

we prophesy in part

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by [eclipturesque](#)

Summary

Ilya hasn't planned on meeting Shane's parents after only three days at the cottage. He sure as hell hasn't planned on dying that very same day, only to wake up in his childhood home in Moscow.

The year is 2004, he's twelve again, and his mother is still alive.

Chapter 1: i-ii

i.

Ilya hasn't planned on meeting Shane's parents after only three days at the cottage.

It goes better than expected. Shane stays tense through most of the conversation, but the moment Mrs. Hollander - Yuna - sets a plate of deliciously smelling home-cooked pasta in front of Ilya, he knows everything will be just fine. Food is a love language in Ilya's book, and it simply doesn't make sense to feed someone you plan to disown, punch, or kick out of the house.

Still, he can't help feeling a small pang of sadness when David Hollander corrects his wife with a quiet "summer before." His father's reaction would have been very different in the same situation, but he pushes that thought away, refusing to let the old man's shadow stain the moment.

Ilya holds Shane's hand on their way back to the cottage, kissing the knuckles now and then. He almost wishes the drive could last forever. Everything feels too new, too raw, and too fragile, and he is trying to carve the feeling into his memory so he can hold onto it when they eventually return to their separate teams and lives.

He feels loved - not because he's the best, or perfect, or has earned it in any way. He is simply loved, and he loves back, and it's the most wonderful thing in the world.

A truck appears on the road seemingly out of nowhere and hits them head-on before he even has time to understand what's happening.

It feels like he is burning from the inside out. Every breath is a struggle, and fear keeps him floating on the edge of consciousness. He tries calling for Shane, but his voice collapses into silence. He tries to move, but it seems he no longer knows how to control his body.

His thoughts scatter, time has lost all meaning, and he helplessly wonders if this is how it all ends. He can't recall a single prayer, yet a silent plea takes shape - not with words, but with pure intent. *Let this not be the end. Let Shane be okay.*

When a woman's voice finally breaks through the haze, he recognizes it instantly. Cool and gentle fingers brush his forehead and thread through his curls, and the familiarity of it confirms what his mind can barely process. He hasn't heard that voice since he was twelve; he never expected to hear it again.

Mom.

He leans into the caress, and a thought flashes through his mind that maybe dying isn't so scary after all.

ii.

He must have blacked out at some point. When awareness returns, he feels like a human again - and it's not a good feeling. He is in a bed, his whole body hurting, skin clammy with sweat, and he

can feel the rough, damp sheet beneath him all too clearly.

He opens his eyes, only for his head to explode with pain as he tries to blink away the tears. Everything is a blur, but someone is sitting beside his bed. He squeezes his eyes shut and opens them again, trying to focus his sight, when something glinting in the dim light catches his attention.

No way. No fucking way. He'd recognize that cross anywhere. Before it was his, it belonged to-

An involuntary moan escapes him, and those cool hands are touching his face again.

"Oh, baby, you're awake. You had us so worried, but the fever's broken. The doctor says you'll be just fine-"

He bursts into tears before she can finish the sentence. The next thing he knows, he is in his mother's arms. She holds him tight, rocking gently, murmuring all sorts of soothing nothings into his hair.

He must have lost his mind. Either that, or he is in a coma, or dreaming, or dead. All of it feels more reasonable than waking up in his childhood home on another continent, with both of his dead parents alive and arguing over breakfast like it's any other morning.

His body feels borrowed because, technically, it is. When he first drags himself to the mirror on unsteady feet, he simply doesn't accept what he sees - that pale, scrawny kid with feverish eyes. He doubles over and vomits before he can take a single step toward the bathroom. Father shows no compassion whatsoever, forcing him to clean up the mess and paying no attention to his shaking hands or Mother's quiet protests that he's still too sick to be out of bed.

An ugly tear-off calendar in the kitchen reads January 2004, which apparently means he's twelve again and about to relive the worst year of his life.

He is stuck sharing a room with his brother, who barely acknowledges him and is already picking up too many of Father's bad habits.

If not for his mother, he'd be convinced this was some kind of purgatory his very religious grandma used to frighten him with when he was little. Mother is everything he remembers, and somehow nothing like his memories at all. He's taken aback by how young she is - not much older than he'd been before he died. Her hands are gentle, and her smile is always warm for him, but what he took for sadness as a child is much more than that. She looks exhausted and is zoning out; her eyes are hollow, and despite spending hours in the kitchen, she barely eats anything.

She is so obviously not okay. No one but him seems to notice.

He isn't arrogant enough to believe that the world ceased to exist the moment he died in that crash - assuming any of it was real in the first place.

He once heard that drivers instinctively yank the wheel to the left before a head-on collision to avoid the worst of the impact. He doesn't know if that's true, and the crash itself is a blur, but he wants to believe Shane has survived - that the passenger side took the hit. There isn't a single reality, dream, or hallucination where he can accept the idea of Shane being dead.

God, if Shane is alive and conscious, he's probably freaking out. At least his parents are good people, and as much as Ilya resents Pike - that boring excuse for a player - the guy seems to be a good friend to Shane. They won't let Shane deal with all of that alone.

He can't bear the thought that Shane might be dead. He can't bear the thought that Shane might never have been real at all.

To be honest, he's never considered himself particularly smart. It's a miracle that he's managed to master not one but three skills: sex, hockey, and pissing people off. Truly a man of many talents.

But whatever's happening to him now is beyond good and evil. He gets tired too quickly, sleeps too much, can't think straight, and can't focus properly. He knows children's brains work differently - but experiencing that firsthand is pretty damn miserable.

Biology, you heartless bitch.

Being twelve again sucks. Suddenly, nobody takes him seriously, and he has literally zero say in anything. The little things he used to take for granted are also gone - a decade of photos, his sex drive, the toothbrush he liked, the shirt he wore to death, the ability to look up something online or text Marleau or Svetlana (or Shane) whenever he felt like it. Everything familiar has been taken from him, and he ended up in this nightmare where he's just a frightened kid under his father's thumb.

He has to go to school again, where most people are stupid as fuck - and mind you, the worst of them aren't even the kids. He has to use public transport to get around: loud, overcrowded Soviet-era tin cans mistakenly called buses. Most of the cars and the tech look like they belong in a museum or on a movie set. Ironically, the only thing that hasn't changed is the president.

His father's cruelty toward his mother is unbearable to watch. Whatever she does, he meets it with criticism and disdain; nothing is ever good enough - the soup's too thick, the mashed potatoes are too salty, there's a smudge on the mirror, his shirt isn't ironed right, and even Ilya failing a geography test (coal basins, seriously?) is somehow her fault too. Father calls her useless and lazy, and the second Ilya tries to stand up for her, he gets chewed out for interrupting the adults.

In his previous life, he'd done plenty of things he wasn't proud of, and the league's biggest asshole title didn't come out of nowhere (no regrets there, if he's honest). He's almost ready to believe this is his punishment. Punishment for all of it - and for wanting Shane in his life so badly, so greedily, for believing they could have a happy ending when common sense, his own country, and even religion told him he'd burn for it.

But his mother certainly doesn't deserve what's happening to her. He'll be damned if he doesn't try to save her.

He needs an ally - an adult ally - and he also needs to get his mother away from his father. That's why he thinks of his grandma, a woman he remembers as loud, bossy, and deeply religious. Surely she should care about her daughter's well-being.

He waits until no one's home, finds her number in the phonebook, and makes the call. He suffers through the small talk, then finally tells Grandma he's worried about Mom.

"It's adults' business, Ilya," she cuts him off.

He doesn't expect dismissal. He definitely doesn't expect irritation. He keeps talking anyway - about the bruises on Mom's right wrist, about how tired she is, and how sad she looks. It doesn't help.

Two days later, Mom asks him quietly why he told Grandma she's lazy and a bad mother.

Ilya drops his forehead onto the kitchen table in exasperation.

The first time his father pulls off his belt and tries to punish him for "being disrespectful," a wave of fury crashes over Ilya. Panic follows right behind it.

He knows - remembers - that it will hurt, that it will be humiliating; that's the whole point. But the moment he sees the belt, he forgets he's twelve now, forty kilos at best, and facing a man twice his size. He lashes out, kicking and biting, earning a slap for the effort. Once he realizes he can't win, not this fight anyway, he starts crying from sheer helplessness.

"Pathetic" is the only thing his father bothers to say before the first strike.

"Fighting back only makes it worse, sweetheart. So does talking back."

"Speaking from experience, huh?"

They fall silent as his mother tends to his split lip. Ilya notices her red-rimmed eyes and the high collar of her sweater and can't help thinking his father hadn't suffered enough before he died in his previous life.

