**this, the tale of reckless love**

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# this, the tale of reckless love

by justhockey

Summary

He wasn't ready for this.

Maybe he never would have been, not in two, or five, or ten years. Maybe he would have spent the rest of his life holding this secret inside, not telling a single soul about the way his heart beats for his biggest rival. Or maybe, in a year or ten or once he's retired, he might have come out publicly. Might have shared his truth with the world.

But that was supposed to be his choice. To tell or not to tell, to hide in the shade or step out into the sunshine. It was supposed to be his decision, and now it's been taken from him.

Notes

Title from *Partners in Crime* by Set It Off.

See the end of the work for more notes

Shane is sleeping soundly when it leaks.

The Voyageurs won with a huge 4-0 shutout against Vegas and his parents are just down the hall, sleeping in his guest room for a few days simply because they miss him. Things are good. Great. Shane has no idea that his entire world is splintering open.

He's making the most of a day off, still fast asleep at 7am when he's usually been awake for at least an hour by now. He's dreaming about something good - some*one* good, who smells like ice and skin and, faintly, like cloves. Someone with soft golden curls, and eyes Shane would happily drown in, and an accent that wraps around his name in a way that almost feels like belonging. Like ownership.

The knock on his bedroom door startles him awake. It's not loud, exactly, but Shane has always been a light sleeper. His eyes flutter open and he swallows down a yawn as the knock comes again, insistent and firm.

It makes something curdle inside him.

He roots around for his glasses on his bedside table, shoving them onto his face as he stumbles out of bed. He tugs on the sweatpants folded neatly on the chair in the corner of his room, and then he opens his bedroom door.

It's his mom, standing there with shifting eyes and wringing hands. And Shane doesn't know what's happened but he knows it's something big. Something bad. It's written all over her face.

"Can you come to the living room, please?" His mom asks. "There's something we need to talk about."

"Mom, what's wrong?" Shane asks, his nerves slipping into his voice as he follows her.

When they walk into the living room, Shane's dad is already waiting for them both. He's perched on the edge of Shane's couch, hands clasped between his knees as he watches Shane with a look that he struggles to place. It's never easy for him to read people's expressions, but it's even more difficult when they're guarding their emotions as closely as his parents are right now.

"Can someone tell me what's going on, please?"

"Sit down, kid," his dad tells him.

Shane does as he's told. Every terrible possibility flashes through his head like the trailers before a movie starts: he's being traded, there's been an accident, someone is dead. His grandpa, maybe? He's getting old now. Or, fuck, surely not a teammate?

"Shane, sweetheart," his mom begins, in that voice she reserves solely for delivering bad news. "A picture has been leaked online."

Shane freezes.

“A - a picture? What picture? I don’t-“

“Of you, kid.”

“You and, well,” his mom pauses, sucks in a breath like she needs it for courage. “You and Rozanov. Together.”

Everything kind of just…stops.

The air in the room and in his lungs. The thoughts in his head. The blood flowing through his veins. His *heart.* The entire fucking planet. It’s like a moment halted in time.

Like the world took a screenshot of the exact second his life collapsed beneath his feet.

There’s nothing at all for a brief, blissful moment, and then everything rushes back at him in an instant. Like a tsunami coming to sweep away everything Shane has built, and he is completely helpless to stop the flood. There isn’t even anything he can do to mitigate the damage.

No.

*No, no, no,* this can’t be happening. It isn’t real. Surely, surely it isn’t real. They’ve been hiding this for almost a decade. Making a secret out of something that is supposed to feel like freedom. They’ve been so fucking *careful;* they’ve had to be. He doesn’t understand how they fucked up. *Where* they fucked up.

And god - *Rozanov.*

However catastrophic this is for Shane, it is infinitely worse for him. Shane knows all about Russia, even though Rozanov still hesitates to talk about it. He knows what happens to people like them over there. Fines, or jail, or worse. So, *so* much worse. It was a secret for the sake of their careers, and their privacy, but it was also a secret for Rozanov’s safety.

And now it’s all just blown up in their faces.

It wasn’t even supposed to be anything serious, that’s what they’d told themselves and each other for years.

Shane knows it’s not true, of course. Knows it hasn’t been true since that very first time in Toronto, all those years ago. The way they look at each other, touch each other, kiss each other - the way that they make love, sometimes, soft and slow and deliriously passionate - is a world away from the *casual* they’ve always claimed to be.

But now…now what the fuck are they supposed to do?

“Shane, buddy. Can you talk to us?” His dad’s voice startles Shane out of spiralling.

He looks up, sees his parents looking back at him. Can't properly figure out the expressions on their forlorn faces.

