way for a long moment.

His friends hugged him tightly, offering condolences and sweet words. It felt like a heavy weight was being lifted from Shane's shoulders and he wondered briefly why he hadn't let them in sooner.

“Okay,” Rose spoke up eventually, carefully. “I have to tell you something... And I know you probably don’t want to hear this – and I really, really don’t want to defend the guy – but I talked to Svetlana.”

Shane’s shoulders stiffened immediately at that. “Rose, please don’t.”

“I know,” she said gently. “It’s just... You weren’t speaking to us, and we didn’t know what was going on, so I thought maybe she knew more and... I really think you should know this. Please, just listen for a second.”

Shane looked away, his jaw tight and his eyes burning, but he didn’t tell her to stop again.

“She basically confirmed to me what happened that night,” Rose continued softly. “She saw how you spilled the drink on your shirt and how you left with Ilya. She said that the entire night he acted so protective of you, didn’t let anyone close. He doesn’t do that with anyone usually.” She searched for Shane’s eyes. “Ilya told the truth about that, and apparently he really likes you.”

Her words landed heavy and unwelcome, like something that fell into his lap that he hadn’t asked for. Shane let out a short, bitter laugh. “Great. So I just overreacted. Am I just supposed to feel better now?”

The words came out harsher than he wanted them to, but the hurt and betrayal still sat deep in his chest.

“That’s not what I’m saying, Shane. You know that,” Rose said immediately, unwavering. “You didn’t overreact. You are allowed to be hurt. You are allowed to be angry. What he did was still not okay and the whole bet thing was fucked up.” She squeezed his arm lightly. “But I’m your best friend and I know you, and I think the whole sex thing might’ve maybe been a bit... triggering for you.”

“That’s one way to put it,” Shane muttered before he could stop himself. “It was more like being catapulted right back to my 18-year-old self that was almost taken advantage of.”

Rose nodded slowly, a pained look hushing over her face. “Yeah... That.” She shifted closer, brushing his knee with her own. “I know you’re miserable. And I can’t just sit here and watch you disappear into yourself like this.”

Hayden nodded his head in agreement. “You haven’t drawn anything all week. You haven’t complained about your professors once. That’s how I know it’s bad.”

Shane swallowed. His throat felt traitorously tight again. “I just don’t know what’s true anymore.”

Hayden shifted, rubbing his hand over the back of his neck. “I wasn’t sure if I should say anything but... Okay so, this doesn’t have to mean anything,” he added carefully, like he was stepping on thin ice, “but Ilya has been playing like *shit* ever since this happened.”

Shane couldn’t help but snap his head up to look at his friend.

“They’ve lost the last two games,” Hayden went on. “Games they really shouldn’t be losing. Coach benched him in the last period yesterday. Dude looks *wrecked*.”

The silence stretched once more, heavier this time. Then Rose leaned forward, her voice soft but firm. “I’ve never seen you as happy as you were these past weeks, Shane. I haven’t seen you this open and worriless for three years... Not like that. Not the way you were with him.”

The words hit Shane square in the chest. He stared at the floor, blinking hard. “That doesn’t mean it was real,” he whispered.

“No,” she agreed. “But it also doesn’t mean that it wasn’t.”

He swallowed. His throat felt raw. “You don’t know if it all wasn’t just... part of the lie. How will I ever know what to trust anymore?”

“I’ve got to be honest. I don’t know Ilya like that. But I know Svetlana, and she loves him,” Rose said honestly. “And I trust her ability to be a good judge of character. She wouldn’t lie to me for him if she thought he’d hurt you on purpose.”

Shane was about to reply to that when something else entirely caught his attention. He frowned, something in his mind clicking into place. “Wait– Are you and Svetlana...?”

Rose blinked. Then she smiled, small, a little sheepish and unmistakably fond. “Well, thanks for asking,” she teased him. “While you were living your *Ten Things I Hate About You* drama, me and Lana talked, confessed and got together.”

She didn’t say it in a mean way, just a gentle statement of fact. Her eyes were kind, almost apologetic.

“It can be that easy, huh?” Shane sighed, almost laughing at himself.

Hayden snorted and nudged his shoulder. “Told you,” he said pointedly. “Lesbians. It’s what they do.”

Despite himself, Shane huffed out a weak breath that might have been almost the ghost of a laugh. It wasn’t quite there yet, but close enough to make Hayden smile proudly.

The room settled into a softer silence after that.

Rose reached for his hand, squeezing it once. “No one’s asking you to forgive him today. Or tomorrow. Or ever, if you can’t. But shutting yourself off like this isn’t protecting you. It’s just... hurting you.”

Shane nodded slowly. He knew that. He had known it since the first night alone with his thoughts. This conversation had somehow opened his eyes. Not enough to heal, not enough to forgive, but enough so he could finally breathe again.

Because now that he could look at things from a distance with a clearer mind, with Svetlana’s confirmation and with the memory of Ilya’s voice on the other side of the door – honest, wrecked and breaking apart – he didn’t actually believe that Ilya had tried anything that

night. He had jumped to the worst conclusion because his body remembered his fear from first year before his brain could catch up, because back then betrayal had come disguised as kindness once before and then turned into something else entirely.

And because the bet – God, that stupid bet – had shattered the ground beneath everything else.

He believed Ilya when he said nothing happened. But what still hurt was that it had ever started as a game in the first place. That Ilya hadn't trusted him with the truth. That something real had been born from something so careless.

At least, Shane *wanted* to believe that it had been real.

Still, when his phone buzzed on the bedside table next to him, lighting up with Ilya's name – no message left, just a missed call indicating that he had tried reaching him again – Shane didn't grab it. Not yet.

But this time, he didn't turn it face-down either.

In the following days, Ilya absolutely spiralled.

Not in the quiet, dignified way or in the brooding, poetic way. No. This was a full-body, no-sleep, can't-eat, pacing-the-room kind of spiral. The kind that made his friends exchange worried looks and wordlessly confiscate his phone at two in the morning because he had tried to draft an apology text that started with '*I will kneel if you ask me to*' and only got worse from there. At one point, they were all sure Ilya had fully lost his mind.

He couldn't live like this anymore.

He couldn't train properly; he couldn't focus. He couldn't even breathe without feeling like something essential had been ripped out of his chest and left him hollowed. The world had narrowed to one singular, unbearable truth: Shane was still out there, hurting, and it was all Ilya's fault.

So on one faithful day, he made a decision.

If Shane wouldn't come to him and if words hadn't been enough, then Ilya would have to prove it. Loudly and repeatedly through action. *Respectfully*, yes, but with absolutely zero shame left intact.

If he had to beg, he would beg.

If he had to humiliate himself, so be it.

If he had to become a walking frat-bro romcom cliché—

God help him, he would.

Chapter End Notes

Ahhhh my lover boy ilya!! 😞😞😞 Never beating the “fell first and harder” allegations, not even in this fic. I genuinely love them so much, it’s baaaad you guys.

I had this plot twist planned ever since the beginning, so if you go back to chapter 1, you might see some hidden clues that ilya already knew shane from the start, like i.e., him recognising shane and knowing his name even when drunk at a party or how his friends were never malicious with the bet etc. (except for stupid brad who’s not even part of the friend group 😞) The dumb hockey bros (*lovingly*) *just wanted to help their oblivious friend finally ask out the dude he’s been very obviously pining over for YEARS* 😞😞
Ahhhh I just couldn’t wait for you to find out 😞

Let me know your thoughts down below!!