He doesn't expect to return to the ice in his new (old) body and magically play like the MLH's top (best) forward. What he truly doesn't expect is to step on the ice and end up flat on his back the next second.

Laughter erupts behind him when he gets up and goes down literally after a few steps. He manages to crawl to the boards and get himself up, only to be shoved from behind and hit the ice with the elegance of a concussed crab.

His so-called teammates keep laughing, and after yet another jab in the back something in him snaps. He's on his feet and facing his tormentor before he can even think it through, as if moments ago he wasn't struggling just to stay upright. He drops his gloves and punches the kid right square in the nose.

It's nice to know he hasn't lost all of his skills.

His well-aimed punch sets off a chain reaction that turns into a full-on brawl on the ice. He is outnumbered from the start, so, honestly, it could have been worse. He's used to hatred from

opponents; homegrown hate is definitely a new experience.

The black eye fades after exactly ten days.

The marks from his father's belt buckle take much longer to disappear.

He's stretched out on the couch with his head in his mother's lap, her fingers gently drifting through his hair. Luckily, his father and brother aren't home tonight, and there's no one around to offer their usual family wisdom: "He's a man, Ira, stop smothering him with affection" or "Look at that, the baby's clinging to Mama's skirts again."

Without these rare moments of peace, this new life would be unbearable.

Ilya closes his eyes and almost purrs. For a moment, it feels like he's not in a cramped Moscow apartment at all, but back in the cottage, and the fingers in his hair are...

"What's been going on with you lately, sunshine?"

He flinches, the cottage in his mind vanishing in an instant.

"Shh, shh." She caresses his cheek. "I worry about you, Ilyusha. I hope you know you can always talk to me and tell me anything."

He buries his face in her lap because there are so many things he wants to ask her. *Mom, do you believe in rebirth and second chances? Or: I've lost you once already, and now I've lost Shane, and I don't know how to fix any of it. And: I never thought I'd get a chance to save you, and now I have no idea how to use it. I can't tell what's real anymore, and I'm literally dying not knowing what happened to Shane. I hope you would've loved him.*

Of course, he says none of it. Instead, he rolls onto his back and looks up at her. She has those same unruly curls he knows from his own reflection - the ones he never quite learned to tame. And she's so beautiful, even now, when she's so endlessly sad. He takes her hand, brushing his thumb over the greenish bruises on her wrist she's been trying to hide beneath the long sleeves of an oversized sweater.

"And you know you can always talk to *me*, Mom," he says softly, noticing the surprise that flickers across her face. "You're not alone, even if it feels that way."

"When did you grow up so much, my boy?" she whispers after a long pause.

You have no idea, Mama.

They say the body remembers. You don't just forget how to skate, take slapshots, or level especially smug assholes from the opposing team. Well, his body has nothing to remember - it's hardly ever done any of that.

Also, he's weak as a kitten, and his legs look like a pair of matchsticks. His skates are too heavy and are two sizes too big. His hockey stick doesn't just have the wrong flex - it's wooden and barely bends at all; the curve is wrong too. He won't be playing his best hockey anytime soon, that's for sure.

In his previous life, grief pushed him toward hockey. This time, it's cold calculation. Sure, he loves the game, but it also means money and freedom in the future - not just for himself, but also for his mother.

He's not being entirely honest about the whole *cold calculation* thing, though. The truth is, he really, *really* needs to be in Regina, Saskatchewan about five years from now.

He spends most of his free time at the school outdoor rink, running through every basic skating and stickhandling drill he can think of, over and over again. He's still missing almost two decades of practices, games, and muscle. But he's improving - improving so fast that even his chronically hungover coach has noticed. And he still has time.

His mom has always liked hockey. Sometimes it feels like it's the only thing two such different people as his parents ever truly shared.

Shane would probably have called Ilya's parents not compatible.

"Coach, why am I on the 4th line today?"

"Because we don't have a 5th."

"Shut up, Rozanov, I wasn't talking to you."

Surprising to no one, his teammates hate him more than ever these days.

He's always hated the word "accident," and even at twelve, he knew his mother's death hadn't been one.

Which makes it harder to face the fact that all his plans to save Mom treat it exactly like an accident - like something you can prevent and then live happily ever after.

The thing is, depression and suicidal thoughts aren't an accident; they're a long and exhausting struggle, and they won't disappear if he hides the pills or stays at home that day.

He's not fine, no, but he blames stupid hormones, stupid biology, and his stupid fucking body for being so emotional lately.

His father scolds him every time, lecturing him about discipline, self-control, and how real men don't cry - and, judging by his father's standards, they should also have an emotional range of a log. Not that Ilya would ever say the last part out loud.

The first time he cried in front of Shane, that night in Tampa, his instinct - drilled into him from an early age - was to hide his face and apologize. So it stunned him when he wasn't mocked or pushed away - when he was kissed and pulled into an embrace instead. That was the moment he knew, with sudden clarity, that what he had with Shane was anything but simple or casual.

At the cottage, Shane wasn't ashamed of being vulnerable or of his tears, and Ilya, almost against his own instincts, let himself go too. If his father had witnessed it, he would've had plenty to say,

none of it pleasant and probably heavy on the familiar insults - weak, pathetic.

At the cottage, Ilya met Shane's teary eyes and felt himself fall even harder for him, though just a day ago he hadn't believed that was possible.

He coaxes the school psychologist into finding him a mental health helpline number. In the end, the apathetic woman is only too happy to give him something so he'll finally leave her office.

He makes the call the same day, and the lady on the line clearly isn't prepared to be speaking with a child. She hears him out and then, a bit unsure, suggests calling the cops or an ambulance if he thinks his mother might be in danger.

"It's not an emergency. Not yet. And my father is a high-ranking police officer," he sighs.

"Oh. I see."

The helpline lady tells him that nothing can be done unless his mother seeks help herself or becomes a danger to herself or others.

"Do you know about any shelters for women who are being abused?" Ilya asks instead. "In Moscow or around?"

She pauses, then says, "You... know about those? Ok, please stay on the line. I need to check and ask around."

He waits, listening to the muffled voices in the background, until she comes back and says, "I've got a number for you, dear."

He finds a pen and a scrap of paper and writes the number down. He thanks the lady and is about to hang up when she asks, "How old are you, kid?"

"Twelve." There is no point in hiding it.

"Your mom is very lucky to have you."

Of course she is, Ilya thinks. After all, he has never been known for false modesty.

He calls the shelter, and they sound less surprised to hear a child's voice. But once he brings up his father's job, their tone changes.

"No," they say. "Sorry, but no. We have dozens of women and children here whom we can actually save. We can't risk going up against the police. Or worse."

He's never hated Russia more than at that moment.

His mother won't even listen when he mentions seeing a therapist.

"I'm perfectly fine, darling. I'm not crazy."

He tries to tell her he meant nothing of the sort, that she isn't fine, that she needs help, that there's nothing shameful in admitting it-

She retreats to the bedroom, not saying a word, and doesn't come out even for dinner, much to his father's irritation. Ilya knows he's hurt her, even though he meant quite the opposite.

He tries not to think about what will happen if he fails. Most likely, he'll end up at one of the many high bridges Moscow has no shortage of, becoming just a number in the grim statistics of the said bridge.

That night he dreams of brown eyes, those silly freckles, and Shane telling his parents that he loves *him* and doesn't hate him at all. Then the walls around him dissolve, and he's suddenly standing over Shane's motionless body - just like after Marleau's hit, only this time no one is rushing to help. Ilya looks at Shane's hands: no gloves, his fingers unnaturally pale. An empty pill bottle is lying nearby.

He wakes with a start and a choked sob. He bites down hard on the pillow, and for a while the only sound in the room is his dumb brother's faint snoring.

He starts with small things. He makes syrniki for his mom in the morning, and then they clean up the kitchen together while she hums along to a catchy tune on the radio.

He invites her to his game, boasting he'll score a hat-trick and dedicate every goal to her. He ends up scoring four. After each one, he salutes her, and she laughs and waves back like it's their private ritual. His teammates snicker, but he doesn't give a fuck.

He skips lunch at school for a week to buy her three roses. Leaves her little notes - like "have a good day," "the weather is beautiful today (just like you)," or a simple "I love you" - slipping them into her cookbook or the drawer with laundry supplies where his father will never find them.

It's not much, and it probably doesn't change anything in the grand scheme of things, but he always regretted not doing it in his previous life.

It's the least she deserves anyway.

It's Saturday, and Father and Alexei are off on a "fishing trip" - a clever euphemism for drinking vodka with friends in the middle of nowhere.

Mom takes him to Gorky Park instead. It's crowded and the cashier at the Ferris wheel is rude in that unmistakably Soviet way. The view from the top is gorgeous, Mom looks relaxed, and for once her smile looks real. After the Ferris wheel, they buy hot chocolate to warm up and a head of cabbage at the grocery store to feed the ducks at the pond.

