

If This Is It...

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If This Is It...

by [S_D_Blackthorn](#)

Summary

S_D_BLACKTHORN

Riri's
DRAWINGS

IF
THIS
IS IT...





When a petty morning argument is the last thing Ilya says to Shane before he boards the Montreal Metros' team plane, he thinks the worst consequence will be a bruised ego and an awkward apology.

Instead, the aircraft declares an emergency.

As social media explodes, the hockey world halts, and Shane's Instagram messages turn from apologies to goodbyes, Ilya is forced to confront the one truth he's been hiding longer than his feelings:

Shane Hollander is his. And he may have just lost him.

A mixed-media, Long Game-era angst spiral featuring breaking news alerts, trending fan edits, locker room confessions, and the most devastating Instagram DM thread you will ever read.

Notes

Hi friends. ❤️

So this is entirely the fault of my writing Discord. Specifically, one chaotic gremlin (you know who you are) whogave me a seemingly innocent, cute prompt and then just sat back and watched me spiral into darkness and laughed with me.

Thank you for the idea. Thank you for enabling my descent into the dark side. Thank you for cheering while I absolutely emotionally destroyed these two.

This is Long Game era, pre-public, pre-marriage, peak "we're fine, this is fine" energy. And then... it isn't. It's also a "what if it was Shane on the plane instead"

There is no major character death in this story. I promise. I am evil, but not that evil.

Chapter 1: Altitude

The ice at the Canadian Tire Centre feels like sandpaper.

It drags under Ilya's blades, catching when it shouldn't. His edges don't bite cleanly. His lungs burn faster than they should. Every stride feels slightly wrong, as if the surface itself is resisting him.

Ilya Rozanov is in a mood, which, for the Ottawa Centaurs, means everyone else is having a miserable Tuesday morning.

He barks at Miller for a lazy pass before the puck finishes sliding. He reruns a power-play drill three times because the spacing is half a stride off. He corrects a rookie so sharply the kid nearly trips over the blue line trying to adjust. When his stick feels uneven in his hands, he snaps at the equipment manager about the tape job as if friction itself is sabotage.

He tells himself it's leadership. It isn't. It's a temper tantrum disguised as hockey.

It started hours ago, in the quiet of his kitchen. Shane had already been dressed for travel. Montreal jacket zipped. Bag by the door. Coffee half-finished on the counter. The taxi idling outside like a countdown neither of them acknowledged.

He'd looked tired. Dark circles under those beautiful, and at the moment very sad eyes. Shoulders tight.

Ilya had noticed, but couldn't stop the words coming out of his mouth. He didn't want to fight but he was tired of Shane always having to leave, always *choosing* to leave, instead of milking every last second they had together. So he'd chosen to push, to fight.

"You're too soft on your D-men," he'd said, leaning against the counter like this was strategy instead of a choking sadness. "You let them walk over you."

Shane adjusted his bag strap. Exhaled. "I'm the Captain, Ilya, not a dictator. You know that's not how it works. The locker room is weird enough as it is right now, okay? Can we just not do this? I have a two-hour ride and a six-hour flight. I'll call you when we land in BC."

It should have ended there. He had every opportunity to stop it there.

Instead, Ilya sharpened it to match the way his chest was feeling. "Don't bother. If you want to be martyr for your team, go. Be saint. I don't want to hear it."

Shane shook his head, sighed, and walked away. He paused at the door, giving Ilya one last look over his shoulder. A second. For one full second, he looked like he wanted to say something else. He didn't. Instead, he sighed and walked out.

The door closed.

And now Ilya skates like he's trying to grind that moment into the ice until it disappears, because he knows how stupid and petty and selfish he was being.

Practice ends. The locker room hums with the usual noise. Showers running. Towels snapping. Someone arguing about lunch and the game tomorrow. Ilya drops onto the bench and reaches for his phone that he can hear vibrating in his locker like a thing possessed, mindlessly opening the first notification.

@IrinaFoundationOfficial mentioned you in a comment.

He taps it.

The photo fills his screen — last summer's youth camp. Sunlight. Kids crowding the boards. Him and Shane in practice helmets with cages because the kids insisted. Their cages tangled together. Shane laughing openly. Ilya grinning in a way he rarely does in public.

The new comment sits beneath it.