They know, now. They know the biggest secret that Shane has ever kept from them. The *only* secret probably, or the only one that matters at least. And he's terrified right down to his very core that they'll look at him differently now. They'll still love him, of course. Will accept him without reservation because his parents are unfailingly good people. But that doesn't mean they won't see him in a different light.

It doesn't mean things won't change for them.

"What, um. What picture?" He manages to ask, the words heavy and clumsy on his lips.

He glances around for his phone. He'd forgotten to take it to bed last night so it's just sitting there on the coffee table. He watches it light up, then go dark, then light up again immediately. He can see the notifications rolling in and he wants to throw up. Wants to check them, wants to scour every corner of the internet as much as he wants to throw it out of his third-floor window and hide from the world.

He picks it up, watches more and more notifications blowing up, then places it back onto the coffee table. Face down.

In the end, it's his mom who passes him her own phone. There's a photograph open on the screen; it's the photo that will change everything.

He doesn't know who took it, who shared it with the rest of the world like it was theirs to give away.

He recognises it instantly, though.

It's from just a couple of weeks ago, at the All Star Game in Tampa Bay. They'd played together for the very first time, and their team had won with a respectable 9-7 victory. Rozanov had found Shane on the beach, and Shane had followed him to his room, and they'd talked. Finally. After too many years of ignorance.

Shane had left that room different than he went in. Hollander had become Shane, and Rozanov had become Ilya. And Shane was hopeful, perhaps, that they were finally on the same page.

All of that is ruined now.

He doesn't remember seeing anyone lurking in the hallway when he'd peered out of Ilya's door to check that the coast was clear. And he's always so careful, so meticulous. The interloper must have been well hidden. Or Shane must have been distracted by Ilya's hand still on his hip - by the way his eyes had glistened, and he'd smiled so softly, and Shane simply couldn't stop himself from stealing one final goodbye kiss.

He didn't know it would be the kiss that doomed them.

It could have been another hockey player who'd taken it, even if they weren't the one who shared it. Almost the whole hotel was booked out for the games, including the entire floor that Shane and Ilya had been staying on. That kind of makes it worse, almost, that this betrayal - the one that might just ruin both of their lives - might have come from one of his peers. His colleagues. Maybe even one of his friends.

A notification appears at the top of the screen and he thrusts the phone back into his mom's hands before he can be tempted to read it.

He wonders, for the briefest of moments, if he could lie. If he could say it was photoshopped in an attempt to sabotage them. He glances at his parents to gauge whether that kind of lie might work on them. But his dad is looking at his mom, and his mom…she's looking at Shane's t-shirt. The one he'd slept in last night.

The one with a black and yellow *81* splayed across his chest.

"*Mom.*"

"Oh, my boy. It's okay. It's all going to be okay," she promises him. It's a promise they both know she cannot keep.

She reaches a hand out, rests it on his knee as she chases his eyes. Shane can't meet them, though. His breath feels shallow, and his skin feels prickly and paper thin; the slightest touch and Shane will be torn open.

"We love you, Shane. No matter what. This doesn't change a thing. You understand that, don't you?" His dad asks.

Shane startles even himself as a laugh bursts out of his chest. It's bitter, cold, too harsh.

"It changes everything," he argues. "Nothing will ever be the same now."

He's going to lose it all, isn't he?

His friends, his team, maybe even hockey all together. The only thing he's ever really loved is going to be taken away from him, and he doesn't know how he's supposed to survive that kind of grief. He's nothing without hockey. It's in his blood and bones and soul. Without hockey, he's not even sure he really exists.

And he's going to lose Rozanov, too. *Ilya.* Right when they were on the cusp of becoming something real.

"I'm gay," he whispers. Then, "I'm sorry. Sorry that I lied."

"Shane, my darling boy. It's okay," his mom assures him.

Her voice is quiet, and soothing, and it makes Shane feel a little bit like a child again.

"You didn't lie. You're allowed to keep things for yourself. This is…it's big, right? It's okay that you weren't ready to talk about it. You don't owe us anything you're not prepared to

give."

His mom is, god, she's *perfect.* Always knows the right thing to say exactly at the right time.

This time it's just not enough, though. He doesn't think there's anything anyone could say or do to make him feel better right now. Not as his entire future collapses in on itself.

Because this isn't just about the present, about the here and now. It's not even about the near future - about the way they'll address it, or the way his friends and his team and the league will handle the aftermath. It's about everything that comes beyond that. It's about what his life looks like when the dust finally settles, and if there'll be enough of it leftover for him to begin to rebuild.

"Have management been in touch yet?"

His mom shakes her head. "Your agent has called, but the team hasn't reached out yet."