For the first time in this new life, he feels like a child again, and it isn't a bad thing. His mind is still in a weird place after all the nightmares and overthinking, which is probably why he asks:

"Mom? Have you ever imagined our life without Father?"

"Ilya-"

“No, really. Don’t you think we’d be better off without him? Today was perfect, all thanks to” - he waggles his fingers in air quotes - “fishing”.

“Ilya, sweetheart-”

“What if we run away? I’ve been thinking about it lately. Let’s take the bare minimum and find you a job somewhere far from Moscow. I’ve checked - there are jobs with housing. I can help, I can give skating lessons or something. It won’t be easy or pretty, but...”

He almost says, *Boston’ll draft me in five years, and you’ll never have to work again.*

Mom stays silent for a long time as they watch two ducks fight over the same leaf of cabbage.

“Do you think I haven’t tried?” she says at last, her eyes fixed straight ahead, as if she isn’t talking to him at all.

Oh.

“What happened?” he asks quietly, like he isn’t sure he wants to know.

“He always finds me, always brings me back. It’s... personal.”

Ilya squeezes his eyes shut to fight back tears. Ducks keep quacking in the background, and even though they resemble loons, they don’t sound like them at all.

It’s an accident that gives him hope. A real accident this time.

Mom’s away for a week to visit Grandma, and Ilya decides it’s the perfect chance to skip classes. School is boring and pointless, and besides, he’s been losing his mind from having zero alone time for the past month - a shock after years in that absurdly large and empty Boston house of his. Funny how you don’t appreciate things until they’re gone, personal space included.

He enjoys the silence, but it’s not even noon when he hears keys turning in the front door. No one should be home this early. If it’s his idiot brother - well, that would mean he’s skipping school too, and then they’re even...

It’s not Alexei. Ilya darts back to his room and slips under the bed - hardly a brilliant plan, but instinct wins the moment he hears his father’s booming voice in the hallway. Discipline is his father’s second religion, and getting caught ditching school will not end well for him.

He lies perfectly still, trying to steady his breathing. His father is on the phone, and judging by the noises, he is rummaging for something in the kitchen or in the living room.

“Ah, found it. I was rereading that cursed report last night and must’ve forgotten to put it back in the briefcase,” his father says, sounding relieved. “Tell Nikita Petrovich it’ll be on his desk in an hour.”

Fuck, that was close, but looks like he won’t be caught after all, if his father is heading back to work.

“I’ll make it up to you tonight, Polina, don’t be mad. Maybe not just tonight - we’ve got the whole week ahead.”

Wait. *What?*

Ilya is lying on the couch, his eyes fixed on the whitewashed ceiling.

He keeps replaying the overheard words in his head, and they always lead him to the same conclusion: his father is having an affair at work. An affair with someone named Polina. Not the most unique name, but it's not super common either.

His ex-future-stepmother was named Polina. In his previous life, his father remarried pretty quickly after the "accident," but Ilya had been too angry, too betrayed, and too scared to ask where Polina had come from. He always assumed they'd met after Mom died, not before. Apparently, that might be very far from the truth.

In the evening, Alexei - who is trying (and spectacularly failing) to boil pelmeni for the two of them - mentions offhand that Father has called to say he is busy at work and will be home late.

Busy, my ass, Ilya thinks bitterly, leaning over the pot to check if their dinner is beyond rescue.

It takes him a while to get into his father's cell phone. Father is hardly home these days, and the whole situation makes Ilya want to smash something heavy against the wall.

When the opportunity finally appears - Father is in the shower, Alexei is at judo practice - Ilya grabs the phone off the table and opens the call log. He is lucky it's 2004, and the damn thing is basically a brick with no password, no lock, nothing. His father is a control freak, and his contacts are all labeled very formally. Ilya scrolls to the time of the overheard call, and there she is. Polina, the secretary, saved under her full government name. A name he knows too well.

His holier-than-thou father, the man who ruined his wife's life in not one but two timelines, is cheating with a girl half his age. Ilya feels disgusted. Ilya feels betrayed.

And he finally has a plan.

Tracking Polina down requires a few questionable methods and even more skipped classes.

She's sitting in a small cafe near Father's office, probably waiting for her lunch to be served. Ilya watches from a distance, studying her.

She looks younger than he remembers, hardly older than twenty-five. In his previous life, she disappeared the moment Father started to need constant care and stopped recognizing her. He's fairly sure she showed up at the funeral, but he'd been too tangled in his own complicated feelings to be certain. She still inherited a generous chunk of that Moscow apartment - Father didn't revise the will, and Ilya had no interest in contesting it. Maybe Alexei did; who knows...

Ilya forces his mind back to the present moment. He's on a mission and doesn't have time for a trip down memory lane.

He slips into the seat across from her and introduces himself as Grigori Rozanov's son before she can say a word. He's never thought highly of her, but he's never taken her for a fool. Greedy, calculating, vulgar - for sure. But not stupid.

“I have a feeling, Polina,” he says, trying to sound older not just in voice but in the words he chooses, “that our interests happen to align.”

She narrows her eyes, suspicion written all over her face, but she doesn’t interrupt or tell him to leave.

Well. That’s something he can work with.

Chapter 2: iii

Chapter Notes

Remember when I said this story would only have two chapters? Well, it got out of hand pretty quickly, and for various reasons I had to split the second chapter in two. The next one is the last one, pinky promise <3

iii.

The divorce goes through quickly and smoothly, all thanks to Father and his friends in high places. Ilya, unlike Alexei, is adamant about staying with Mom, which doesn't surprise her at all, though it does surprise Father.

He has to sell the idea to Polina first. Alexei is heading off to police academy in the summer anyway, but her perfect dream of marrying an elderly colonel and not working a day in her life definitely doesn't include raising a sullen teenager - she simply hasn't given it enough thought yet.

Polina gets his point, and Ilya leaves it to her to convince - manipulate - Father. *Gross.*

It's ironic that in his previous life he despised her, and the feeling was mutual. Sometimes it felt like they were trapped in a cycle of trying to make each other's existence miserable. Yet now Polina has become a surprisingly useful, if unlikely, ally.

It's also ironic that he spent weeks picturing ridiculous scenarios about running off to some shithole under false identities, when all it really took for his father to let them go was the affair coming to light, cracking his facade of self-righteousness.

Ilya knows his father is doing damage control, spreading a mix of lies and half-truths about Mom and pinning the blame on her - all of it just to preserve his morally infallible image.

Traditional family values, my ass.

Father has been paying him more attention lately, mostly thanks to Ilya's miraculous progress in hockey. Suddenly, he cares about the games, the stats, and even Ilya's take on Dynamo's odds of surviving the first round of the playoffs. At one point, Father even drags him on a "fishing" trip - an experience Ilya remembers with disgust, since vomiting in the bushes after a shot of vodka was nothing but humiliating.

Ilya keeps his distance. This strange attempt at fatherly attention is nowhere near enough to erase two lifetimes of sins. But his father has never been good at reading people who aren't afraid of him, and he probably mistakes Ilya's coldness and hostility for proper behavior and obedience.

He looks at his father and thinks it's deeply unfair that some people inherit good looks and boring genes, while he gets half his DNA from a tyrant and an abuser with an incurable genetic disease.

He can't help wondering if things might have been different if his father had been born and raised in, say, Canada. If he'd had some boring corporate job not even remotely connected to law enforcement? Could that hypothetical Canadian father have kindly welcomed his son's lover into his home, the way David Hollander once did? Could this imaginary father have treated Mother as a person? Not as a trophy, not as an unworthy servant, but as an actual human being?

Probably not. He'll never know for sure.

Mom has taken a job with social services as a live-in caregiver for a very elderly, very wealthy, and very lonely woman. They move into her apartment, which still carries traces of the Soviet elite's former opulence. The old lady - *call me Grandma Maya, sweetie* - has a sharp mind, but she can barely walk and needs constant care.

He suspects his father had more than a little to do with this arrangement; otherwise, the court would never have allowed Ilya to stay with an unemployed mother without a place of her own. Well, if this is his father's final way of proving he still calls the shots and they're nothing without him, then so be it.

As sweet as Grandma Maya may be, caregiving is hard work, both physically and mentally. Ilya is exhausted himself, always hunting for ways to earn a little money: some skating lessons here, some side jobs there, all of that on top of school and hockey. But he doesn't regret any of it.

He watches his mother and sees the changes: how she looks more alive despite the long days, how she's rediscovered her interest in reading, and how she cautiously lets herself meet new people, still half-afraid it might provoke Father's anger or jealousy.