@HockeyMom85:

My kids still talk about Coach Shane and Coach Ilya every week. They can't wait for camp next year. Thank you both for making hockey feel safe and fun for them 

@IrinaFoundationOfficial:

@Roz81 and @ShaneHollander can't wait to be back either!

The words land softly. He remembers Shane leaning in that day, whispering, "We're never living this down." He remembers warmth. Ease. Something that almost felt like being allowed.

He smiles for a minute, letting the happiness settle in before heading back to clean the seemingly endless notifications.

One from Yuna Hollander jumped out at him. He'd grown close to Yuna and David since coming to Ottawa. They embraced him with open arms and joked about him being the favourite son.

There are three missed calls, and one text.

Yuna:

Ilya, call me. Don't look at the news. We love you, sweetie.

The air leaves his lungs. Yuna does not send messages like that. Yuna is steel wrapped in velvet, not sentimental.

His pulse begins to climb.

Another notification jumps out.

Twitter — @MTLBeatReporter

 *Metros heading west. Captain Hollander leading the way as always.*

The photo shows Shane boarding the charter. Suit jacket over his arm. Pausing to sign a jersey for a kid. Looking tired but steady, and oh so beautiful. Ilya regrets he didn't tell him how beautiful he is more often.

Timestamp: three hours ago. Five hours ago, Ilya was cruel and selfish. Suddenly he feels a pit in his stomach. Something was very, very wrong.

Another alert.

Twitter — @HabsFanEdits

 *From rivals to something more. Hockey's favorite enemies.*

Clips of fights at center ice. Handshake lines. Charity events. The Irina Foundation photo. Dramatic music layered under slow-motion glances.

It's already trending. The internet loves the trajectory of their relationship. *Not that they know the half of it*" he thinks to himself, wondering why all of a sudden they were major news again.

His phone vibrates again.

Jackie Pike:

Ilya, have you heard from Shane? I just have this feeling that something weird is going on, and I can't get in touch with Hayden.

Another message follows.

Please tell me you've heard something. I'm really worried.

His throat tightens and his chest feels hollow. Yeah, something was definitely up. The next news alert that landed had him falling onto the bench behind him in shock.

Twitter — @RandomHikerQC

 *Video: Plane over Gatineau trailing smoke.*

The footage is shaky. One engine trailing something dark. The person filming is shouting in French.

The replies are flying

@Metros_Gurl_24 *Is that the Metros charter??*

@PikeNation *Oh fuck that looks bad*

His heartbeat is now roaring in his ears when he notices something. He had Instagram messages waiting. From Shane. Shane hates Instagram. He uses it for the charity or when he's forced to by the PR staff. He says it's soulless. He never messages here unless Ilya is messaging from his own flights. Everything inside him stills.

@shanehollander → @rozy81

1:11 PM

Ilya, I know you're mad. I know I messed up. I shouldn't have just left like that. It's not easy for me to leave you at all.

1:12 PM

I didn't mean it the way it sounded. I never mean it the way it sounds with you.

1:13 PM

I hate leaving things like this. I hate that you wouldn't look at me.

1:14 PM

The plane feels weird. Like turbulence but not? People are nervous.

1:15 PM

I keep thinking about your face when I walked away. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

1:16 PM

I don't want the last thing between us to be a fight.

1:17 PM

Ilya, I love you. I've loved you for a long time. Probably from the very beginning. I'm sorry I didn't say it before.

1:17 PM

I would choose you. Every time. Over everything. Even hockey. I mean that.

1:18 PM

Hayden's trying to get ahold of Jackie. I think he's scared too. Make sure you tell her he loves her and the kids.

1:19 PM

The masks came down. People are screaming. I'm trying to stay calm.

1:19 PM

If this is it... please know you're the best thing in my life.

1:20 PM

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

A breaking news alert from the tv in the corner suddenly blares, all but silencing the room.

BREAKING — TSN

Montreal Metros team plane has declared an emergency following reported engine failure. Attempting emergency landing. Aircraft unreachable by radio.

The locker room turns into shock and chaos. Phones light up around him, guys talk rapid fire about what's happening, Hayes looks over at Ilya who has now gone pale and shaking, sitting still half in his gear and staring at his phone.

He keeps staring at the at the last message Shane sent. *If this is it...*

A hand grips his shoulder. He flinches. "Rozy. You gotta breathe, dude."

"Shane's on that plane." He says hoarsely.

"I know, buddy, I know."