I will see you in the finale!! 🙄🙄

Chapter 7: you always leave me wanting more (I can't shake my hunger for)

Chapter Notes

heyyy besties!! First of all I want to apologise for the HUGE delay 😭 I know I usually updated every other day but this week has been horribly stressful for me, so I rarely got the chance to sit down and write :(but anyway, now it's here!! And you know how I said last time that I split the last chapter in two because it was getting too long? Well, somehow this finale still turned out to be over 7k words long, so... you're welcome!!



I can't believe we have arrived at the final chapter at last 😳 and that this fic has become my most viewed one yet? Like what is reality???

I really hope this chapter makes up for all the hurt I have caused you (and my characters) in the last two chapters and that it lives up to your expectations!! <3 Let me know down below in the comments which chapter was your favourite, or even your favourite scene maybe! I'd love to know 🙏

But for now, please enjoy the finale!! 🍷

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

The first time Shane saw Ilya again, it was outside a lecture hall.

Shane had started going back to class because, unfortunately, responsibility was still deeply ingrained in his bones. Missing more than a week made his skin itch with guilt, even if the thought of running into Ilya made his stomach twist unpleasantly.

Which was exactly why the universe, apparently, decided to be funny.

Shane stepped outside the building, backpack heavy on his shoulders, sketchbook and reading materials in hand, when he nearly walked straight into a broad chest blocking his path. Some books and papers flew to the ground and Shane muttered a quiet apology as he crouched down to pick them up, realising only when the person in front of him kneeled down to help him, who he had run into.

“Ilya,” he gasped, stopping short. His eyes widened in shock at the sudden encounter.

Ilya straightened like he had been caught committing a crime. “Hi.”

There was an awkward, unbearable pause. Ilya kept a careful distance, two of the fallen books in hand and posture open, like he was trying to prove something without saying it out

loud.

He gestured helplessly at Shane's arms-full load of textbooks clutched to his chest. "Those look heavy," he blurted out of nowhere. "Should I... uh... carry them?"

Shane stared at him, unimpressed, grabbing the last two books from Ilya's hands, more roughly than necessary. "No," he said simply, trying very hard to seem unbothered by this whole situation.

"Okay," Ilya replied immediately, falling into stride beside him as Shane hurriedly tried to get away. "Worth asking."

He didn't say anything after that or push further. He just walked with him across the quad in silence until their paths split, offering a timid "Have a good class," like it actually mattered to him.

Shane continued walking without another word or turning back, heart pounding traitorously in his ears.

Ilya watched him go, shoulders slumping slightly, but there was something almost relieved in his expression.

He had officially survived the first encounter and Shane hadn't told him to fuck off.

That felt like a win.

After that, it got worse... or better, depending on who you asked. Shane suddenly started seeing Ilya *everywhere*. Especially in places he had absolutely no business being near.

He noticed him outside buildings Ilya definitely did not have lectures in, leaning against brick walls with a cigarette in hand like this was completely normal behaviour. On the big square before the library, pretending to do stretches after practice, even though the rink was on the complete other side of campus. By the arts building – *the goddamn arts building* – holding a coffee he very clearly did not drink, hockey bag slung lazily over his shoulder.

At first, Shane thought it was a coincidence, then bad luck, then the universe playing a dumb joke at his expense. But after the fourth time he walked out of class to find Ilya waiting at least somewhere nearby – not blocking his path, not cornering him, just *being there* – denial became harder.

Initially, Shane braced himself for something: a speech, an apology, a grand gesture.

But mostly, Ilya just... existed nearby.

Sometimes he'd lean against a wall scrolling through his phone, pretending he hadn't been obviously waiting. Other times he'd greet Shane with a tentative "Hey," and then let the moment breathe, like he was giving Shane the choice to engage or walk away.

"Oh," Ilya said brightly one afternoon, when Shane exited the library only to find him waiting by the steps. "Hey. Fancy seeing you here."

Shane stopped dead, staring the other man down like he had grown a second head. "You don't even have classes on this side of campus," he sighed matter-of-factly, trying his best to sound nonchalant about the fact that Ilya had very obviously made it his mission to infiltrate every hour of his day.

Ilya nodded solemnly. "I know," he said simply, like it was the most normal thing in the world.

Shane paused. He wasn't sure if he should entertain Ilya's antics, but curiosity got the better of him. "Then why are you here?"

Ilya shrugged, seemingly still acting like all of this was a coincidence. "Public space. I'm allowed to choose where I spend my free time."

Shane closed his eyes for a brief, agonized second. He wanted to stay mad, but something about how Ilya was acting almost made a smile creep onto his lips. "You are unbelievable," he commented, forcing his mask back into place and looking at Ilya as neutrally as he could.

But the brunette man had noticed the faint slip in Shane's expression. "I get that a lot," he said, sounding pathetically hopeful in his own ears.

The tone of Ilya's voice prompted the black-haired man to peek up, eyes turning slightly more open and less guarded when he met the other's gaze. "Ilya... Why are you doing this?" he couldn't help but ask. Quite frankly, Shane was tired of acting like none of this affected him at all.

"Because I hurt you. Is worst thing I've ever done," Ilya confessed, then hesitated for a second. When he spoke again, his voice was steady and low. "I don't get to decide when you are done with me but... I just can't bring myself to *not* try."

The agony and hopelessness shimmering in his eyes hit Shane like a jolt of lightning, forcing him to avert his eyes. He searched for something appropriate to say, while the silence between them turned uncomfortable. Eventually, he opened his mouth to reply, just to see that Ilya had already turned to leave with his head hanging in defeat.

Ilya's teammates had become his unofficial accomplices.

It started when Luca texted him one day, out of the blue and ominous, telling him exactly where he could find Shane.

Luca: *library. third floor. left table in the corner. he's sketching!*

Ilya had noted that and studied next to Shane in silence for the rest of the day, glancing at his sketchbook from time to time without successfully getting an actual glimpse at what Shane had been drawing. They hadn't talked and Shane had blissfully ignored his presence the entire time, but he had also not told him to go away or had left himself. Ilya could just hope that this meant something.

Then, also Troy jumped in on the spy activities.

Troy: *café near arts. he's giving sad energy today idk... dumped a whole pack of sugar in his medium latte*

Ilya couldn't help but smile fondly at the message, knowing exactly what Shane probably looked like, sulking in his favourite spot, drinking that abomination from hell that he liked to call coffee. Ilya would rather call it *sugar soup*, which always earned him an angry kitten stare from Shane. However, the memory also made a sharp pain rise in his chest. He stared into the distance, looking at nothing in particular, replaying every interaction they had in a loop. He was wondering if any of this was actually helping or if he just kept reopening wounds. Was he being selfish?

But every time he considered stopping, the image of Shane laughing, blushing or animatedly talking about his interests popped in his mind. There was nothing else he wanted to see as badly as that. Maybe all of this was hopeless, but he had to give it a chance, nonetheless. Even if all he could do was stand there, heart laid bare, and say with his entire presence: *I'm still here. I'm not leaving. I will wait as long as it takes, if you'll still have me.*

That was why he decided to walk to the café at last, a clear mission repeating itself in his head. He made a quick stop by the grocery store, grabbing the essentials for his plan, and made his way there.

Once he arrived, Shane was still sat exactly where Troy had told him. And he hadn't lied when he said that Shane looked sad. Seeing him like this truly broke Ilya's heart. So, he walked in determinedly, taking out the items from his bag and placing them in front of the other man, who looked up with surprise. Ilya wordlessly put chocolate, fresh strawberries and a ginger ale on the table – all of Shane's favourites – knowing that they would hopefully cheer him up.