Shane nods. He knows his mom will have handled his agent, for now at least. No one dares mess with Yuna Hollander, especially not when it comes to her son. The fact that Montréal hasn't been in touch yet? That's a little more concerning.

"What are people saying?" He has to know.

His mom and dad glance at each other before looking to him, and that doesn't make him feel particularly optimistic. He pushes his fingers up under his glasses, rubbing his eyes until he sees kaleidoscopes.

"They're…surprised," his dad hedges.

"Some people think it's fake. A few, well. A few are claiming they aren't surprised. People want to know long you and Rozanov have been - you know."

Shane digs his fingers into his eyes. Sighs. Shakes his head.

"And I'm guessing you are as well?"

"You don't have to tell us anything," his dad says immediately.

"But it might help with, y'know, controlling the narrative," his mom adds, ever the momager, even in times of crisis. It's a small comfort, he supposes, that at least that hasn't changed.

Fuck, he wants to talk to Ilya. He needs to figure this out with *him* before they try to make a game plan. But Shane is too scared to even *look at* his phone right now, let alone trawl through the no-doubt hundreds of messages in order to find his text thread with Ilya.

He's also terrified that Ilya won't answer. Shane isn't sure if he's prepared to face that possibility yet. Especially because he thinks that might hurt worst of all, and he's not sure what to do with that. Not amongst all the other chaos.

He sighs again, leaning back in the armchair and looking at the empty space between his parents' heads.

"A long time," he confesses.

He doesn't look at their faces but he sees the way they both shift, sees their heads turning to look at each other before they come back to Shane.

"How - how long is that, kid?" His dad gently presses.

"Since rookie year," he admits. "Well. The summer before, technically."

He's met with silence. With held breaths, and ominous stillness. He bravely risks a look at his mom, first, and then his dad. They look…surprised, to say the least. Dumbfounded might be more accurate. Or shell-shocked, like Shane has just dropped a bomb on everything they thought they knew about their son.

"It was casual, at first," Shane adds, maybe to soften the blow.

"But - but not anymore?"

"I don't know. No. Maybe it never was. We spent a lot of time pretending," Shane acknowledges. "Things sort of changed at the All Star game. But I don't suppose that matters now."

He's afraid that Ilya will never forgive him for this. Afraid he will never forgive him for not noticing that they were being watched, for being reckless enough to kiss Ilya in the doorway in a hotel full of hockey players, for daring to ask for more than he was supposed to want.

"Shane…"

"What the fuck am I gonna do?" His voice breaks, and he pulls his knees up to his chest just for something to hold onto. Something to dig his fingers into.

He wasn't ready for this.

Maybe he never would have been, not in two, or five, or ten years. Maybe he would have spent the rest of his life holding this secret inside, not telling a single soul about the way his heart beats for his biggest rival. Or maybe, in a year or ten or once he's retired, he might have come out publicly. Might have shared his truth with the world.

But that was supposed to be his choice. To tell or not to tell, to hide in the shade or step out into the sunshine. It was supposed to be his decision, and now it's been taken from him.

It feels like a violation. Like something has been stolen.

Shane has never felt so vulnerable in his entire life, and the only thing he wants - the thing he *needs* - is to hide away in Ilya's arms, where he has never once felt afraid, or ashamed, or *less than.* The only thing that could make any of this hurt less, is the one thing that he can't have.

He buries his face in his knees as his mom asks, “Can I hug you?”

He shakes his head. “No. Please. Just - just not yet.”

“Okay. Okay, whatever you need, Shane.”

“What can we do?” His dad asks. “Right now, in this moment, how can we help?”

Shane’s laugh is wet and garbled, muffled from the way he’s hiding his face. “You got a time machine?”

That’s the only way this could be fixed. If Shane could go back in time to the ASG in Tampa, maybe he wouldn’t go to Ilya’s hotel room. Or, no, that’s not true. He would still go, but he just wouldn’t leave. He would spend the night. Sneak out in the early hours of the morning, while everyone else was still hungover in their beds.

Just as the silence starts to become unbearable, there’s a knock at the door. One, two, threefourfive. Hayden’s knock.

Shane doesn’t move, he doesn’t have to. His mom heads to the door and he hears new voices, two of them. Hayden and Jackie. He listens to them getting closer, but he doesn’t dare move his face from where it’s burrowed between his knees. He’s not sure if he can look at them. Especially not Hayden, who’s been nagging him about *Boston Lily* for years now. Who hates Rozanov more than Shane ever even pretended to.

“Shane, Hayden and Jackie are here to see you.”

He lifts his head just a little, his eyes peering up at them. Jackie smiles and waves at him.

“Hi, sugar.”