He starts to shake then. Uncontrollable as the tears finally fall, streaking down his cheeks. "Shane is on that plane." He repeats himself again. "And he messaged to tell me goodbye."

A sharp inhale before Hayes just wraps his arms around him. The locker room hushes again as they look at their captain being held by their goalie.

"He's mine, and he messaged me goodbye. We never got to tell anyone. We never got to... fuck I was so mad this morning when he left. I was being selfish and stupid, and wanting him to stay longer. He's mine, and I didn't even kiss him goodbye. I didn't tell him I loved him."

The words leave him before he can stop them. No one in the room bats an eye though, they all just immediately start looking for updates and offering words of comfort to their friend who is falling to pieces in front of them

Ilya looked down at the phone in his hand and started typing.

@rozy81 → @shanehollander

1:41 PM

Shane. Please. Please answer me.

1:42 PM

I'm not mad.

1:42 PM

I'm not anything.

1:43 PM

I love you too. I should've said it. I should've said it a thousand times.

1:44 PM

Please just come home. Don't leave me. I love you.

1:44 PM

Please.

The words just sat there, showing delivered. And Ilya sobbed.

Twitter — @MontrealMetros

We are aware of the situation involving our team aircraft. We will share more information as soon as it becomes available. Please keep our players, staff, and their families in your thoughts.

Twitter — @HockeyCanada

We are closely monitoring the situation involving the Montreal Metros team plane. Our thoughts are with the players, staff, and families at this time.

Twitter — @SidneyCrosby87

Thinking of the Metros. Hockey is a family. We're all with you.

Twitter — @CMcDavid97

Holding our breath in Edmonton. Hoping for good news.

Twitter — @NMacKinnon29

Stay strong, boys.

Twitter — @ScottHunterNYA

The entire league stands with Montreal. We're here.

His phone vibrates again.

A text from Scott Hunter. When did he give Hunter his number? He can't remember, but he does know Hunter had figured them out a while ago.

Scott:

Kip and I saw. We're watching for any updates. We're here for you, Rozanov. He'll be okay.

Ilya stares at the words. He wants to believe them, he does, but right now all he can feel is this awful sinking feeling that he's lost the one person he loved more than himself. He's vaguely aware of the guys all standing or sitting around him trying to comfort him, but he can only hear the roar of his heartbeat in his ears as the tears just keep falling.

On the television, the camera cuts to aerial footage of trees and flashing emergency lights. The anchor's voice is steady, professional but strained in the voiceover. "As of this time, we

have no confirmed details on potential injuries for the team. The entire sports world holds its breath as we await news on the fate of the Montreal Metros.”

The room is silent.

Ilya presses the phone to his chest.

And waits.

Chapter 2: Debris

Chapter Summary

As players are rushed to the hospital and rumours explode across social media, Ilya finds himself protected by his team, defended by league captains, and exposed to the world all at once. The internet speculates. The country prays. Hockey Canada rolls archival footage of the golden boy in red.

But none of them saw the messages sent from thirty thousand feet.

Now there is only waiting, and the silence.

And the terrible space between landing and knowing.

Chapter Notes

Okay. So. We're doing this.

This chapter leans hard into the aftermath — the locker room, the rumour mill, the captains' chat, the national scale of what happens when something like this hits the league. I really wanted to contrast the quiet acceptance inside Ottawa's room with the chaos outside it. There's something about that cushion of safety that makes the fear sharper.

Also yes, I escalated the rumor arc on purpose. Hockey Twitter would absolutely implode in real time. We are not pretending otherwise.

Deep breath. Grab your tissues and your comfort blanket. Maybe a teddy bear.

Let's go.

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

The confirmation arrives without fanfare, but it feels like a knockout punch to the jaw. The television mounted above the systems board cuts away from looping aerial footage of flashing lights in a forest clearing and returns to the studio. The anchor's voice is steady in the way professionals learn to make it steady, but something beneath it trembles.

“We can now confirm the Montreal Metros' aircraft has made a hard emergency landing. Emergency services responded immediately. Multiple players and staff have been transported to hospital. The extent of injuries remains unknown.”

Hard emergency landing.

Transported.

Unknown.

The words don't explode through the Ottawa locker room. They sink into it.

A shower is still running somewhere behind tile. Someone's phone vibrates relentlessly on a bench. The fluorescent lights hum overhead, unchanged, indifferent. No one moves toward their stalls. No one finishes undressing or finishes getting dressed. No one leaves or even tries to.