He didn't ask to sit or wait for the black-haired man to say something; he just gave him a tentative, small smile and left again hurriedly, not wanting Shane to feel uncomfortable.

When Wyatt texted him a few days later, his breath caught as he stared at his phone.

Wyatt: *museum. don't ask.*

The museum was a new low. Ilya could still vividly remember the last – and honestly only – time he had been there, when him and Shane had sort of had their first official date. It had been one of the happiest days in his life. But he also remembered what Shane had told him back then: He usually came here if he needed to think or wanted to not think about anything at all. Standing in the big entry hall now, Ilya wondered if maybe he shouldn't have come. Maybe he should have given Shane some room, knowing that this was his safe space. But it was kind of too late now, so Ilya decided to proceed despite his worries.

Shane was easy enough to find, of course roaming around in the impressionism section. *His favourite*, Ilya thought with a smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

Shane had come to the museum to think and to get lost in all these familiar shapes and colours. He was standing in front of a piece by Monet that he particularly loved. He had once written an entire paper about it last year, because there was just something about it that always made his chest feel strangely full and hollow at the same time. He was admiring the soft brushstrokes, the light caught mid-movement, the colours blurring at the edges like the world didn't quite want to settle into sharp lines... when suddenly a familiar shadow appeared on the floor next to him and a person stepped to his side.

Ilya stood next to him, hands clasped behind his back like he was on a school field trip. He thoroughly studied the painting in front of them, taking in the many brushstrokes of pastel pink and blue, like he was searching for something specific. "I like this one," he said thoughtfully.

Shane scoffed at that, turning his head, incredulous. "You don't even know what you are looking at," he said, shaking his head lightly. "*Hell*, you don't even like art." He meant for the words to sound like a joke, but instead, they accidentally came out more like an accusation.

Ilya just nodded, unwavering, not even trying to fight Shane on this. "You're right. I don't," he said, deep in thought. "But you like it."

"Why—" Shane started, but the brunette man beat him to it.

"I tried looking it up to sound smart for you," Ilya admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. "I still don't get it but... I think I know why *you* like this one."

Shane looked at him with big, brown eyes, unsure of what to say, but Ilya was still looking at the canvas, seriously and carefully, like he was afraid of getting it wrong.

"I think you like it because you don't want... you don't *need* to be told what it means," he started quietly. "You like when something lingers instead. When the art trusts you to meet it halfway and figure out what it means on your own. You don't need it to explain itself to you; you just like that it shows you how it feels and trusts you to understand its heart."

Shane's breath caught, just a little. Ilya swallowed once but the words kept coming out of his mouth, the realisation settling that he wasn't just talking about the painting anymore, it was

almost like he was describing... *them*. Shane didn't want Ilya to explain himself; he wanted to understand on his own what Ilya was truly feeling. So, the curly-haired man continued, undeterred.

"Everything about this painting is soft," Ilya went on. "The colours and even the edges. Nothing is sharp or loud, but it still says something somehow. It might be quiet, but it stays with you."

He finally glanced over to Shane then, eyes searching, hesitant but sure in the way that mattered.

"You always notice things like that," he said. "The stuff people miss because they're too busy looking for something obvious. Not you. You let things be complicated and then let them come to you."

You've always seen me for who I am, when everyone else was just looking at my outward persona, he didn't say out loud. You liked me even when I was complicated and showed you my scars and sharp edges... because you wanted to understand my heart, too.

"And," Ilya added, "I think you like that it doesn't demand anything from you. It just exists and lets you do the same. I think that is kind of brave... Like it's saying, *you're allowed to take your time*."

There was a pause. Ilya didn't know if the other man was understanding what he was trying to say. He could only hope that his smart Shane was reading in between the lines that he was offering him.

"And *I* like this painting," Ilya said finally, voice barely above a murmur, "because it reminds me of you."

Shane's dumb, stubborn heart stuttered in his chest.

"You don't try to impress anyone," Ilya said quietly. "You don't take up space just to be seen. But when you are there... people can feel it. Or at least, *I feel it*." His throat bobbed as he swallowed thickly. "You're gentle and careful. And there's so much hiding under the surface that you don't show unless you trust someone."

His hands curled into fists at his sides, like he was holding himself back.

"But yeah... That is why," he finished, clearing his throat awkwardly. "At least... Is how I see it."

The silence between them felt different after that, fragile but full.

"Ilya," Shane whispered, and the brunette's heart skipped a beat, hearing him say his name like that, with so much emotion but also... longing. "You can't just say things like that..."

"If you tell me to stop, I will," Ilya replied carefully, the implication clear in the air. If Shane told him to stop any of this, he would.

Instead, Shane stared at the painting again, but it had changed. Or maybe *he* had. His chest felt tight, not with panic this time, but with something dangerously close to understanding. A realisation quietly but intently let itself be heard in the depths of his heart:

To be loved is to be known.

The bus ride home was a blur that Shane barely registered. Everything around him felt unreal, like he was moving through a world that hadn't caught up to him yet.

Shane sat by the window with his backpack wedged between his feet, forehead resting lightly against the cool glass as the city slid past in softened streaks of grey and gold light. His reflection stared back at him in the glass, tired and hollow-eyed, but he no longer felt like drowning. His thoughts refused to stay in one place, ricocheting between memory and feeling, between what had just been said and what had been meant.

The museum still clung to him: The hush of the galleries, the soft colours burned into the back of his eyes, Ilya's voice low and careful beside him. Every time his thoughts brushed too close to that moment, his chest tightened in a way that felt dangerously unsteady.

And yet, Ilya's voice lingered in his mind. The way he had spoken like he was afraid of misstepping, afraid of asking too much. Like he wasn't trying to convince Shane of anything at all, just... offering himself honestly and letting Shane decide what to do with it.

He couldn't untangle all of it yet. His brain kept skipping and looping in between hurt and anger, but now also a creeping feeling of understanding, belief and... trust? It was too much to hold all at once. His thoughts refused to line up into anything coherent, and the harder he tried to force them, the more slippery they became.

By the time Shane got off the bus, he knew he had to do the one thing he was sure would help give him clarity. He practically bolted to his dorm on autopilot, fumbling with his keys and then shouldering the door open. He barely bothered turning on the light before dropping his bag on the floor, crossing the room in three long strides and flopping face-down onto his bed. For a second, he just lay there, breathing into his pillow, wondering briefly how loud it would be for his neighbours if he decided to scream into it too.

Instead, he rolled around, mattress dipping beneath him as he stared up at the ceiling for a long, breathless moment. He needed to clear his head *now* or he would *die*. Maybe he was being a little dramatic, but his fingers still reached blindly for his sketchbook.

The weight of it in his hands was familiar and grounding. He flipped it open without really looking, already moving to find a pencil. The scratch of graphite against paper filled the quiet room, soft and rhythmic, and slowly his thoughts began to loosen. *Thankfully.*

He didn't think about what he was drawing. He never did in the beginning as the first lines always came easily to him. His hand moved lightly over the page, filling it with rough lines and forms that didn't make sense for now, but he knew that they would eventually take shape. Drawing had never required permission from his thoughts. It went straight past them, straight to wherever everything lived before it could be named. He focused on motion and pressure instead. The way his wrist moved almost without instruction, muscle memory taking over where conscious thought failed him. His mind wandered as his hand worked, drifting back through the day whether he wanted it to or not.