“Hey, bud,” Hayden says. “How you holding up?”

“How do you think?” Shane asks rhetorically.

He sits up properly, unfolding his body and putting his feet back down on the floor. It’s one thing to fall apart in front of his parents, who have seen Shane melt down a million times before. But he won’t do that front of his best friends, in front of his *teammate,* who - at least for now - Shane is still the captain of.

His mom hovers for a moment, then she rests a hand on his dad’s shoulder and nods towards the kitchen. His puts his hands on his knees, grunting as he stands up.

“We’ll give you guys a minute,” he announces, then follows his wife into the kitchen.

And then Shane is left alone with Hayden and Jackie. They sit down where his parents had been sitting earlier.

“I’m sorry.”

Hayden frowns. Jackie scoffs. Both of them wave their hands dismissively.

“You don’t have to apologise,” Jackie tells him.

“You haven’t done anything wrong,” Hayden adds.

Maybe. Maybe not. He should have trusted them, he thinks. Even if not about Ilya, then about the fact that he’s gay. His mom had said he doesn’t owe anyone anything that he isn’t ready to give, and that might be true, but. His best friends deserve his honesty now, at least, even if he couldn’t give it to them before.

“It’s true,” he tells them both. “It’s not, like, photoshop or anything.”

“Yeah. We figured,” Jackie says, smiling softly.

“You’re wearing his t-shirt,” Hayden points out.

It’s not a conscious decision, but Shane finds himself reaching a hand up to cover the *81* on his chest, right above his heart. He closes his eyes for a moment, takes a breath, then looks back to his friends.

“Boston Lily, eh?” Hayden asks, and Shane just nods. “Jesus, Shane. How long has this been going on?”

Shane tenses, right as Jackie elbows Hayden in the ribs. He yelps, leaning away from his wife.

“Ow, fuck. What the hell, babe? I didn’t mean it like *that,*” he insists. “Just - it’s a long time to keep something so big a secret.”

It is. Seven fucking years worth of lying, and hiding, and secrets, all wasted because some idiot with a phone decided that their privacy meant less than selling a story.

“Are you - I mean. Are you pissed at me?”

“No,” Jackie answers, before Hayden can even open his mouth. “Of course we’re not pissed at you.”

Jackie is an angel of a woman. Three kids already, and another one on the way, all while her husband travels the continent for nine months a year. She has the patience of a saint, and the heart of one too. It’s not her that Shane is worried about.

It’s Hayden and his hatred for Boston, but for Ilya most of all.

He looks his best friend square in the face, waiting for his answer. But while Hayden still looks stunned, he doesn’t look even remotely angry.

“Of course not, bud. You could have told me - I want you to know that - but I understand why you didn’t,” he says. “And while I don’t really get why you’d pick *him,* I trust you and your judgment, so…”

Hayden trails off, shrugging his shoulders as he subconsciously rests a hand on his wife's round stomach.

It's, well - it's the best Shane could have hoped for, honestly. He thinks finding out your best friend is not only gay, but is also intimately involved with your arch fucking rival, would be enough to shock anybody.

Montréal and Boston have been at each other's throats since before Shane and Hayden were even born, but the rivalry has only been exacerbated since Hollander and Rozanov were drafted. He figures a little anger might have even been warranted, but his best friend clearly still finds ways to surprise Shane.

"I don't know what the fuck I'm supposed to do," Shane admits.

"Have you spoken to him? Rozanov?" Hayden asks, and while it's clear that he's trying, he still spits out Ilya's name like it's something poisonous.

Shane shakes his head.

"Has he reached out?"

"I don't know. I'm too scared to look at my phone. I don't think I'm ready to see what everyone is saying about me."

He watches as Hayden and Jackie glance at each other, so quick it almost goes unnoticed.

But Shane catches it - catches the expressions on their faces that he can't quite work out, but he knows they don't mean anything good. His parents were clearly trying to protect him from what people are saying online. It's bad. Of course it's bad.

And then he remembers the group chats. The Voyageurs one, and then the one he's in with players from around the league, and he kind of wants to throw up.

What are they saying in them? Are they slating him, belittling him, harassing him? Or has he been kicked out of them already? No longer welcome in their circle, or their chats, or their sport.

"What are the guys saying?" He ask, his throat tight and his voice choked. Hayden doesn't answer. "Tell me."

"Shane, I don't think now is the-"

"Tell me!" He repeats, panic and anger and terror all flooding his nervous system.

He thinks he might have been numb, before. The shock of the whole situation making his emotions feel muted, distant, like something he could brush his fingers against but not quite grab hold of.

What he had thought was a tsunami was actually only the water retreating.