Ilya is now on the floor. His back presses into the cool metal of his locker. One skate is off, the other half-loosened as Wiebe works on the laces. His phone rests in his palm like something fragile and radioactive at the same time. Wyatt Hayes hasn't moved. One solid arm remains braced across Ilya's shoulders, not trapping him, just anchoring him in place like he might otherwise float away.

They landed. The sentence should feel like relief.

Instead, it feels like the moment before you assess damage.

Ilya tries to translate the words in his head. A hard landing means metal met earth too violently. Transported means stretchers. Unknown means a blank space wide enough to swallow him whole.. None of it is making sense to him right now, other than the agony in his chest as he rereads the messages from Shane again.

His breathing starts to fracture. It isn't dramatic or loud, but it just stops completing itself. Inhale, stall. Inhale, stall.

Boodram notices, and calmly walks over with quiet deliberation, crouching directly in front of Ilya until the rest of the room disappears from view.

"Hey," Bood says, voice level and grounded. "Look at me."

It's not sharp or soft. It's steady and kind. Ilya's vision swims at the edges, but he forces his gaze up. Bood holds eye contact, unflinching. "Stay with me. In through your nose. Slow."

Ilya knows enough that it's an instruction, not a suggestion. He's seen Shane have panic attacks before. Perhaps this is what it feels like for him too? His chest feels tight and he can't seem to focus on Bood's face for long, but he tries. The first breath shakes apart.

"Again." Bood says. "Just like me, Rozy. Slow and steady."

Wyatt shifts slightly, giving Bood space but never removing his arm. There is no panic in either of them. No frantic energy. Just control.

"You can't help him like this, Ilya," Bood says calmly. "He landed. That's the only fact we have. We work with facts."

Facts. This is a word his brain immediately recognizes. It lands in his gut like something solid. Ilya inhales again.

Across the room, Harris' phone vibrates hard enough that it clatters against the bench. He glances down, then again, and his expression tightens.

Wiebe sees it immediately and straightens. He turns toward the open locker room door where a few staff members are hovering, uncertain whether to stay or leave.

"Everyone out," Wiebe says, voice firm but controlled. "Media, comms, support staff. Out. Now."

There's a pause — not defiance, just confusion as they shuffled awkwardly. Wiebe doesn't raise his voice. "Except Harris," he adds. "He stays."

The tone leaves no room for debate. Staff begin filing out, quietly, respectfully. One equipment manager lingers for half a second before Barrett stands without looking at him, simply occupying space between Ilya and the doorway.

The message is clear.

Not now.

The door closes behind the last of them, and the room feels smaller.

Safer.

Wyatt exhales slowly, maintaining his place holding Ilya. Troy Barrett shifts closer to the door, instinctively positioning himself like a barrier. Luca Haas moves to the bench beside Ilya, not speaking, just close enough to be counted. Looking a little terrified and unsure.

No one asks him to explain what he said. No one looks at him differently. There's no teasing, no tension, no stunned silence about *he's mine*. There's just quiet acceptance layered over the fear they all feel for the unknowns.

And somehow that makes the horror sharper.

Because if this is what it looks like when he is accepted — fully, without question — then what happens if the person he said it about doesn't make it back?

His phone vibrates again. He looks down, hoping it's Shane, but it's not. It's Jackie.

Jackie:

Ilya, I'm home with the kids. My parents can't get here for a couple of hours, but they're trying. I can't leave them. I can't get through to anyone. Hayden hasn't answered. Please tell me something.

A moment later:

Jackie:

The news says hospital. That's all it says. The kids keep asking what's wrong.

He types carefully, not sure if it will help but the need to follow Shane's request making him do it anyway.

Ilya:

I haven't heard anything since before the landing. Shane messaged me. He told me Hayden was trying to reach you, that he loves you and the kids. I promise you, if I hear anything, you'll know right away.

He stares at the screen after sending it, wishing promises actually carried weight.

The captains' group chat starts to go off as everyone tries to find out information. The hockey world is not as big as it seems, and the captains are, for the most part, a pretty tight group. The rumour has reached them too, obviously.

Mark Stone:

Is it true Rozanov lost it?

Nathan MacKinnon:

Seeing the same. Some staff was on Twitter running their mouths.

Connor McDavid:

They're saying he was screaming Hollander's name.

A pause.

Scott Hunter:

Enough. It's none of our business. At minimum, they are close friends who work together on mental health initiatives. If he's upset, that's human. Drop it.