Their life is far from perfect. Yet for some reason, Ilya feels that things will work out for them in the end.

He isn't naive enough to believe his mission is over. He spends days making calls, stopping by clinics, hospitals, and mental health organizations (not that there are many), piecing information together. In his old life, he could have googled all of it in five minutes, but he doesn't have that luxury now.

In the end, he compiles a list of all the therapy options in the area that are free, anonymous, or both. He considers sticking that list on the fridge, but talking about therapy directly didn't work last time. Leaving the list in plain sight isn't much subtler. He ends up copying it and slipping it into their mailbox instead - Mom is the one who sorts the mail anyway. She'll recognize his handwriting right away, but at least this way they can both pretend the list never existed.

The next morning, Mom studies him over breakfast with a thoughtful, uncertain look, clearly wanting to ask him something.

"I love you," he says with a wink and easy certainty. She smiles and turns back to the kitchen sink, and it feels like she's accepted his words as a reply to the question she couldn't voice.

He finds a library that agrees to issue him a card rather than telling him to return when he's fourteen or sixteen.

Ilya Rozanov walks into a public library. Sounds like the beginning of a bad joke.

He spends hours and hours in the reading room, plowing through books on mythology, folklore, religion, and esoterica. It doesn't help much: everything is either written in dense academic jargon or reads like someone describing their bad trip. None of it gets him any closer to understanding what the fuck has happened to him.

He's flipping through an unbearably dull book that quotes the Bible seven times a page when his eyes land on a quote:

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.

He slams the book shut in annoyance.

Ilya Rozanov has enough love for two people; he's still not convinced it's the solution to all his problems.

"I think," Mom says one evening over dinner, "that something's wrong with me. That I'm failing, that I'm a bad mother, that you might've been better off with your father."

He starts to protest - loudly - but she silences him with a look.

"Remember that list you kept putting in our mail over and over? I still don't understand how or why you thought to do that. You shouldn't have had to. Sometimes I feel like I don't know you at all." She pauses, watching him. "Anyway... I made some calls, and my first therapy session is next Tuesday. I hope you won't think less of me because of it."

He reaches across the table and closes his hand around hers. "Thank you," he whispers, never looking away. "It's scary, but you're brave, and I'm proud of you."

She tries to protest softly, but he's not having any of it.

It takes time and a dozen sessions to convince her that therapy isn't only for the "crazy" and that depression is very real.

Real and treatable.

Hockey is unbearable.

It's unbearable without gear that actually protects, doesn't weigh a ton, and doesn't smell like something found its final rest inside ages ago. Without friendly banter and fun locker room vibes. Without coaches who can string two sentences together without screaming or swearing. Without players who aren't terminally boring and clueless on the ice.

It's unbearable without Shane.

This time, the worst day of his previous life ends up being almost disappointingly ordinary, which still unsettles him in its own way.

He lies about being sick, doesn't go to school, and spends the entire day fighting the urge to stay glued to his mother's side. He is itching to flush every pill in the house, to hide the knives, and to block the balcony door.

Just to be on the safe side.

Deep down, he knows there's no reason to expect a catastrophe. But he's still on high alert and jumps at every sound, trying to fight off the intrusive thoughts. He tries not to reassure himself that things will be fine – he's too afraid to risk jinxing it, fearing the universe will mock him one more time.

~~*Unnaturally pale fingers. An empty pill bottle lying nearby.*~~

They both go to bed a little later than usual. Once the apartment goes quiet, he gets up and creeps toward his mother's bedroom. He lingers in the doorway and listens.

When his mother's breathing evens out, he waits a few more minutes before slipping into her room. He pads over to the bed and quietly settles on the floor, carefully resting his back against the mattress near the headboard.

He needs to be close to her. He also needs to know he really pulled it off - that whatever took Shane away from him won't take her a second time.

Ilya has never truly believed in God, but when the old clock in the living room strikes midnight and he still hears his mother's soft breathing, he sags in relief and begins whispering those few prayers he remembers.

In his previous life, he'd worn number 81 since he was twelve.

January 8 was his mother's birthday; it only felt right to wear that number in her memory - in memory of those rare days when she was allowed to sleep until noon, when she wore her favorite dress, and Father was almost kind to her.

Now his mother is here with him, alive and happier than ever. He can tell she still struggles, that she has her bad days, that their life is no fairy tale. Still, she's here, right by his side, and he wants to believe she has many, many *happy* birthdays ahead of her.

Ilya switches his number to 24.

He never answers when people ask him why.

After all this time, he's enjoying getting to know his mom not just as "Mom," but as a person.

Her favorite flowers are pink tulips, not roses. She hates opera and fell asleep during the second act when she took him to see *Tosca* and wasn't even remotely ashamed about it. She simply can't watch a movie in silence, always pointing out plot holes and unrealistic moments, which is annoying and endearing at the same time. She has a childhood friend living somewhere in Siberia,

and they still exchange handwritten letters. Her favorite seat at their home rink is the middle one in the eighth row; she insists it's the lucky one with the best view, and he doesn't argue.

He loves finding out all those boring things about her.

He scrapes together some money and heads to an Internet cafe, though he doesn't expect to find anything useful online.

The internet is still a long way from what it'll become in thirteen years. Some articles and flashy websites pop up when he searches for rebirth and time travel, all of them somehow even more useless and crazier than the library folklore.

He tries looking up Shane Hollander instead and gets nothing. Youth hockey barely exists online, Facebook isn't a thing yet, and Instagram, with its accounts of five-year-old "future first-rounders" run by delusional hockey moms and dads, is years away.

Then he searches for Shane's parents, but nothing comes up for either David (with his painfully boring name) or Yuna (he honestly had some hopes there).

For his own sanity, he's convinced himself that Shane survived the crash. But if there's even the faintest chance he's wrong, if somewhere far away *his* Shane is struggling to make sense of this new life...

If that's true, he has to find him, or at the very least find some way to let him know he isn't alone.

He has absolutely no idea where the Hollanders live now. He'd been too absorbed in admiring Shane instead of watching the road on their way to the cottage, and "about two hours' drive from the airport" isn't exactly helpful. For all he knows, Shane might have lived somewhere else as a kid.

The only thing he knows for certain is which team Shane should be playing for this season. With that information, he should be able to dig up the team's postal address, or at least whatever rink they're attached to.

That thought makes him smirk. Watching all those boring documentaries about Shane's career has finally paid off.

Writing a letter to Shane turns out to be surprisingly difficult. After a week and a dozen drafts, he throws out every single one and starts from scratch.

He wants to mention those beautiful freckles, because it's true and it never fails to make Shane smile. But what if Shane is just a kid who's never heard of Ilya Rozanov? Freaking him out is the last thing Ilya wants.

His letter ends up being just a single sentence, stamped and mailed before he can change his mind.

You have a very weak backhand.

He never gets a reply, which is an answer in itself.

Chapter 3: iv-v

Chapter Notes

Remember when I said this is the final chapter?

Is lie. Liar told you that.

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

iv.

Time passes. Sometimes he still wakes in a cold sweat and finds himself sitting on the floor of his mom's bedroom, purely to reassure himself that she's breathing and sleeping peacefully. It just doesn't happen as often as it used to. The surreal dreams about leading Boston to victory, raising the Cup, and sharing all those stolen moments with Shane never fade.

His life is obviously so different now, yet the world mostly keeps to the same course he remembers from *before*. Mostly, because some things completely unrelated to him still play out differently, like Avangard winning the Super League instead of Salavat. He isn't sure what to make of it.

But 'mostly' is good enough for him. Too many things are playing out the same way, and that alone tells him his previous life was real and not some delirious dream.

And if he sometimes pays a couple of seniors to place a bet for him at the sportsbook - his money, their IDs - and mostly keeps winning, well, he's innocent until proven guilty.

Svetlana's return to Moscow for the summer is a welcome dose of familiarity. She's childish and wild and never stops talking, but she's also genuinely funny, and he's missed her terribly. She isn't *his* Svetlana - not yet, maybe not ever - but she's still a good friend with whom he can almost drop the act and just be himself.

It surprises him how quickly she and his mom get along. Even though it makes sense, given Svetlana's complicated relationship with her own mother - some American actress barely involved in her life. Before long, Svetlana becomes a regular in their apartment, happily gossiping with his mom about all kinds of things.

And he may complain and roll his eyes theatrically when they shoo him out of the room to talk about... girl stuff, but he does it fondly.

He knows better than to get on the bad side of the two most important women in his life.

One day he spots a bouquet on the living room table. A very big, very expensive bouquet he definitely didn't buy. And Mom wouldn't have bought it either; she still struggles with treating herself to anything nice.