The museum flashed before his eyes again, and with it, the way Ilya had stood beside him, hands clasped behind his back like he didn't trust himself to reach out. The way he had looked at the painting –*actually looked*– like he was trying to learn a language just to speak it back to Shane. The way he had spoken so carefully, like every word mattered – not because he was performing, but because he meant them.

You're allowed to take your time, he had said.

Shane's grip around the pencil tightened momentarily, pressing down harder and darkening the line. He frowned slightly, not lifting his eyes from the page.

He had taken his time.

God, he had.

He had taken his time, shut himself away, torn everything apart until only the bare truth remained. And now that the dust had settled, now that his fear had loosened its hold, he could finally see it clearly.

He was still angry. The bet hadn't magically stopped hurting just because Ilya had said the right things in the right tone. And yet, there had been that awful, gentle pull – the same one that had drawn him to Ilya in the first place. The same one, he had tried so tirelessly to cauterize out of himself to no success.

You believe him, a quiet voice whispered inside of him, and he pressed his eyes shut as he swallowed.

He did believe him, Shane realised. He hadn't wanted to admit it out loud, but somewhere between their fight and now, his worst fear had loosened its grip. He believed that nothing had happened that night and now he also believed that Ilya was honest about his feelings. Ilya actually liked him.

This meant that the version of Ilya he had accused – the one who would take advantage – didn't exist.

What *did* exist was the boy who kept showing up anyway. Who waited without demanding. Who learned about Shane and his interests without needing credit.

Shane's pencil slowed, hand hesitating and hovering for the first time since he had started. Something about the shape on the page felt... familiar. He frowned slightly, attention

sharpening as something about the page tugged at him. He looked down and blinked, finally letting himself see what he had been drawing this whole time.

His breath caught in his lungs

It was a face.

Not fully rendered yet, but undeniable: The slope of a nose he knew by heart, the curve of a mouth he had kissed before, curls falling into a forehead he had brushed back more than once. The line of the jaw, soft where it mattered, strong where it counted. The intensity in his eyes that Shane had learned how to read long before the other ever realised that he was looking. Even unfinished, even half-formed, there was no mistaking it.

He had drawn Ilya.

He stared down at the page, pulse suddenly loud in his ears, as if the realisation had physically knocked the wind out of him. “*Oh*,” he whispered, barely audible.

He hadn’t meant to. That was the thing.

This wasn’t intentional or some indulgent fantasy he had allowed himself in a moment of weakness. His defences hadn’t just slipped; they had been bypassed entirely. His hand had gone where his heart already was, long before his brain could intervene.

Of course, Ilya had worked his way back inside his heart.

Not through grand gestures, apologies or explanations, but through patience and consistency. Through being there again and again without asking for anything in return. Because if there was one thing Shane Hollander loved, it was predictability. Even if it came in the form of Ilya Rozanov.

He flipped back some pages to the sketches from a few days ago, from when he had been sitting in the library. Ilya had appeared out of nowhere – as he so often had lately – and settled in opposite of him, studying in silence. Shane had briefly wondered how he had found him, especially since he had deliberately chosen a completely different spot this time. At this point, he was convinced Ilya had some kind of tracking superpower.

Shane hadn’t dared to say anything back then, afraid his voice would betray him and crack. He had made sure though, that the other man couldn’t see what he was working on.

What he had drawn back then stared back at him now: Two pages full of Ilya, sketched in different positions – playing hockey, a close-up of his face – like he was his goddamn muse. You could say that Shane had been grieving in a multitude of different ways this week.

Now, Shane exhaled shakily and pressed the sketchbook to his chest as if to keep the truth from spilling out too fast. He was still hurt, but he wasn’t angry anymore. He let himself fall back against the pillows, eyes burning and chest aching with something dangerously alive. For the first time since everything had shattered, the thought of Ilya didn’t feel like a wound anymore, it felt like a choice.

He could close himself back up again, pretend this didn't mean anything, that his body and his art had simply betrayed him. He could stay safe in the numbness he had perfected over the years, where nothing could touch him deeply enough to hurt.

Or... he could risk to hope again.

He could choose to risk believing that something real could grow from something broken. That sincerity could coexist with mistakes. That love didn't have to arrive perfectly to be worth fighting for.

Shane tilted his head, looking back down at the sketchbook, at the soft, unfinished lines of the portrait he had drawn. It was like Ilya had said in the museum: The drawing didn't need to explain itself; Shane understood it on his own.

He closed the book, slowly and carefully. His answer settled quietly but firmly in his chest: No, he hadn't fully forgiven Ilya just yet. But he was ready to feel again. And he was ready to stop pretending that Ilya hadn't already found his way back to him.

Tomorrow, he would decide what to do with that. But for now, he lay there in the dim light of his room, heart racing, pencil still warm in his hand – knowing, finally, that whatever came next would be a risk. And he was choosing it anyway.

The rink was almost empty when Shane arrived.

The building was quieter than usual. There was no chatter or noise at this hour, just the hum of the overhead lights that whirled softly, casting pale reflections across the ice, freshly resurfaced and gleaming like something untouched. The air smelled faintly of cold metal and something clean. Shane lingered by the entrance for a second longer than necessary, hands tucked into the sleeves of his oversized hoodie, heart thudding so loudly he was sure it would echo in this big arena.

It was Thursday afternoon; ice hockey practice had ended about fifteen minutes ago, but for once it had been Shane who had gotten himself an accomplice: Svetlana hadn't even hesitated when he had made Rose ask her when he could potentially get Ilya alone. *He does solo drills every Thursday after practice*, Rose had forwarded her girlfriend's message.

Of course he did, Shane thought, smiling to himself. *That over-achieving show-off*.

He swallowed once and then finally stepped inside.

He spotted him immediately. Ilya was still on the ice, moving through drills alone, skating hard and fast like he was trying to outrun something. Shane could see all the way from here how tense his shoulders were, like he was carrying something heavy that he refused to set

down. It looked intense: No music, no teammates, no distractions. Just the sharp scrape of blades cutting into ice, his heavy breaths fogging in the cold.

He didn't see Shane at first. But he never noticed his surroundings when he was like this – all focus, muscle memory and quiet intensity.

Shane crossed to the bench and set his bag down carefully. From it, he pulled out a small container of strawberries – washed and bright red against the white plastic – and a second bag filled with sour candy, neon wrappers crinkling softly in his hands.

Then he sat down and waited, watching intently as the other boy skated his laps, too caught up in his passion to notice anything around him. Shane loved seeing Ilya in his element like that.

The brunette man finally skated to a stop, breathing heavily with his hands clutched to his knees. When he finally straightened and looked up, their eyes met across the rink.

For a split second, Ilya just stared at him as if he had seen a ghost, and Shane involuntarily held his breath.

Ilya's expression shuttered, surprise giving way to something wary, as though he was already bracing for impact, like when he would crash right into the dasher boards during a game. He skated closer, slower now, before stepping off the ice and pulling his helmet off in one swift motion. His long curls sprung free, still sticking slightly to his forehead before he ran a hand through his hair to loosen them up a bit.

"Shane," he breathed out, still perplexed. "You... I didn't think– How did you know where I–"

The black-haired man gave a timid smile. "You're not the only one who can magically appear at someone's hiding spot," he said. His voice wasn't shaking and he was very proud of that. "I asked around."

Ilya huffed out a small breath. "Of course you did. Smart as always."