Now, though? Now it fucking drowns him. He thought he'd been scared before, thought he'd been anxious and apprehensive and overwhelmed. But that's got nothing on the wave of feelings that crest over him now, sharp and ice cold, filling his lungs and his head with sickening, debilitating dread.

Shane gasps, but he can't catch his breath.

He jumps out of his armchair like he's just been electrocuted, starts pacing the floor just as his parents rush back into the room.

Everyone is standing, now. Hovering around Shane with shared looks of concern and pity, that only fuel the maelstrom that's twisting up inside of him.

He can't breathe properly.

His skin is prickling, like there's a livewire running beneath the surface, and his hands and face are starting to tingle.

The light is too bright - even though it's still morning and the sun hasn't even reached its peak yet - and everything is so *loud.* The sound of his own heartbeat thrumming in his ears, the rustle of Jackie's coat every time she moves, his mom's panicked breaths.

Shane feels like he's going into overload.

It's not the first time this has happened to him. Not by a long shot.

It used to look worse when he was a kid, with so many big feelings inside such a small body. It used to feel like he might explode from keeping it inside, and so his little hands would curl into fists and he'd hit and pinch his thighs or chest like he was trying to make all of the noise stop. Like the external pain could alleviate the internal one.

This is a much quieter breaking.

The storm rages inside of him as Shane stands entirely motionless. He taps out a rhythm with his hands. Presses his thumbs to his index fingers, middle fingers, ring fingers, and pinkies, and then he does it all over again. If he messes up - taps one finger twice - he has to tap *all* of them twice until it feels right, and then he can go back to his usual rhythm.

It soothes him sometimes, but not now. Not with something as big as this.

He hears voices around him, soft, rumbling sounds, like thunder in the distance. They're indistinguishable, though. He doesn't know who is speaking or what they are saying, and he doesn't care all that much. Would like them to stop entirely, if he's being honest, but he can't find his voice in order to ask for silence.

So he stands in the middle of the room, completely frozen, as his parents and his friends surround him.

They don't touch him, which he's grateful for. Thinks maybe, through the haziness, he hears his mom tell Jackie and Hayden that touching him will only make it worse. He's not sure.

He’s not sure of anything right now, except for the fact that he feels like he’s coming apart. Like he’s being unstitched at the seams, and the thread that usually holds him together is now unravelling.

He thinks he might be holding his breath.

Shane isn’t sure how long he’s been standing there when a sound cuts through the fog.

The click of a key in a lock. His front door swinging open and then slamming closed. Voices, all blurring together in a way that he can’t untangle. Except for one.

*Ilya.*

“Shane? Shane, are you-“

Ilya comes into focus.

With messy hair, and red cheeks, and wild, frantic eyes, Shane thinks he’s never seen anything more perfect in his entire life.

He thinks he makes a sound, but he’s not entirely sure. All he knows is that Ilya’s face crumples, pained, and suddenly he’s moving forward again - moving towards Shane.

“Rozanov, don’t touch-” he hears someone, maybe Hayden, begin to say.

Ilya doesn’t listen.

He crashes into Shane, his arms wrapping around him so tightly that it makes Shane’s bones creak.

And Shane…he finally lets go.

His knees buckle as a quiet sob bursts out of his chest, but Ilya doesn’t let him fall. He keeps both of them standing, taking almost all of Shane’s weight as he holds him to his chest. Shane just about manages to lift his arms and curl them around Ilya’s waist, clinging onto him like Ilya is the only thing keeping him tethered to reality.

He buries his face in Ilya’s neck, sucks in a desperate, gasping breath, and murmurs, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“No,” Ilya says, immediately silencing Shane’s rambling. “No sorries. Not from you. You did nothing wrong.”

“I shouldn’t have kissed you. I didn’t see anyone, I swear, but I still shouldn’t have-“

“Shane, sweetheart, *please.* You are my breaking my heart,” Ilya whispers.

He presses kiss after kiss into Shane’s hair, against his temple, along the shell of his ear, and to every single part of Shane that he can reach. He doesn’t loosen his hold, doesn’t try to pull

away, just moves his hand to the back of Shane's head to cradle him carefully, like he's something precious. Someone worthy of such gentleness.

And Shane knows his parents are watching this. Knows Hayden and Jackie are, too.

But Shane can't find the strength to pull away from Ilya - not when it feels like his arms are the only thing holding Shane together. Not when this is the first time breathing has come easy to Shane since the moment his mom knocked on his bedroom door.

They know now, anyway. There's no point hiding. He might as well let them see - let them *understand* - exactly why Ilya is worth almost a decade of hiding.