The chat goes quiet again for a minute.

Sidney Crosby:

Hunter's right. We don't speculate about guys in a crisis. We need to keep focus on what's happening with Montreal. We're all friends with Hollander, and none of us as close to him as Rosanov – are any of us okay? Focus on the landing.

Everyone agrees.

Scott texts Ilya privately seconds later.

Scott:

Ignore the noise. Focus on getting to him when you get the information.

Outside the locker room, the speculation escalate online as videos and rumours race through social media. The hashtags shift.

Twitter — #Rozanov

Twitter — #Hollanov

Twitter — #MLHRelationship

Twitter — @PuckDramaDaily

If Rozanov's reaction is this intense, there's more to this story.

Twitter — @RivalryRewind

We always joked about enemies-to-lovers. Maybe it wasn't a joke.

Twitter — @HockeyWhispers

This might explain the charity partnership, the interviews, the off-season training clips...

Twitter — @HockeyWhispers

If the rumors are true about Rozanov and Hollander... that makes this even more devastating.

Harris lets out a groan as he tries to stay on top of social media.

"What." Wiebe says, looking at him. Harris turns the screen toward him and he scans the hashtags.

Twitter — @CensInsider: *Reports claim Rozanov collapsed when the landing news hit.*

Others say he screamed Hollander's name. What is going on in Ottawa today?

One post threads together clips from the Irina Foundation camp, handshake lines, All-Star Game footage. Another suggests there's "more to the story." It is happening in real time, and distracting from the news that would actually be helpful. Wiebe's jaw sets.

The television cuts back in.

"Sources confirm at least one player has been taken into emergency surgery. Names have not been released."

Ilya's stomach drops like he's the one falling now. Bood doesn't let his gaze waver, just keeps Ilya breathing. "We don't fill in blanks," he says quietly. "We wait for facts."

But the blanks are screaming.

The broadcast shifts again before anyone can say more.

The red banner at the bottom of the screen changes from TSN to Hockey Canada's official feed, and for a moment the tone of the room changes with it. The footage isn't chaotic. It's polished. Archival.

Shane in a Team Canada jersey, number bright against red. A slow-motion replay of him scoring against Sweden in overtime, helmet ripped off as he shouts, the Maple Leaf stitched over his heart. Another clip: Crosby feeding him a cross-ice pass on the power play, Shane burying it top shelf, the two of them colliding in celebration. McDavid laughing beside him on the bench. MacKinnon shoving him playfully after a post-game interview.

The screen freezes briefly on Shane mid-smile, cheeks flushed, sweat at his temples, eyes bright.

The statement scrolls beneath the footage.

Hockey Canada Official Statement:

Hockey Canada is closely monitoring the situation involving the Montreal Metros team aircraft. Several players and staff aboard the flight have proudly represented Team Canada at the international level, including Captain Shane Hollander and Assistant Captain Hayden Pike.

We are in contact with league officials and request privacy and support for the players, their families, and their teammates at this time.

The hockey community is strong. We stand together. We are praying for the safe recovery of everyone involved.

Back to Instagram, where they shared more photos. Shane standing for the anthem, jaw tight and focused. Shane laughing in the tunnel with Crosby. Shane pulling a young Team Canada rookie into a side hug after a goal. Hayden Pike leveling an opponent cleanly, then helping him back to his skates.

@HockeyCanada

The hockey world stands united for the Montreal Metros. 

🇨🇦@SidneyCrosby87

Proud to share the ice with these men. Thinking of them and their families tonight.

🇨🇦@CMcDavid97

Hockey is a family. We're all behind you. Praying you are all safe.

🇨🇦@NMacKinnon29

Stay strong, boys.

Ilya watches the screen and feels something inside him fracture further. That is the version of Shane the country sees.

They don't see the man who left coffee unfinished on the counter that morning, or the way his face scrunches up when he's mad. They don't see the beautiful freckles and how his eyes soften when he looks at Ilya.

And they don't see the messages sent from the plane.

Wyatt's arm tightens slightly around his shoulders again when fresh tears start to fall again. Fuck he's sick of crying. Why is there no new news?

Harris speaks softly into the room. "They're taking most of them to a hospital near the landing site. Press is already gathering, trying to find out information. We'll have to sneak you in."

“I need to go,” Ilya says, his voice sounding broken.