Shane looked up at him from where he was sitting, the space between them heavy with everything unspoken. His gaze dropped to the bench next to him: The strawberries and sour candy sat there as proof that Shane had come here with the intention of staying for a while. He indicated for Ilya to sit.

"I'm not here to fight. I brought... a peace offering," he said finally, sliding the green bag of candy over to Ilya. "I just... needed to see you."

Ilya nodded once, his blue eyes wide. "Okay." He didn't dare to move or even take a piece from the bag Shane was offering him.

"I wanted to start with saying," Shane continued, steadier now, "that I am sorry for the things I said that morning." That, Ilya hadn't expected. "Some of them... crossed a line. I was angry and I wanted you to hurt the way I did."

“You had every right, Shane,” Ilya interrupted him immediately, but the other man held up a hand to stop him.

“No. Please,” Shane cut in gently. “Let me say this.”

The brunette man couldn’t help but still at that. Shane took a deep breath.

“I was angry because you hurt me. And I won’t pretend that didn’t matter because that bet...” His mouth twisted in disdain. “It hurt so bad. How could you ever agree to something so stupid?”

This whole time he had been brave, saying what he wanted to with a calmness that even surprised him, but now he could feel his eyes get glassy. He blinked rapidly in hopes of forcing the tears to go away.

Ilya nodded, eyes downcast. He knew it had been more of a rhetorical question, but he decided to answer anyway. “I know,” he whispered. I should have never agreed to it. It was careless and dumb and... I hurt you. Is my biggest regret in life.”

Shane held his gaze, waiting.

“The truth is...” Ilya paused, as if he wasn’t sure if he could admit his next words out loud.

But then the dam finally broke.

“I’ve been in love with you since first year,” he blurted out, the words tumbling over each other like he had been holding them back for years. “Before you ever noticed me or knew my name, before I even *was someone*. Before we spoke for the first time...”

Shane’s head snapped around to him so quickly at that, he almost pulled a muscle. His eyes were wide with shock and disbelief, his lips mouthing a faint ‘*What?*’ but he appeared to have lost his voice completely.

Ilya swallowed hard, continuing undeterred. “I came to Canada and everything was new and loud and wrong,” he said, voice uneven now. “During orientation week, I had no idea where I was going, I didn’t know how to talk to anyone. And then I saw you.”

He closed his eyes as if to conjure the memory to show up in his imagination.

“You were sitting in that lecture hall during the introductory course like you just belonged there. Like the place had been waiting for you all this time. You were laughing with people you’d just met, like it was easy. Like the world didn’t weigh on you... the way it did on me.”

Ilya’s hands curled at his sides, pressing them so harshly into fists his knuckles turned pale. “I remember thinking, *Oh. He’s fascinating.*”

He shook his head, eyes shining. “I didn’t think you would ever look at me. And I couldn’t allow myself to want you. There were so many things that had to go right first. Expectations from home that I could never even dream to fulfill... So I just... watched.”

His voice dropped slightly, as if he was ashamed to admit it out loud, but he pushed through. When he spoke up again in the next moment, his voice sounded broken and raw.

“Why do you think I never got with anyone? Why I never showed interest in anyone that tried?” he asked quietly. “It wasn’t because I didn’t notice them. It was because I only ever had eyes for you. From the very beginning.”

Ilya exhaled shakily, like that confession cost him his entire sanity.

“And then after first year, I came back from break, and you had changed. I know why now, but back then I felt even more like I shouldn’t try to barge into your life. So I stayed quiet and convinced myself that wanting you from afar was already more than I deserved.”

A single tear escaped his eyes, but for once he didn’t try to hide it. He let it roll down his cheek, anticipating it to drop to the floor and soak into the concrete, where it would dry up and be forgotten. But to his surprise, a warm, gentle hand caught it in time and wiped it away. He found Shane looking at him with brown doe eyes, also filled to the brim with unshed tears.

“I thought I was being *so subtle* about it but, as it turned out a few days ago, my friends knew all along.” A weak, self-aware smile crossed his lips. “Is why they made bet in the first place... It wasn’t to make fun of you; they thought it would push me to finally *do something*.”

He put his hand over Shane’s, that was still resting on his face, and carefully closed his fingers around it, leaning into the touch. “They meant well, but it was so, so stupid. I already scolded them about that.”

Shane made a sound that almost sounded like a giggle underneath his quiet sobs. “But at the same time, I kind of need to thank them, because despite all the shit that happened after, they were right. I finally worked up the courage to approach you. And when you finally started talking to me, laughing with me, looking at me like maybe *—just maybe—* you could like me too... I just fell harder.”

“But I had never thought about the possibility that you could want me too,” he went on softly. “So when it started becoming real, I panicked. I didn’t know how to tell you the truth without ruining everything.”

A second passed, heavy and unforgiving. Ilya’s eyes lost focus, staring blankly ahead. “And then I destroyed it all anyway.”

He let out a breath that sounded almost like a laugh, but there was no humour in it. All the while, his shoulders sagged, like the words had taken something vital with them.

“I know none of this changes anything,” he went on, voice rough now. “I know it doesn’t fix what I did and I also know that you probably can’t forgive me. And you shouldn’t have to.”

He swallowed hard, eyes dropping to the floor between them.

“I broke your trust. I let you wander in dark, and that is on me. I didn’t protect you. I didn’t tell you truth when it mattered.”

There was another pause, longer this time.

“I know you will never trust me again,” he said quietly, his voice barely above a whisper. “And maybe you shouldn’t.”

He lifted his gaze back to Shane, and there was no pleading left in his eyes now. Just honesty and exhaustion.

“I just needed you to know,” he finished, “that none of it was fake. Even if it doesn’t matter now.”

He fell quiet after that, inhaling and exhaling deeply, like he had been holding his breath during the entire speech. He said everything that he had carried for years and didn’t expect anything in return.

Shane sat there for a long moment, simply staring at the man in front of him, failing miserably to calmly catalogue all this new information somewhere in the back of his mind. For the first time in a very long time, he was stunned speechless.

You see, Shane Hollander loved predictability. And for once, he was presented with something that he never could’ve guessed in a million years – and strangely, *impossibly*, against everything he believed to know about himself, he wasn’t mad about it. Instead, he found this irregularity oddly grounding as it cleared up the fog in his head.

He still hadn’t found his voice back, but something inside of him shifted.

Finding out about the bet had hurt. The carelessness and secrecy behind it all had kept him up at night more often in these past days than he would’ve liked to admit. But now, he learned that maybe it hadn’t been as rash and thoughtless as he once believed. Hearing the context now, the original idea had almost been... sweet. Incredibly dumb, yes, but Ilya’s friends and teammates had meant well, trying to take care of their oblivious captain. Shane hadn’t been a pawn in a ruthless game, but rather the unintended centre of a clumsy, misguided attempt to give Ilya the courage to reach for something he had convinced himself was impossible.

Ilya’s words rearranged everything in a new light and finally, Shane could see it clearly.

The bet was never meant as some sort of sick joke or manipulation. When you stripped everything back to the deepest, innermost core of it, what remained was a boy who had spent years watching from the sidelines, taught not to want anything he hadn’t earned. A young boy who was raised on silence and expectations from his father, on the warped truth that love came with conditions and consequences and was never given out freely.

When Ilya had finally wanted something – *someone* – for himself, he hadn’t known how to ask.

It was funny how forgiveness didn't arrive like a clean slate. Instead, it snuck in like this – with understanding and the active choice to give in right here and now.

So when Shane finally lifted his head, his next words were sure and clearer than ever. “I forgive you, Ilya.”