“Lovely tulips.” He tilts his head at the bouquet. “Should I be asking where they came from, or should I pretend I didn’t notice?”

Mom meets his eyes and smiles, lips quirking to one side, as if daring him to look away first or take his words back. But then, just for a second, something wary flickers across her face.

“I don’t know,” she admits, breaking eye contact first. “It’s... too early to tell. And I’m still trying to make sense of it.”

“Do you like him?” he asks, hoping the question won’t tip the conversation into awkward territory.

She nods.

“He knows your favorite flowers - that’s something,” Ilya says with a smirk, noticing how the tension slowly eases from her shoulders. “Please do me a favor and tell him that if he so much as lays a finger on you, I’ll break his nose. Or his fingers. I’m not picky.”

“All these years I’ve been trying to put some good manners into that pretty head of yours, and it seems none of it stuck.” She gives him a light smack on the back with the kitchen towel still in her hand, though she can’t quite hide the affection in her voice.

Puberty sucks. It’s awkward, unpleasant, and gross, and he feels more out of control than ever.

Living through it once was more than enough, thank you very much.

Mom notices his distress over the rapid changes in his body (of course she does), but assumes it’s all for the wrong reason.

“You’re so handsome,” she says, looking at him lovingly, as if she is not seeing an angular, clumsy teenager with a face dotted with acne.

“It’s genetic,” he replies with a wink, even though he doesn’t quite believe her.

“Is there anyone special?” Mom asks him one day, the question slipping out as if she’s been sitting on it for a while.

He really shouldn’t be surprised. She’s perceptive enough to notice that for all his shameless flirting, he never shows real interest in any of the girls who try to chat him up after home games. Or in any other girls, for that matter.

Very much unlike his teammates, who, it seems, are capable of thinking about one thing only these days, and it sure isn’t hockey.

“Svetlana and I are just friends, Mom,” he says, trying to sound casual and to steer the conversation toward safer territory. People love to assume things, but he and Svetlana never got further than a couple of drunk kisses last year. It’s convenient that everyone thinks they did. Everyone except his mother, of course - the only person he can’t really lie to.

“Oh, I know that, honey.” Mom ruffles his curls, and he leans into the touch, not even bothering to pretend he doesn’t enjoy it. “It was the first thing you told me about her, and you’ve reminded me plenty of times since. And she’s been updating me on every crush and heartbreak of hers for years anyway. But that’s not what I asked.”

He rolls his eyes in mock annoyance. His mother is anything but subtle, and she saw through his clumsy attempt to change the subject.

“So,” Mom says as she pinches his cheek gently and hushes his protest. “Is there anyone special?”

“Special is... a very appropriate word,” he says after a long pause, refusing to elaborate.

He meant every word he whispered to Shane that last morning together. He still does. In that impossible, abstract scenario where his dead mother could know Shane the way he does and see the love Ilya carries for him, he has no doubt she would have loved him.

Coming out to his very real mother - sweet, kind, and understanding, yet still shaped by her Soviet upbringing - is terrifying.

When he was born, gay sex was still a crime in Russia. Homosexuality was removed from the list of mental disorders only eight years ago. He’s painfully aware of how casually hatred and slurs slip into everyday life, the media, and politics. And into hockey, naturally.

In his previous life, the realization that he wasn’t attracted solely to women had confused him more than it frightened him. And now... Now he thinks he was unbelievably reckless and even more unbelievably lucky not to get caught. It could have cost him his career at best and his life at worst. He shivers at the mere thought of his father finding out.

In the end, he’s terrified to tell his mom the truth. He tries more than once, but he never manages to force it out. Whatever words he chooses right now, none of them will ever do Shane justice.

Eventually, he decides to wait until he gets Shane back - Ilya’s convinced that he will charm Mom in no time.

And this time Ilya isn’t waiting eight years plus one Rose Landry for Mr. Perfect to figure out he’s gay, completely.

v.

He starts his last season in juniors with a “C” on his jersey. He’s still considered one of the biggest jerks in the league, but that’s just who he is - the game wouldn’t be half as fun without it. Besides, his teammates respect him, and that’s what matters.

His father’s presence in the stands still bothers him, but at least the man has the decency to stay away from Mom and her lucky seat in the eighth row. And outside the rink, Ilya has perfected the skill of avoiding both him and his stupid opinions.

He almost feels sorry for the kids on the other teams - they never had a chance, even with him sandbagging. He keeps his stats close to what they used to be the first time around. Sure, it would be fun to shatter a bunch of new records and rub a little extra humiliation into a few teenage egos,

but he can't afford to stray too far from how his career unfolded before. He won't risk being pushed into an adult league or any other unlucky scenario that might force him to miss the International Prospect Cup.

He's almost a guaranteed member of Russia's roster for the tournament in December. At this point, he'd have to do something impressively stupid to screw it all up.

He's buzzing with anticipation and can't stop imagining every possible way his first meeting with Shane might go.

In 114 days, he'll be in Regina, Saskatchewan. *About fucking time.*

The hockey world is shaken in October when Alexei Cherepanov, a player just two years older than Ilya, collapses on the bench during a KHL game and dies of heart failure. The ambulance on duty has already left with five minutes still on the clock, and the one that eventually reaches the arena has a defibrillator that isn't charged.

Ilya remembers it happening in his previous life, but with everything else going on around him the memory hadn't resurfaced until he heard the news.

They've never crossed paths, and Ilya knows there was probably nothing he could have done. People die in accidents every day. But the fact that the damn game took place in a small city just outside Moscow leaves him with an irrational guilt he can't quite shake off.

Another memory rises to the surface: three years from now, a plane carrying the entire Lokomotiv team to their first KHL game of the season will crash, killing everyone but the flight's mechanic. They'll call it a pilot's mistake, which could mean anything in Russia.

Can anyone prevent something like that? Or is the real question here how do you keep going if you don't - or if you can't?

It's the first day of the final camp before the Cup, and he's practically crawling out of his skin with impatience, alert to every word from the coaches and management.

In his other life, this was where he first heard about Shane Hollander. The coaches absolutely wore out Ilya's ears talking about him, and they analyzed his play to death from grainy footage, probably obtained with the help of one of countless ex-Soviet players living in North America.

Back then, fueled by youthful arrogance and plain stupidity, he didn't pay any attention to the whole obsession with Canada's Golden Boy and wrote the kid off as a pretender. He was convinced - thanks in no small part to Daddy dearest - that *he* was the best, that as long as he gave everything on the ice, it didn't matter who lined up against him.

Look who's obsessed now.

The coaches aren't cutting anyone any slack, and being the team's standout player doesn't spare him from nonstop criticism and yelling. Whatever he does, it's never quite good enough; the highest praise he hears is, "This will do, but next time be faster, shoot harder, play more aggressively."

It's the same constant pressure he remembers from living under the same roof as his father.

Ilya's used to that.

The camp ends in two days, and they're spending Friday night on video analysis. Ilya slips into a seat in the corner, safely out of the coaches' line of sight, and dozes through the first half of the session. He has exactly zero interest in the last year's Cup or in watching endless highlight reels of the Finns and Americans.

"Alright, boys, time to talk about Canada. That's who we'll be facing in the final if you don't blow it. They've already announced their roster, and it's a solid one, at least on paper."

Those words jolt him awake. He's been waiting for this moment for years. He bites back a smile, hardly believing he's about to lay eyes on Shane, even if it's only on video.

Ilya looks at the screen as the coach starts the playback, and for a moment his mind just freezes.

The footage is so blurry he can't see the number on the jersey, let alone the face, but he doesn't need either to know it's not Shane. The coach keeps talking, then moves on to four more players, and with every new clip Ilya feels himself sinking deeper into quiet panic.

"May I see the Canadian roster?" he asks once the session ends, hoping his voice doesn't betray how desperate he feels.

He stares at the page way longer than it takes to read through twenty-five names with their respective teams and positions.

Who even *are* these people, and where the hell is Shane Hollander?

Everything after that is a blur. He grabs his coat and wallet, walks out of the training base, and heads downtown. There are a couple of places that don't mind letting minors in if you know the right people.

He drinks, he smokes, and then he's kissing someone in a bathroom stall. He couldn't say if it was a guy or a girl even if his life depended on it.

He doesn't remember much after that. He wakes up on a couch in an apartment he doesn't recognize, surrounded by people he's never seen before. The music is so loud he feels his head might explode. He must have gotten into a fight; his knuckles and cheek throb with a dull, pulsing pain.

He'll welcome any pain if it means not thinking about Shane. Not thinking about the possibility that Shane has never existed, that the person he loves was just a fever dream driving him forward. Or that Shane existed and died. Or that, without even knowing it, he made a choice about who got to live - as if this life has always been about a choice between his mom and Shane.