"It's okay. It will all be okay," Ilya promises him, and the way he says it - so steady, so certain - makes Shane believe that it is true. Makes him think Ilya would do anything at all to guarantee it.

"I'm scared," Shane whispers.

"Yes, it is scary. But you are brave."

Shane can't help but laugh. Not the bitter, frightened laugh from earlier, but something real. Something honest. Ilya brings that out of him even now, in moments like these. Ilya, perhaps, is the best of him.

Maybe it's not hockey in his blood and bones and soul. Maybe it's Ilya.

For Shane, Ilya Rozanov has been tied to hockey for almost as long as he can remember - has become synonymous with the game. With his love for it.

And Shane loves Ilya, too. He's known it for a while now, even though he spent such a long time refusing to acknowledge it. But he knows it as surely as he knows his own name - knows it without any hesitations, or reservations, or doubts. And he's never been as certain of it as he is in this moment.

Because, as their world disintegrates around them, Ilya is creating a new one for Shane, right here in his arms.

Ilya is holding Shane up, keeping the panic at bay, even as his own life is in disarray. Even though this is happening to him, too, and his own future on his team, in the league, in the *country,* could be in jeopardy.

"How are you even here?" Shane asks, finally pulling away from Ilya enough to look him in the eyes.

Ilya, impossibly gently, caresses Shane's freckles with his thumb. It makes Shane shiver, leaning into his touch like he's afraid it might be taken from him.

"The team was in LA after game. I was still awake when the photograph leaked - time differences," Ilya explains. "You didn't answer any of my calls or texts, so I got on first flight here."

Shane sighs, leaning his forehead against Ilya's mouth and chin in search of a kiss. Ilya gives it to him without hesitation.

"Thank you," he whispers. "I needed you."

"I needed you too, sweetheart."

Those words…they make the remaining tension seep out of Shane's body.

He'd been so afraid that Ilya would be furious with him, so afraid that whatever understanding they had come to in Tampa wouldn't be strong enough to withstand a catastrophe of this magnitude. Maybe, secretly, he'd even worried that this thing between them didn't mean as much to Ilya as it does to Shane. But those few words - and flying here without hesitation, and holding him so tenderly - have proved that he's in this just as much as Shane is.

He isn't backing out, not even if the face of the mountain of scrutiny they're going to have to deal with.

He pulls back again, taking a moment to just look at Ilya. At the shine in his eyes, the smile curling at the corners of his lips, the faint flush on his cheeks. *Beautiful,* Shane thinks. Even with the dark shadows under his eyes and the furrow between his brows. The worry hiding in his irises. *Mine.*

"You wore these glasses just for me, hm?" Ilya asks.

"Shut up," Shane mutters, but he can feel his skin turning pink under Ilya's unfettered attention, even as he rolls his eyes.

"Very pretty, kótik. Thank you."

Ilya grins, bright, teasing, *adoring,* even. And it never fails to catch Shane off guard, the way he can read Ilya so clearly when he struggles with just about everyone else. Maybe it's because they're linked together by something neither of them can see - a string tying them together that can't ever be broken.

Or maybe Ilya is just an open book when it comes to Shane, now that they have nothing to hide from each other.

"Ilya, my parents are here," Shane hisses, suddenly remembering that they're not alone.

Ilya has always had a way of making the rest of the world disappear when they're together.

And while Shane doesn't quite feel ready to face it yet, he knows he doesn't have to do it alone anymore. So he turns around, one of Ilya's arms falling away from him but the other remaining wound around his waist even as they face Shane's parents. Jackie. *Hayden.*

He's not sure what he's expecting to find, but he leans into Ilya's side and braces for impact anyway. Just in case.

He's met with four slightly baffled faces, and while he isn't sure what exactly they're thinking, it doesn't seem bad. Jackie is grinning, and his mom is almost smiling, and his dad and Hayden, well. He's not exactly sure *what* their faces are doing.

"Ilya, these are my parents, Yuna and David."

Without missing a beat, Ilya takes a step forward and extends his hand. To Shane's mom first, who shakes it politely, and then to his dad, who shakes it more insistently.

"It is very nice to meet you," Ilya greets them. "I am very big fan of your work."

Ilya gestures to Shane with - unbelievably - a genuine smile on his face. Jesus Christ. He's not even fucking around; he actually means what he is saying.

Shane's mouths a disbelieving *oh my god,* while Jackie bursts out laughing, Hayden groans painfully, and both of Shane's parents smile proudly. He can't believe this is his life right now - has no idea how, less than two hours before, he was sleeping soundly in his bed. It feels like a lifetime ago now. Like another reality entirely.

"You know Hayden, of course," Shane says, continuing with the introductions. "And this is his wife, Jackie."