The curly-haired man opposite of him blinked in surprise as if he was certain he misheard. His eyes were still big and glassy when he spoke, looking at Shane in utter disbelief, like he had said something ridiculous and absurd. “I don't deserve that.”

Shane's eyes softened in response. He could see the way Ilya still carried those invisible rules bestowed on him by his father, rigid and unforgiving, learned long before Shane had ever entered his life. Love was still something Ilya treated like a reward you had to earn, not something you were allowed to expect openly. Like if he didn't perform well enough, didn't give enough, didn't *suffer* enough, he wasn't allowed to keep it.

“Maybe not, who knows,” Shane said gently. Then, with a small, crooked smile that held more resolve than doubt, he added, “But *I* think you do, so I'm giving you my forgiveness anyway.”

“Shane...” Ilya said his name almost like a protest, quiet and strained, as if he was trying to stop him from saying something untrue. His eyebrows knit together in confusion, his head shaking almost imperceptibly, like he genuinely couldn't fathom why Shane would say something so generous, so *impossible*.

“Do I need to remind you that you once told me I'm the smartest person you know?” the black-haired man asked, lifting his chin as if to challenge Ilya. “If I say you deserve this, you can't fight me on it. You don't get to argue with me.”

He paused, breath hitching just slightly before he continued more honestly, “And besides... I don't think I can keep pretending I don't like you anymore.”

Ilya just blinked again, once, twice, like his brain needed a second longer to catch up to the words.

“You don't like me,” he said quietly, almost testing the sentence, as if he expected it to fall apart the moment he said it out loud.

Shane let out a soft laugh, shaking his head faintly. “Yeah. I do,” he said, putting emphasis on each word. “I think I like you maybe a little too much.”

Ilya's breath hitched ever so slightly. “You said you hated me,” he whispered, like he was remembering that moment vividly in his mind, like he had replayed that sentence in his head over and over again. “I would not blame you if you did.”

“I was angry because you hurt me,” Shane explained, voice steady but gentle, leaving no room for doubt. He paused, giving the truth space to settle between them. “But I don't hate you.”

He took another breath, deeper this time.

“I think I might actually even... love you,” Shane admitted. “Even if we don’t make any sense together.”

Ilya looked at him and noticeably swallowed. The vulnerability in the other man’s voice seemed to knock the air straight from his lungs, and for a moment he just stared at him, eyes shining, like he was afraid to move and shatter whatever fragile thing had just formed between them.

“And is that what you want?” he asked carefully, each word measured. “To be together?”

Shane didn’t even hesitate. The answer was already there, waiting for him to declare it.

“So much,” he replied truthfully. “So much it scares me.”

Something in Ilya’s expression broke open at that. He turned his head slightly, murmuring something in Russian under his breath, the words slipping out before he could stop them.

The other man frowned. “What did you say?”

Ilya looked back at him, eyes warm and unguarded now, like there was nowhere left to hide. “I love you,” he said.

Shane’s heart stuttered painfully in his chest. “Say it again in Russian, please,” he breathed.

Ilya’s voice softened, reverent and sure, like he was finally saying something he had carried for years without permission. “*Ya tebya lyublyu.*”

That was enough for Shane to finally lose his composure. He closed the distance between them in a single, decisive movement, leaning into Ilya’s space like it was exactly where he belonged. The bench creaked softly as Shane shifted his weight forward, strawberries and sour candy still sitting between them, forgotten the second Shane’s hand came up to Ilya’s face.

For half a heartbeat, Ilya froze in place – not because he didn’t want this, but because he hadn’t dared to believe it would actually happen. And then, Shane kissed him.

It was slow and deliberate at first. A kiss meant to say *I’m here, I’m choosing you, I’m not going anywhere*. Shane pressed his mouth to Ilya’s with a tenderness that made Ilya exhale shakily against his lips, like he had been holding his breath since first year and was only just remembering how to breathe again.

Ilya’s hands found the other man’s waist instinctively, gripping the fabric of his hoodie desperately, signaling him to get up from the bench. His other hand slid up Shane’s back, pulling him closer and closer, until Shane finally moved around the treats sitting between them and let himself sink down on Ilya’s lap without thinking – a familiar motion, a quiet callback to the first time they had crossed this line together.

It felt right... like coming home.

Shane smiled into the kiss when he felt it – the faint taste of cigarettes on Ilya’s mouth, lingering and unmistakable. It didn’t bother him in the slightest this time, though. Because it tasted like Ilya. Like late nights and stolen moments and something real that refused to be denied.

Ilya, on the other hand, knew the sweetness instantly.

Strawberry.

It was always strawberry with Shane, soft and bright and warm, like something meant to be held carefully. Ilya kissed him deeper, slower, like he was memorising it all over again, like he was afraid the world might take it away if he didn’t. Over and over again, he murmured Russian *I love you*’s against Shane’s lips, voice breaking slightly as his words got muffled by their mouths clashing.

Shane huffed out a breathless laugh, the sound dissolving into another kiss. Ilya chased it, pressing soft pecks to the corners of Shane’s mouth, then his cheeks, then the bridge of his nose – lingering there, kissing over freckles like he was tracing them, like each one was something precious he needed to remember.

“I love you,” Ilya whispered again, this time against Shane’s skin. And again. And again.

Shane’s hands slid into Ilya’s curls, fingers threading through them gently but surely, holding him there. He tipped his head back just enough to give Ilya access to his jaw and his neck, letting himself be kissed wherever the other could reach.

He giggled again, quiet and giddy, overwhelmed in the best possible way.

“I know,” Shane breathed, resting his forehead against Ilya’s, their noses brushing lightly. “I love you so much.”

Ilya held him like he couldn’t imagine ever letting go – arms wrapped around him, solid and grounding, like he was making up for every moment he hadn’t been allowed to want this.

The rink stayed quiet around them.

The echoes of practice had long faded, the ice cooling beneath the lights, the world reduced to this moment right here and the way they fit together like this had always been inevitable.

And this time, there was no fear left in it.

Only warmth.

Only love.

Only them.

I can't believe it's over you guys 😭

I want to thank every single one of you once again for all the continuous support that you showed me throughout this fic :(I had SO much fun writing it!! thank you for all the kudos but more importantly, thank you for all the sweet comments on each chapter 😊❤️ I waited for them to fly in every time and it quite literally has been my favourite part of the day to read your thoughts and reply to you <333 I'm super sad to see this fic finish because it's been my BABY these past weeks and I loved teasing you with each update 😞 The more I hope that the ending was satisfactory and fulfilling!!

Maybe you should keep an eye on the chapter count for some time because maybeeeeee I love them too much and wrote a little epilogue, hypothetically 🙄

Otherwise, I hope to see some of you in my next fic (whatever and whenever that may be), I'm thinking maybeeee figure skater ilya and hockey player shane..... BUT WHO KNOWS

Until then, feel free to follow me on X @wooziunivrse if you want to scream about hollanov together!!

Chapter 8: epilogue

Chapter Notes

hello my loves <3

as teased in the last chapter, I wrote a little epilogue for you guys!!

Mind you, the last chapter is still the “official” ending of the story, this is kind of just like a short and sweet bonus chapter because I wanted to write about hollanov being boyfriends, happy and in love 🥰

I hope you enjoy this little sweet treat 🍪

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

The weeks following their conversation at the rink passed with surprising ease. So much so, that Shane realised something odd had happened.

He was happy.

Genuinely so.