The idea that Shane is simply out there somewhere, alive and uninterested in hockey, doesn't even cross his mind. Shane and hockey are inseparable, and if Shane commits to something, he perfects it.

And if Shane is not on the roster...

He opens a bottle of cheap vodka sitting on the table and drinks straight from it.

He can't tell how much time has passed as he floats in and out of awareness. Voices and music blur together; someone is asking for money, and someone else presses a drink into his hand. And then everything shifts, and he realizes he's being moved, and it makes him nauseous.

When the world stops spinning, someone's mouth is on his - or maybe it's the other way around. He presses closer to the warm body beside him and holds on as tightly as he can.

He falls asleep with a quiet 'Shane' on his lips.

He cracks his eyes open, immediately wishes he hadn't, and squeezes them shut again. He has no idea where he is or what day it is. His thoughts are tangled, his head is splitting, and he can't even recall how or why he ended up in... wherever he is now.

Oh wait, actually, he can.

Shane.

He groans. His head starts to hurt even more.

"Oh good, you're awake. I was getting worried," a voice says, startling him. A very female voice.

Fuck.

He slowly rolls onto his side, panic rising, and squints his eyes open.

There she is - a girl. Standing by the opposite side of the bed in nothing but her underwear. A girl who is not Svetlana. Very young and a complete stranger. His body might be seventeen, but his mind isn't, and he is absolutely not attracted to anyone still in high school.

"Fuck," he swears out loud.

"Seriously? Thanks, dude. You really know how to make a girl feel wanted," she says, no sympathy in her voice as she slowly buttons up her blouse.

"Sorry," he murmurs. "Sorry, don't take it personally, it's not about you."

"Relax, I get it. Hogging me all night and calling me by some other girl's name? Yeah, that's probably complicated."

Oh for the love of-

"Hey, chill. Nothing happened," she says, probably noticing how he's beating himself up.

He exhales slowly through his nose.

Ilya Rozanov is relieved he didn't have sex.

Sounds like a setup for another bad joke. His life's full of those lately.

"You smell awful." That's the first thing Svetlana says when he gets into her fancy new car. "Like you've been sleeping on the street for a week, and then someone poured a bottle of cheap perfume on you. You're disgusting, Ilya Rozanov."

It only gets worse from there. He's seen Svetlana at her best and her worst, but he's never seen her this furious.

The truth is, he didn't know what else to do on the outskirts of Moscow with an empty wallet and a dying phone, so he called her. And the way she's looking at him right now makes him question that choice and pretty much every other one in his life.

"You're an idiot," she spits out. "With all that talk about wanting to go down in hockey history, I assumed you meant records, titles, something worth bragging about. But no - instead you vanish for two days and choose to be the first idiot to ditch the national team and get kicked out before the roster even goes public. Amazing work, captain."

She slams on the brakes, forcing him to grab the overhead handle.

"Svetlana, maybe you--"

"Your father, the one you love so much, found out first," she cuts him off. "He had to tell your mom. Meanwhile, the police have been checking every hospital, bar, club, and drug den around."

He feels an unwelcome pang of guilt. His mother shouldn't be anywhere near his father, and he hates the thought of her worrying. Still, he can't help himself and mutters, "Pretty sure they missed a drug den or two."

Svetlana twists toward him so fast the seatbelt jerks her back down to the seat. She looks like she genuinely wants to strangle him here and now. He's trapped in a car with someone who's had her driver's license for a month and is currently deciding whether to punch him or throttle him. He knows he deserves it.

He decides it's probably wise to shut up if he wants to get home alive and in one piece.

He's been in the shower so long the steam is making him lightheaded. He scrubbed himself clean ages ago; at this point he's mostly hiding from his mom and Svetlana's combined wrath. Svetlana stopped talking to him halfway home, and he apologized to his mom the second he walked through the door, but he knows they're both waiting for an explanation.

Ilya Rozanov gets kicked off the junior national team.

It doesn't sound like a joke at all, and it should hit like a punch to the gut, but it doesn't. If anything, he feels almost nothing.

He's brushing his teeth, almost convinced he'll never get rid of the phantom taste of cheap vodka and flavored lipstick, when a thought hits him. A thought so simple and so obvious that he wants to break something.

Why is he such an idiot? Why did he let his emotions take over and snap like some hormonal teenager?

Because you are one, his inner voice reminds him.

There are at least a few simple, boring explanations for why Shane isn't on the Canadian roster - an injury, or an illness, or something else just as harmless. Ilya will never know unless he goes to Canada next week.

He grabs his phone from the charger on the shelf by the bathroom mirror and dials the coach - only to get yelled at for a solid minute.

No one is planning to give him a second chance.

He thinks about Svetlana's father, but she currently wants to drown him more than save him, and her father isn't a minister yet, so he probably can't help anyway. He stares at his own father's contact for a long time, but he can't bring himself to call. He also doesn't want to owe the old man anything if he can help it.

He helplessly scrolls his contacts for some time before he sees the number he forgot he had. He hesitates for a second and presses the button.

The call is answered on the first ring - almost like the person on the other end has been waiting for it.

Chapter End Notes

Teenage Ilya has taken over my brain. Please send help

The two accidents mentioned in the chapter are real. I'm usually not a fan of dragging (recent) real-life tragedies into fiction for drama, but those two were THE hockey tragedies of the last twenty years in Eastern Europe. There's no way Ilya wouldn't have known or been affected by those events, so forgive me for the infodumping.

Chapter 4: vi-x

Chapter Notes

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

vi.

“You’ve gotten yourself into quite a mess,” Sasha says softly, and he sounds almost impressed.

As the national team coach’s son, he’s very well informed about Ilya’s misadventures and doesn’t even bother to hide how pleased he is about it. Ilya pointedly looks past him, focusing instead on the display shelves showcasing all the commemorative pucks, trophies, and medals Sasha’s father has amassed over his long and decorated career.

In his previous life, his first time with Sasha happened on the couch beneath those shelves. It was clumsy and over too fast, but he still remembers an overwhelming sense of rightness. He can pretend it was all about curiosity and attraction, but it was also the thrill of doing it with his coach’s son - and the son of his father’s friend - under all the memorabilia earned for the glory of the Motherland, which Sasha half-jokingly called “his Daddy’s hockey altar.”

In this life, he gently made it clear to Sasha that he wasn’t interested. But the universe apparently has other plans - and a lousy sense of humor - because here they are again, in the same place, just a year later.

“Ilyusha, stop acting like you’re suddenly fascinated by all this hockey junk.” Sasha hooks his fingers under Ilya’s chin, forcing him to meet his eyes. “We were having such a nice conversation, and suddenly you zone out on me the moment we get to the fun part.”

Ilya grimaces, more at the embarrassingly childish version of his name than at anything else he just heard. He firmly wraps his hand around Sasha’s wrist - not to shove it away but more to assert a bit of control in this damn room, a place that drags up more memories than he has any interest in revisiting.

“Here’s the deal,” he says, drawing out each word. “You’ll call your father, and you’ll find all the right words to get me back on the team. I don’t need the captain’s patch; I don’t care which line he dumps me down to; I just need to be on the roster. And if you pull it off,” he lowers his voice, his finger tracing Sasha’s cheek, “then so be it, I’ll reward you with a blow job.”

He is ready to pay a much, much higher price if it gets him to Canada next week, but Sasha doesn’t need to know that.

“Not even a kiss? You really are hopeless and unromantic, Ilya.” Sasha leans in just a little, his tone teasing. “And what if Daddy says no?”

Ilya gives a quiet snort. They both know Sasha has his father wrapped around his little finger; otherwise, he’d have been shipped off to some military school ages ago.

“Then,” he whispers, pressing a slow kiss to the underside of Sasha’s jaw, “you’ll be a very persuasive and very good boy,” another kiss, just above the previous spot, “and make Daddy change his mind.”

vii.

Regina greets them with biting cold. Their team is one of the first to arrive - when the only acceptable outcome is gold, you don't let jet lag get in the way. Hardly anyone else is here yet - a scout or two, some press, and a group of local fans. The rest will arrive in the coming days, but Ilya isn't interested in any of them.

After some quick mental math to figure out how early it is in Moscow, he texts Mom and Svetlana. Both aren't particularly happy with him at the moment, but the idea of not getting Shane back sparks a not-so-irrational fear that fate might steal his mother from him too. That's why he talked Sveta into staying at their apartment for a week, pretending it was only so Mom wouldn't spend New Year's by herself. And that's why he texts them constantly whenever he has time and the time zones allow it. Any reply he gets - no matter how annoyed it is - means they're all right.

He also knows the Canadians are here already, with their first practice set for the evening, just two hours before his team takes the ice.