"Nice to meet you, Ilya," she says.

"Jackie, you are far too good for Pike. He is only Montréal's fifteenth best player."

Jackie laughs again as she takes Ilya's proffered hand, while Hayden grumbles under his breath.

"I can hear you, Rozanov," Hayden informs him.

"Yes, I know. That is the point."

"Shane, break up with him," Hayden demands. Jokingly, *probably.*

"No," Ilya replies for him. "Shane is not allowed. I will not let him."

Embarrassingly, that makes Shane blush. It's just…nice, is all, being wanted like that. Maybe - maybe even being loved? If he's really, *really* lucky. And he figures he deserves a little luck from the universe, given all the shit she's been throwing at him recently.

"Really?" Shane asks, quiet. Just for two of them.

Ilya kisses the high point of Shane's cheekbone as he whispers, "Of course. I am not letting you go now that you are mine."

Shane sighs in relief. Lists sideways so he's leaning his body against Ilya. And Ilya doesn't waver, doesn't stumble, he just bears Shane's weight like it is easy. Like he'd carry him through anything.

“Well, Rozanov-“

“Ilya, please.”

“*Ilya,*” his mom corrects herself. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

“Yes, it is,” Shane’s dad reiterates. “The circumstances aren’t ideal, of course. But we’re glad to meet you, nonetheless.”

The moment is so unbelievable - so impossible - that Shane feels his eyes welling with tears.

He remembers desperately hoping that he could somehow bump into Ilya at an awards ceremony, with his parents in tow. He’d wanted an excuse to introduce Ilya to them, even just as Rozanov - just as a fellow player. He’d needed proof that they existed in the same world; he’d needed proof that the Shane his parents knew and the Shane that Ilya knew were actually one person.

That who he *was,* and who he *wanted* to be, weren’t so far apart from each other.

And now here they are - as the world outside prepares to crucify them both - meeting Shane’s family and best friends like nothing about this is strange. Like the circumstances aren’t devastating, and painful, and frightening.

“I am sorry it had to be this way,” Ilya says, and Shane’s parents, Hayden, and Jackie all nod their heads.

“Well. At least you’re here,” Hayden says. “It was, uh, good of you. To come.”

Ilya grins. “It hurt you to say that, yes?”

Hayden snorts out a laugh. “Yes. Very much so.”

“He’s right, Ilya,” Shane’s mom says. “It’s good of you to be here. And it makes it easier to decide what we’re going to do about all of this. What we’re going to say.”

He doesn’t mean to, but Shane’s entire body stiffens in an instant.

For a little while he’d allowed himself to get lost in Ilya’s presence, almost forgetting what they still have to face outside of their little bubble.

His mom’s comment brutally snaps him back to a reality than he’s not ready to live in yet.

The tension is radiating off him, but while everyone else is oblivious to it, Ilya is dialled in immediately. His gaze shifts from Yuna to Shane, his brows furrowed in concern as he analyses the expression on Shane’s face. He can see the worry, the fear, the anxiety, all swirling inside of Shane like a tornado that’s gathering speed. He can read him like an open book.

Ilya strokes Shane’s flank, then rests his hand on Shane’s hip and squeezes firmly. It’s comforting, grounding; it helps Shane take a steadying breath to stop the panic from lodging

its claws into his lungs.

“Maybe we talk about this later, yes?” Ilya suggests, voice cutting through the scattered conversation.

“Rozanov, everyone is-“ Hayden begins, but Ilya just talks over him.

“World will still be on fire in a few hours. We can wait a little while before we have to do anything about it.”

“Shane?” His dad pulls him into the conversation. “What do you think? Do you want-“

“Yes,” he says. “Yeah, I just. Need some time, please. I can’t - right now, I can’t-“

“Is okay, sweetheart.” Ilya soothes him with a gentle hand cupping his jaw, forcing Shane to meet his eyes and take a breath. “There is no rush. We have time.”

And the thing is, Ilya is right. They do have time. They can’t change what’s happened, they can’t take it back even if they wanted to.

It’s out there now, for the whole world to see, and whether they address it in an hour, or ten, or a whole day, it isn’t going to change the fact that their secret is no longer theirs. That the one thing Shane and Ilya wanted to keep for themselves is now suddenly available for the public to witness, and judge, and pick apart.

There’s no harm in taking a moment - taking a breath and collecting themselves - before they decide how they’re going to handle this.

Like Ilya said, the world will still be on fire in a few hours. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to prepare before they go out to fight the flames.

“Well, uh. We’ll go and make us all some coffee,” Jackie says, herding everyone out of the room. “You two take a minute.”