Not in the quiet, tentative way he had been stuck in for the past three years – not the kind that came with a mental checklist of things that could possibly go wrong. No. It was the easy kind of happiness. The kind that snuck up on him while he wasn't paying attention and now refused to ever leave. In a weird way, he felt like his old self again, but at the same time, like a completely new person altogether. It was like being with Ilya had somehow reignited a spark inside of him that he thought he had lost a long time ago... and it felt good.

That newfound warmth in him announced itself in the most random moments: When they studied together, walked together, touched in small, absent ways – fingers at wrists, hands at waists, foreheads pressed together when they thought no one was looking.

But the first time Shane consciously felt it blooming in his chest was the day he told Rose and Hayden:

He hadn't exactly planned how to tell them. But when they had sat in the café together – Rose cross-legged with a mug of tea, Hayden stretched out on his chair like he owned the place and Ilya unintentionally walking in through the front door – the moment had just felt right. Shane had seen Ilya noticing them and awkwardly staying in the entry way, frozen in place like he was unsure of how to proceed, and it had made a smile spread on his lips.

He had shifted his eyes back to his friends before blurting it out, voice failing miserably to sound casual and bursting out incredibly giddy instead. “So... Ilya and I are together.”

For a millisecond, Rose had gone completely still. Then she had gasped, dropped her mug to the table – miraculously without spilling it – and launched herself across it. “I *knew* it,” she exclaimed fiercely, arms tight around Shane’s shoulders. “I *knew* he was in love with you.”

Shane had grinned from ear to ear, signalling Ilya, who had still been standing by the door like he wanted to blend in with the furniture, to come over. The curly-haired man’s eyes had widened for a second, pointing at himself and mouthing a timid ‘*Are you sure?*’, but Shane had enthusiastically waved at him to join them, not a doubt in his eyes.

So, Ilya had slowly made his way toward their table, smiling softly at Shane with every step he took. Rose had ripped her head around when she had seen who was approaching and let out a hilarious squeal. She hadn’t even let Ilya fully arrive, when she had jumped up and hugged him with brutal, loving force.

When she had finally let him go, Ilya had stood there for a second longer with an adorably perplexed expression plastered on his face, his mind seemingly trying to make sense of the warm welcome and Rose’s hearty attitude.

“Uhm. Hi,” Ilya had said flatly, waving his hand uselessly at the others sitting at the table.

In contrast to Rose, Hayden had just squinted his eyes at him suspiciously. “I’m just going to say this once and you better hope I don’t have to tell you again,” he had said dangerously calm. “If you ever hurt Shane again, I will end you. Emotionally. Socially. And possibly physically.”

Ilya had wondered for a split second how the other man was planning on doing that, considering Ilya was remarkably bigger than Hayden, but something about the dark glint burning in his eyes had made him believe it. Thus, he had nodded immediately. “That is fair.”

Rose, wiping at her eyes, had beamed with pure joy, blissfully ignoring Hayden’s animosity. “Yeah, yeah. Anyway! Now that that’s settled, hear me out.” Her hands had wildly gestured in the air, unable to contain her excitement. “Double dates! With me and Lana. It’s mandatory, I’m not asking.”

Shane had laughed then – *really laughed* – open and candid, like he hadn’t in quite some time, and something in his chest had finally loosened.

Thinking about it now made him smile as he walked across campus with Ilya, fingers loosely intertwined. Winter had finally passed, and spring slowly blossomed all around, the early sun warming their backs pleasantly. Shane was rambling about an upcoming paper, hands moving animatedly as he spoke, and Ilya listened intently like every single word mattered.

“You know,” Ilya said thoughtfully, squeezing his hand, “I still do not understand how you write thirty pages about one painting.”

Shane scoffed, bumping his shoulder into Ilya’s. “It was only twenty-five pages last time. But I could’ve written more.”

“I am both impressed and deeply concerned,” Ilya said solemnly.

Shane laughed, the sound bright and unguarded, and Ilya looked at him like he had just been handed the sun.

They didn't necessarily hide that they were together, but they didn't make a big spectacle of it either. No dramatic announcement, no long explanations. They just... existed together, wrapped up in their own little world. Shane would sit in Ilya's lap on the quad while he sketched, legs draped comfortably over his thighs. Ilya would bring him coffee in the mornings, though he still argued that it was all wrong, sweetened beyond reason like this, and Shane pretended to complain while drinking every last drop. All of it felt natural. Like something just clicking into place.

Which was why it was only a matter of time before the team caught on.

It happened one day at the rink after practice. Shane sat on one of the benches, flipping through his sketchbook while he waited for Ilya to finish for the day. He had been there before, but this time it was different: In the instances before he had never come alone to the arena, except for the days when Ilya did his solo drills after everyone else had already left.

So when the ice hockey practice finally finished, Shane barely noticed how the place went quiet.

Luca was the first to clock it. He froze mid-sentence, eyes narrowing as he recognised the familiar figure sitting behind the boards. Shane had walked over to the barricade, smiling at someone on the ice. Luca's gaze followed his captain as he skated toward the other man, immediately leaning down to press a kiss into Shane's hair like it was instinct.

"Oh?" Luca said slowly. "*Oh.*"

Like on autopilot, he skated over to them as fast as he could.

Wyatt and Troy turned in confusion as their teammate bolted toward the benches. But as soon as they saw what was unfolding before their eyes, they followed suit, chasing after Luca as well. They all came to an abrupt stop in front of Ilya and Shane, frozen crystals splashing in the air as their blades cut roughly through the ice.

"What the—" Ilya started, but Troy lifted up his hand to stop him halfway.

He was still heaving breaths when he spoke up next, bent over in exhaustion with his hands on his thighs from how fast he had skated here.

"Are you kidding me?" he shouted, pointing wildly between Shane and Ilya. "It *worked*? And you didn't tell us *anything*?"

Ilya stiffened slightly. "If you are about to say something stupid—"

"You're dating, right?" Wyatt cut in, stunned. "You're *actually* dating."

Shane glanced at Ilya's friends, amusement written all over his face. He wasn't mad at them because of the bet anymore but seeing them this flabbergasted now was still kind of funny and satisfactory to him.

“Is that really so shocking?” he asked teasingly.

Luca groaned, dragging a hand down his face. “We almost ruined this. We nearly destroyed *love* itself! Not telling us is pure evil, cap.”

Ilya shook his head, entertained by this whole situation. “Is what you get for scheming behind my back and making up stupid bet. Now, we are even.”

Wyatt laughed softly, shaking his head. “So... you’re okay? Both of you?”

Shane met Ilya’s eyes for a moment before answering, something warm and certain passing between them. “Yeah,” he said simply. “We are.”

Luca sighed, relief flooding his features. “Thank God. I have been carrying guilt like a Victorian ghost.”

Ilya snorted despite himself.

“I literally stopped believing in love, the second you two stopped talking to each other,” Wyatt whined theatrically. “This is a *miracle* for me. Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander, the eighth Wonder of the World.”

Ilya chuckled at how dramatic his friends were. “Okay, okay. We get it.”

“No, Ilya, you don’t! You’ve been in love with him since... since the *ice age*,” Troy exclaimed, clutching his chest. “I deserve partial credit.”

“You deserve silence,” Ilya said flatly, but there was no real bite to it, his arm sliding around Shane’s waist, protective and sure.

The comment earned a round of groans and playful protests, but the edge of the moment had already dulled. The initial shock faded into easy laughter, teasing and half-hearted apologies directed at Shane for being stupid hockey jocks.