He can't wait to talk to their captain. He is equally terrified of the answers he might get.

Even sneaking out for a smoke is a challenge - he's still on probation, and Sasha's father has unironically promised to put him on the first flight home at Ilya's own expense if he so much as breathes the wrong way.

He knows it's mostly a bluff - Sasha talked his father into giving Ilya a second chance in no time, thanks in no small part to the backroom politics. The higher-ups might have been screaming for blood, and Ilya's own father was busy dripping poison into everyone's ears about his son deserving the harshest punishment for his stunt and lack of discipline, but the coaching staff knew perfectly well that some of those higher-ups would love to see them fail.

And without Ilya on the roster, that wasn't just a possibility - it was the most likely outcome.

At least no one questions him when he asks for permission to watch Team Canada's first practice.

They're good, he has to give them that. He remembers watching them in his previous life, remembers playing against them and beating them in the final, but he'd been far too preoccupied with only one person.

It feels wrong watching them practice without Shane, as if a key piece is missing from the puzzle, and only he seems aware of it. Ilya snorts when Bertuzzi - the captain, of all people - fails to bury a perfect pass and then wastes another scoring opportunity barely a minute later.

He knows precisely what - who - they're missing.

He catches up to Bertuzzi as he's coming off the ice, before the guy can disappear into the tunnel. His face looks vaguely familiar. Now that Ilya can see him closer, he is fairly sure Bertuzzi's career ended early because of some murky story, but specifics elude him. Not that it matters anyway.

"Where's Hollander? Is he injured or something?" he asks after introducing himself, relieved to finally drop the years-long act of barely speaking English.

His stomach twists when Bertuzzi looks at him in open confusion and asks, “Who?”

“Hollander. Shane Hollander. Roughly my height, dark-haired, half-Asian, with those stupid freckles all over his face. Has one hell of a shot, plays in the center.”

He knows he sounds almost desperate, like some zealot begging for a miracle to happen. Bertuzzi stares at him, suspicion written all over his face, as if he’s convinced Ilya is messing with him.

“Never heard of him.”

All the sounds collapse into silence, broken only by a rapid thump of his heartbeat inside his skull. Nausea rises, the air feels too thin, and the panic doesn’t ease, no matter how hard he tries to breathe through it.

He’s sitting on the ground with his back against the wall, in the exact same spot where it all started - where he first saw Shane Hollander.

In his previous life, some have long argued that the Rozanov-Hollander rivalry was exaggerated and inflated by the league and the media. But he, of all people, knows the truth: remove Shane from the equation, and there will be no Ilya Rozanov who dominated the league and dragged his team to their first MLH Cup in ages. They fueled each other, pushed each other, and were obsessed with each other, not only as lovers but first and foremost as hockey players. Even when some of their run-ins on the ice felt almost like foreplay, they shaped each other into the players they were.

Shane was the first person to make him realize that he didn’t just like hockey - he loved it. But it only truly mattered if Shane was in the picture.

His phone buzzes in his pocket - one of his girls must have replied to his earlier texts. But he doesn’t have the energy to check, and he definitely doesn’t have any words left in him.

It’s supposed to be freezing, and he shouldn’t be sitting on the ground. He also should be on his way to the locker room for the pre-practice meeting. But he honestly doesn’t care anymore, and he no longer feels the cold anyway.

His left hand hurts more than the rest of him, and there’s wetness clinging to the skin. He lifts his hand, drags his tongue over his knuckles, and the metallic taste confirms it. Blood. He’s had enough split lips and broken teeth over the years to recognize the tang. He must have slammed his fist into a wall or something equally hard and unforgiving, but the memory isn’t there.

He’s not sure he can do any of it - the Cup, the draft, the MLH - without Shane. He certainly doesn’t want to. And if not for the persistent thought of his mother tugging him back from the edge, he’d probably be looking for the highest bridge in Regina. Or maybe he could just sit here and let the cold lull him to sleep. Maybe he’ll wake up in the cottage, and Shane will hug him and tell him it was just a bad dream and that he’s got a ten-year plan to fix everything anyway...

He registers someone crouching in front of him, talking to him, but the words slide past him. Everything is out of focus, and only then does he realize he’s been crying. Embarrassed, he blinks rapidly and swipes at his face in a clumsy attempt to clear the tears.

He looks up and meets Yuna Hollander’s concerned gaze.

Yuna looks as unflappable as ever as she offers him a pack of wet wipes and repeats her earlier question, this time more slowly.

“Can you understand me?”

Yes. A reasonable question at a rink packed with teenagers from all over the world, most of whom likely spend more time on the ice than in English classes. He nods.

“Good, good. Are you hurt? There’s blood on your hand and on your face.”

No. He wants to say it’s nothing, that it’s just a scratch, and that the blood on his face probably came from his hand. Instead, he just shakes his head.

“Do you need me to get someone? Your parents, your coach, maybe a trainer?”

Another *no*. What he needs right now is to pull himself together and ask her about Shane, but he’s so damn tired that he can’t string even a single sentence together - in any language. And really, how do you even ask a woman you’re supposedly seeing for the first time in your life about a son who, by all signs, doesn’t exist?

Yuna’s hand on his wrist feels shockingly warm. “All right. Let’s get you inside and warmed up, dear. David, help me get him up, please.”

Oh. He hasn’t even noticed that Shane’s dad is here, hovering a step behind his wife.

Together, they haul him back onto his feet, and he doesn’t even bother to pretend he could’ve done it on his own.

Yuna carries the conversation for the three of them as they return to the rink and step inside, her palm rubbing small circles on his back.

She’s talking about everything and nothing - that they’re from Ottawa and both used to play; that this trip to Regina is the most spontaneous they’ve done in years; that the Toronto layover was a living nightmare; that their son - who, by the way, is absolutely obsessed with hockey, even if he mostly plays recreationally these days - is right over there by the vending machine; and that they should really get Ilya something hot to drink because he’s shivering, which, honestly, is no surprise...

He nods politely and-

Wait. Their son?

He stops dead in his tracks, snaps his head up, and frantically scans the hall around them. The last thing he expects is to find himself staring straight into the eyes of a very alive Shane Hollander.

Shane looks... awful, like a hollow shell of who he used to be. Not the “our layover in Toronto was a living nightmare, and I’m not okay” kind of awful, more of a “I haven’t been okay in a while” kind. He’s also paler and thinner - unhealthily so - and even the baggy clothes can’t hide it.

He is the most beautiful sight Ilya has ever seen in this new life.

Yuna asks him something, but he can't look away from Shane and his blank, frozen face. *God, I must be scaring him, covered in blood and staring at him like a maniac.* He's pictured their first meeting a thousand times, and every single one was better than this. *Great first impression, Ilya.*

His brain blanks when Shane exhales and murmurs something - uncertain, barely audible, hopeful. *Hopeful?*

"Ilya?" Shane repeats, louder.

Ilya closes the distance between them in three quick steps and pulls him into his arms - long before Shane manages to repeat the question.

Shane clutches at him with a grip that borders on painful, and Ilya realizes he's hugging him back just as desperately. He doesn't let go and only holds tighter, tucking his face into the crook of Shane's neck, breathing him in and feeling the pulse under his lips.

Shane is warm and real in his arms, but the lean, athletic frame Ilya remembers all too well is gone; there is only bone where muscle once was. *God, what happened to you?*

"Are you real?" Shane whispers into his shoulder. "All these years, they kept saying you weren't."

It finally clicks. While Ilya was tearing himself apart, thinking this was his own personal purgatory, Shane was facing the same one. He must have spoken about his past life, and of course no one believed him. Ilya doesn't want to think about what that disbelief cost him.

He cradles Shane's head with one hand, thumb slowly brushing through his hair as he breathes out the words, "I'm real, I promise. And you still have the most beautiful freckles. I've been waiting for you this entire new life."

Shane lets out a small, choked sound, dangerously close to a sob. "Does that mean I killed you too?"

Oh, Shane...

"Of course not." He aches to grab Shane's face and kiss him senseless to silence that stupid idea, but he's painfully aware of their surroundings. Five years in Russia, plus half a lifetime before that, have carved caution into him. Later, when they're alone, he'll make up for every lost second. "It was that stupid truck and that stupid crash. They took your life too, you know. Not your fault, never was."

He doesn't get an answer, and Ilya knows well enough they'll be returning to this topic later.

"How are you even here? You weren't on the roster when they first announced it," Shane asks eventually, sounding almost accusing.

"It's a long story," Ilya grumbles, mentally kicking himself for that particularly stupid moment of his life. "But of course I'm here. Like I could miss my chance to beat some Canadian asses."

"You're such an asshole," Shane mutters, and there's so much warmth in it that Ilya wants to hug him even tighter and never let go.