And Shane thinks he’s never been more grateful for anyone in his life. Thinks maybe Jackie has just taken Hayden’s place as Shane’s very best friend.

As soon as they’re all out of sight, Shane’s whole body sags into Ilya’s. And Ilya, who’s always got his back, pulls him close and holds on tight. For a while, they both just breathe in each other’s arms. They don’t say anything, don’t look at each other, they don’t even move, they just use each other to recharge.

When Shane’s heart rate is finally back within its normal range, he leans back and tilts his face up towards Ilya’s.

“How are you, baby? Are you okay?” Shane asks, reaching a hand up to trace the dark circles beneath Ilya’s eyes.

“I am okay, Shane.”

“It’s alright if you’re not, y’know? This is happening to you, too. And with Russia…”

“I do not care about Russia. I care about you.”

“Ilya…”

“Is horrible feeling, having this choice taken from us. I want to kill whoever did it. But Russia is not my home anymore. If I cannot go back, is okay. I do not mind.”

“I’m sorry. So sorry this is happening.”

“It is not your fault, moya lyubov. And we will deal with this together, yes? You will not be alone for it.”

“Neither will you, baby. I promise.”

“You will protect me?” Ilya teases.

Shane rolls his eyes. “Fuck off.”

“No, no. Please. I like my boyfriend looking after me.”

Shane stills, feeling his cheeks blush as they stretch around his smile. He looks stupid, probably. Absolutely delirious with affection. But he can’t help himself, and he wouldn’t want to even if he could. The time for hiding their feelings is long gone now, and Ilya deserves to know how happy he makes Shane.

“Boyfriend?”

“I mean, yes. I think so. Probably.”

Shane laughs. “Yeah. I like the sound of that.”

“Does that mean I can tell my boyfriend that I love him?” Ilya asks, so earnest. So sweet.

And Shane - he can’t stop the tears that slip down his cheeks as he processes what Ilya just said to him. Those three little words that he never imagined he would get to hear from him. The words that Shane had felt for a long time now, fluttering in his chest like a second heartbeat, but that he had always been too afraid to let himself linger on - to even let himself think about, really.

But now Ilya is saying them, out loud, so freely that Shane wonders if he should pinch himself just to check that he isn’t dreaming.

“Yes. Yes you can,” Shane says, so eagerly that he almost stumbles over the words.

Ilya leans in close, brushes their noses together gently, then whispers: “I love you.”

Shane whines. Unable to hold back for a single moment longer, he surges forward. Captures Ilya’s lips in a kiss so loving - so tender, and gentle, and soft - that he feels it down to his

toes, his bones, his very fucking soul.

“I love you, too,” Shane sighs. “I love you so fucking much.”

The confession feels like a weight being lifted from his chest. It looks like a weight being lifted off Ilya’s, too, because the way that he smiles - the way his eyes fill with tears - is so beautiful, and genuine, and *relieved,* that Shane can’t help but kiss him again.

“Thank you. Thank you for being patient with me, and for flying here in the middle of the night, and for loving me. Thank you, Ilya. *Baby.*”

Ilya smiles, kisses the freckles scattered across Shane’s cheeks. “Thank you for letting me, sweetheart. Thank you for loving me back.”

They steal another few minutes together, just for themselves. Though is it really stolen now, if they’re finally allowed it? If they’re finally allowed to just exist together, without excuses or explanations or lies. It feels unbelievable, like a gift amongst the grief of having their privacy stolen from them - of being stripped of the right to choose for themselves.

The calm in the middle of a storm. The sunshine peeking out through the clouds.

He doesn’t want to pull away from Ilya, doesn’t want to step out of the safety of his boyfriend’s arms, but he has parents waiting on them. Hayden and Jackie. His agent, and team, and coaches, and management. An entire world who want answers that they’re going to have to give, sooner or later.

“You ready to face everyone again?” Shane asks.

Ilya nods easily. “I like your people,” he admits. “They love you a lot.”

Shane can’t help but smile at that. All he wants is for Ilya to get along with the people he loves. For his friends and family to get along with the man that he loves.

“Yeah,” Shane says. “They do.”

“And I love you a lot, also.”

Shane hums, steps in for another kiss just because he wants to. Because he’s allowed.

“I love you, too,” he tells Ilya, still overwhelmed with joy that he gets to say this now. Hopes he will *always* be overwhelmed with love for Ilya. “Now let’s go face the music.”

Ilya kisses each of Shane’s knuckles one by one, until Shane is laughing. They lace their fingers together tightly, joined by the hand and by the heart. Then they walk hand in hand into the next part of their lives.

The next chapter of a book that Shane never wants to end.

ooc maybe? but who's to say how they'd react in this situation.

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