“We really *are* sorry,” Wyatt said at one point, more sincere than before.

Shane just smiled, small but genuine, shaking his head. “I know,” he said, and he meant it.

Eventually, the team drifted off toward the locker rooms, still talking over one another, shoving shoulders and arguing about nothing in particular. Ilya lingered only a second longer, nudging Shane’s waist once before letting go.

“I’ll be quick,” he murmured.

Later, as they left the rink together, Shane’s hand slipped into the other man’s pocket, fingers curling around Ilya’s. “So... That went well, I would say?”

Ilya squeezed his hand reassuringly. “They are idiots,” he said lovingly. “And they already love you. When we were in shower just now, they kept telling me to better treat you right... like they are my dads.”

Both of them laughed at that.

“They’re never going to shut up about this, right?” Shane asked.

Ilya lightly rubbed his thumb over the back of Shane’s hand. “Let them,” he murmured. “I waited years. I can handle teasing.”

“You know, speaking of teasing... Rose is already planning those double dates,” Shane said, smiling to himself. “She’s super serious about this.”

Ilya leaned down, brushing a soft, fleeting kiss over the freckles on his cheek. “I will endure anything,” he murmured, “if it means keeping you. And if it makes you happy.”

In response, Shane leaned into his side, head resting against the brunette’s shoulder as they stepped out into the evening light. The sun was setting slowly at the horizon, tinting the city in warm oranges and yellows. Almost like a painting.

For the first time in a long while, the world felt at peace.

“Very happy,” Shane whispered.

And this time, he let himself believe it.

It was another Thursday when Shane sat in the stands above the rink, sketchbook open on his knees like always. Coming to Ilya’s solo practices had sort of become his thing at this point. The faint hum of the ice resurfacer still lingered, the scent of the boards and cold air mingling with the soft tang of metal from the goalposts – it all had become familiar and comforting in a way that reminded him of all the hours he had spent here in the past months.

He drew with quiet focus, pencil gliding lightly over the paper, capturing the motion and tilt of Ilya’s body as he moved across the ice. Each line tried to hold a fraction of him: The tilt of his shoulders, the way his curls fell into his eyes, the curve of concentration in his jaw, the energy that made it impossible to look away. Shane’s hand moved automatically, almost reverently, as if he were preserving a part of Ilya that existed only for him.

The brunette man was in the middle of his drills, gliding effortlessly on the ice, stick tapping, edges cutting into the smooth surface. Shane watched him in awe – no longer as the elusive, untouchable boy he had once only known from afar, but as someone who had chosen him over and over again. As someone he *loved*.

He continued his sketch, lines forming the slope of Ilya’s shoulders, the slight arch of his back as he leaned into a turn. He paused only to breathe in, heart softening at the sight. Shane could never grow tired of seeing Ilya like this, so free and in his natural element.

The other man skated over to him then, stopping for a quick water break near the boards. “Hey,” Ilya’s voice broke Shane’s concentration. He looked up, cheeks warming at seeing his hot, sweaty boyfriend up close.

Ilya leaned over the barricade slightly to give Shane a short but sweet kiss, when he caught a glimpse of the other’s sketchbook without meaning to. What he saw there on the pages made his breath catch in his throat.

“You... drew me,” he said softly, disbelief and admiration mixed in his tone.

Shane looked at him, a familiar heat creeping up the back of his neck, and shrugged, a small smile tugging at his lips. “Yeah. You are kind of like... my muse, actually,” he said, tilting his book a bit so Ilya could see the drawings better.

Ilya blinked at him. “Your... what?”

Shane huffed out a quiet laugh. “My muse,” he repeated. “It’s—” He paused, searching for the right words, then tried again. “It’s the person who inspires you. The one your brain and heart naturally keep coming back to, even when you don’t mean to. Someone who makes you want to create things.”

Ilya’s expression softened, something warm and almost reverent settling over his features as the meaning landed. “So,” he said slowly, carefully, “I make you draw?”

Shane smiled, eyes fond. “You make it impossible not to.”

Ilya’s lips parted slightly as he studied the lines, his chest rising and falling a little faster. “I never knew I lived in your art like that,” he murmured, voice low.

Shane shrugged, eyes still focused on his work, a little shy but proud. “You have since we met,” he said honestly. “I just... I just finally feel like I can show it to you.”

The other man’s hand brushed against the edge of the sketchbook, fingertips lingering, and Shane felt the warmth against his skin. “Is perfect,” Ilya said, almost to himself. “You have always seen me. *Really* seen me.”

Shane’s chest swelled at that, his face soft but sincere when he carefully chose his next words. “It’d be a shame not to,” he said gently. “Because seeing you... *loving* you is the easiest thing I’ve ever done.”

For a long moment, Ilya just looked at him, then down at the sketches again, like he was committing them to memory. Then his expression shifted, his eyes flickering, bright with something old and tender, but with an ache threaded through it. His voice dropped when he spoke next, quieter, more vulnerable.

“She would have loved you,” he whispered.

Shane searched his eyes, eyebrows creasing just slightly. “Who?”

“My mother,” Ilya replied quietly, eyes still fixated on the drawing. His voice was gentle and certain as he continued. “She always said that being truly seen like this was the most honest kind of love there is... The rarest gift you could give someone.”

He swallowed once, then finally met Shane’s gaze again, sincerity laid bare. “She would have loved you,” he repeated slowly. “Like I love you.”

The words settled between them – quiet, intimate, and devastating in the gentlest way.

Shane’s chest tightened at the sheer gravity of them. For a moment, he forgot how to breathe.

He reached out without thinking, fingers curling into the fabric of Ilya’s sleeve, anchoring himself – no, anchoring *them* – as if he needed the proof of him right now, solid and real. The rink hummed softly around them, distant and unimportant, fading into the background as Shane leaned in.

He placed his lips softly on Ilya’s and kissed him.

It wasn’t rushed or desperate. It was slow and careful, like he was committing the shape of Ilya’s mouth to his memory all over again. Ilya stilled at first, then melted into it with a quiet exhale, lips warm and familiar, tasting so unmistakably like *him*. Shane felt it everywhere – the way Ilya’s breath hitched, the way his body leaned closer without hesitation.

Shane pulled back just enough to rest their foreheads together, noses brushing.

“I love you too,” he whispered, the words steady despite the way his heart thundered in his chest.

Ilya’s hands tightened at his waist, fingers threading through the fabric of Shane’s sweater like he was afraid the moment might slip through them if he didn’t hold on. “You are my home, Shane,” he said softly, like it was something he had known for a long time but had only just learned how to say out loud.

Emotion swelled thick and warm behind Shane’s ribs. He smiled, eyes stinging just a little, and leaned in again – not for a kiss this time, but to brush his lips against Ilya’s temple, lingering there, breathing him in.

“And you,” Shane murmured, voice low and certain, “you are mine.”

Chapter End Notes

And with that, we now reach the very, very end of this story at last 🥹🥹 For real this time...

It’s so hard for me to let go of them, this fic’s Shane and Ilya are literally my babies... I don’t know what to do with myself now that it’s finished 😭😭 Maybe I need to do the

same as you guys and reread my own fic a few times, just to feel something...

Anyway, for those of you who came to read this final final chapter, I hope you enjoyed it, even though it was just a small little treat 🥺

You know the deal by now: Kudos are deeply appreciated and feel free to let me know in the comments what you think!!

Honestly, what I will miss most is reading all of your sweet messages and theories. You all truly made my day every single time I updated <3 So, THANK YOU!!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!