"I've missed you so much," he says instead.

He rocks Shane gently, and they stay like that for a bit, both knowing exactly what the other feels without saying anything.

Shane's breath hitches a couple of times, and Ilya can feel how hard he's trying to hold himself together. He squeezes the back of Shane's neck and quietly repeats, "We're okay," and "I've got you" each time it happens.

When they finally pull away from each other, he notices a lone tear trailing down Shane's cheek. Ilya gently brushes it away without thinking, his thumb lingering right where he caught it just a moment too long.

"I've missed you more," Shane says, not taking his teary eyes away from his face.

"Sure you did."

"Asshole," Shane shoots back with more affection than bite. "Are we still... boyfriends?"

Only Shane would ask something like that, always needing it spelled out for him. That's almost endearing; that's one of the many little things Ilya loves about him. "Yes. Do you even have to ask?"

Shane looks both relieved and a little confused, his eyes fixed stubbornly on Ilya's lips. *Ah.*

"Your parents are still here, Shane," he points out softly, nodding over his shoulder, as he mentally replays the last few minutes and calculates the amount of damage control they'll have to do in a moment.

Shane's eyes glint with sudden resolve as he grabs him by the pinky and drags him toward the rink's entrance, where wide-eyed Yuna and David are still standing in stunned silence. Ilya was so sure that the cottage incident was peak parental surprise for them, but nope. And he has to bite back a laugh at the fact that in both timelines Shane's parents find out about them in the least planned and graceful way possible.

"Mom, Dad, this is Ilya. Rozanov. I've told you about him," Shane says, and there's definitely an accusing edge to it. "I love him."

"I swear, your damage control is almost worse than my emotional one, Hollander," Ilya hisses.

Shane just squeezes his pinky tighter and smiles.



Boston Raiders
@bostonraiders

With the 21st overall pick in the 2011 #NHLDraft, we are proud to select Shane Hollander 🔥💣

07:32 PM · Jun 25, 2011

104 Retweets 5.8K Quote Tweets 146 Likes

hockeynight @h0ckeyn1ght_ · Replying to @bostonraiders

Who?



Bob Cherry  @bobcherryofficial · Replying to @bostonraiders

This is the biggest off-the-board pick of the first round. MLH Central Scouting rated him at No. 93 among North American skaters, while others didn't have him on the list at all.



Meow#24 @meowraiders · Replying to @bostonraiders

well we got Marner last year and the first pick a year before that AND it was Rozanov, our luck was too great to last lol (but seriously whyyyyyy)



xxryanxxx @xxryanxxx · Replying to @bostonraiders

Isn't that the kid BU signed literally out of nowhere last year?



Boston Squirell @bu4ever3 · Replying to @bostonraiders

@xxryanxxx yes! he struggled a bit in the first half of the season, but look at his stats now. he's generational, i'm telling you that. you're all blind and just don't see it yet 😏



StSt Mark @saintmarxx · Replying to @bostonraiders

@bu4ever3 wow you're so delusional



Marleau #1 Stan @CliffIsKing · Replying to @saintmark81

I was watching it live and the only person not surprised by this crazy pick was ILYA fucking ROZANOV. He was sitting together with this kid's family and hugged him after the announcement 🤪wtf



Power Play Podcast  @powerplaypodcast · Replying to @bostonraiders

We love Boston, but they could've picked anyone else and it would've been a better choice



Ilya Rozanov  @ilyarozanov24 · Replying to @bostonraiders

Welcome to the family @shanehollander81, let's go win that Cup 🤝💪



ix. / 4 months later - October 2011

“We’re back at TD Garden Arena with 12:48 left in the second period of the Raiders’ season opener against the Admirals. Boston is leading 2-0, both goals scored by the most surprising first line I’ve ever seen.”

“Rozanov wins the face-off. With pace to the Admirals’ zone. To Marleu. Back to Rozanov - look at the effort!”

“Hollander is lurking at the backdoor-”

“Does Rozanov even see him?”

“He does, or at least he know he's there! Blind backhand pass!”

“AND HE SCORES! OH, THAT’S FILTHY!”

“Wow, what a goal by Shane Hollander! Un-bie-liev-able!”

“Once is an accident, twice is a coincidence, three times is chemistry.”

“That type of chemistry... You can’t teach that. I can’t believe it’s their first game together.”

“And Hollander - the most debated draft pick in years, a kid with no record of playing hockey between the ages of twelve and eighteen - if he keeps it up, he’ll make the entire scouting world look silly. What a debut!”

“Looks like the Raiders knew exactly what they were doing by choosing him in the first round.”

“There’s his parents celebrating in the stands... And I think that’s Rozanov’s mom right beside them.”

“That’s nice to see, Drew. Rozanov talked a lot last year about how hard the adjustment to life in Boston was for her, especially with the language barrier.”

“Doesn’t look like a problem tonight. They’re celebrating like they’re one big family already.”

“Congratulations, Shane! I imagine a lot of emotions for you after your first MLH game.”

“It was fantastic and a lot of fun. It was also a team effort, I have the best linemates I could have ever asked for.”

“Oh yes, we’ll get to your instant chemistry with Rozanov in a moment. But first, how does playing in the MLH match up to what you dreamt of?”

“Like I’ve been playing here half of my life. Like this is exactly where I’m supposed to be.”

x. / 2 years later - September 2013

“Ilya, one more question for you. There have been a lot of engagement rumors going around. That ring in your vacation pictures got a lot of attention. Fans are naturally curious about who your partner might be. And given your recent fallout with the Russian Ice Hockey Federation, there’s been speculation that this might mean you’re looking for a citizenship here...”

Ilya smirks, since he probably knows those rumors better than the press. At one point, Shane actually threatened to nuke his Twitter - both the official account and the burner - and Ilya was forced to promise he’d stop tracking every piece of gossip and rage-baiting people online. But he and Shane have talked it over; they knew this question was coming today and made sure they’re ready for it.

“Is lie. Liar told you that. Not engaged,” he replies in deliberately bad English and winks to the reporter. “I’m married.”

end.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, what a ride! I still can’t believe this was supposed to be a one-shot and after four chapters it's actually finished :) And yes, I’m definitely never posting anything unfinished ever again, period.

This is my first fic in years, and my first one in English (ever). And the response has been absolutely mind-blowing <3 Warmest hugs to everyone who read, commented, screamed, and speculated in the comments. You’re the best, and you kept me going. <3<3<3

The original ending was supposed to be the end of part vii, with them hugging in the hall, but at some point I came to a conclusion that just wasn't fair to Shane. Ilya gets his mom and Shane back, while Shane gets a bunch of issues and a vague hint that maybe he’ll be okay someday. And that imbalance just didn’t sit right with me - they both deserve a real happy ending (or some version of it at least), so I had to give them one.

A whole bunch of OCs tried to sneak into this story at different points (Ilya’s divorced coach with a drinking problem, a teammate getting bullied, the “nothing happened last night” girl suddenly curious about the concept of enthusiastic consent etc), and I had to shove them all out :) Every single one of them looked either too shallow, too stereotypical, or shifted the focus of the whole story. Looking back, I think it was the right decision, but we’ll never know lol

I’ve also got a few AU and side-story ideas living rent-free in my head right now, so who knows what’s coming next. The first one - heavily commented - is Baby Shane POV, who doesn't know Ilya and gets that "weak backhand" mail from Russia. I have no idea how to approach it while staying true to his character, but the idea is so compelling I kind of wish someone else could write it for me lol. The second is the kind everyone claims to hate: “what if Shane dies in his new life, and Ilya is miserable, and Yuna is miserable and hates Ilya from afar without ever meeting him, but eventually they meet and realize they’re grieving the same person and it makes things a little better for both of them.” And maybe an oblivious Irina pov - her son suddenly sharing his Boston apartment with a Canadian friend who literally came out

of nowhere and walks him like a dog, while said son looks at him with pure adoration whenever he folds laundry or cleans sth ☹️☹️ Shane's pov in the post-crash timeline will be too painful to write, but on the other hand Yuna's perspective also sounds compelling... And no, the public reaction to "I am married" is not happening - I enjoy socmed AUs but I suck at writing them, and "I am married" doesn't even mean coming out. The league is still a pretty awful place for queer players, the friendly neighbourhood gay Ottawa Centaurs don't exist yet, and Scott is still deep in his closet. And it's just very Ilya thing to drop a line like that and let the internet lose its mind over it for a couple of months :)

Knowing me, it'll take months to write any of that (if I ever do it in the first place)... But if someone told me last year I'd be writing a fic in English for a fandom called Heated Rivalry, I would've laughed like crazy. So we'll see ;)

Love you all <3

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!