Wyatt stands immediately, tossing a pair of sweats and a t-shirt at Ilya. “Get dressed. I’m driving.”

Wiebe meets Ilya’s eyes. “Go,” he says quietly. “We’ll handle everything here.”

Ilya gets changed in record time, refusing to let his phone out of his sight. The team moves instinctively to shield him as they head toward the back corridor. No one says anything dramatic. No one makes a show of it, but they close ranks. He’s flanked by Bood and Hayes, with Barrett glaring at anyone ahead of them.

Outside, the air is cold and sharp against his face. Wyatt opens the passenger door and guides him inside, throwing a jacket over his head before anyone could snap a picture.

The engine starts. The radio is already mid-update.

“—multiple transported—”

“—one confirmed in surgery—”

“—families gathering—”

Wyatt lowers the volume but doesn’t silence it, puts the car in gear, and hits the road. The highway stretches ahead, dark and long.

Ilya stares down at his phone, fingers tracing the screen. Shane’s final message glows faintly.

If this is it...

“Tell me he’ll be okay,” he says quietly.

Wyatt keeps his eyes on the road, jaw set. “I can’t,” he answers honestly. “But I can tell you this. Shane Hollander is stubborn as hell. And he loves you.”

It’s only an hour to make it to the hospital. Ilya wonders if his heart will make it that long.

Chapter End Notes

If you made it to the end of this chapter and your chest hurts a little — same. This one even hurt me a little.

This one was about holding your breath. About the space between impact and information. About what it means to be seen in your worst moment and not be dropped.

Ilya being protected by his team mattered to me. Bood grounding him mattered. Scott and Crosby shutting down speculation mattered. That acceptance is intentional — because the outside world is about to get louder, and frankly, I know how much that is going to suck for the boys. Yes, I am aware I’m writing it, that doesn’t make it suck less.

Chapter Three takes us to the hospital. We are not done hurting yet. But next one will hurt different I promise!

Thank you for reading. Thank you for screaming with me. And thank you (again) to the Discord gremlins who said “you know you wanna...” and watched me absolutely do it.

See you in the next one. Maybe tomorrow if I'm lucky.

Chapter 3: Impact

Chapter Summary

The plane made it to the ground.

Shane is alive. Hayden is in surgery (also alive).

And because Shane changed his emergency contact, Ilya is the one standing in a hospital hallway trying to hold everything together while the hockey world spins out online.

League captains close ranks. Harris goes warm-and-feral in defense mode. Jackie is home with the kids, waiting.

But none of that matters once Ilya walks into the room and sees Shane for the first time — pale, bruised, breathing.

This chapter is about aftermath.

About almost losing everything.

About the quiet intimacy of holding someone's hand when you thought you'd never get the chance again.

And about what happens when a private moment doesn't stay private.

Chapter Notes

Hi. Hello. It's me again.

First of all — yes, we're still on the dark side. No, I have zero plans to give hints on when we're coming out of it. But this one won't hurt the same, I promise. We get some answers.

Huge credit to my writing Discord (you know who you are, menaces) who constantly encourage the chaos and then sit back and watch while I descend fully into chaos. Thank you for enabling me and supporting my turn to emotional destruction. I appreciate you deeply.

This chapter leans hard into aftermath and quiet devastation. It's softer. There's hospital content, injury, anxiety, and media speculation — but no permanent damage. We are not ending careers here. We are just breaking hearts a little.

Also: yes, there is Russian. With translations. Hopefully I did okay - it's not one of my languages.

Okay. Deep breath. Let's go.

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

The hospital parking lot looks like a stadium on game night, except there's no joy in the noise.

Even before Wyatt turns into the entrance, Ilya sees the glare of camera lights sweeping over the asphalt in hard white bands. Satellite trucks are lined up like barricades. Reporters cluster beneath microphones and camera rigs, shifting restlessly in the cold like something waiting to be fed. The air has that metallic bite of winter in Ontario, sharp enough that it scrapes the throat on the way in.

Wyatt doesn't rush the car into park. He sits there for a beat, both hands still on the wheel, and glances sideways.

Ilya hasn't spoken in ten minutes. His hands are laced so tightly together in his lap that his knuckles have gone white, tendons sharp beneath skin. His phone rests between them, dark screen, but he's holding it like it might vanish if he loosens his grip.

"Okay," Wyatt says quietly, steady in the way he is when chaos breaks loose in front of him on the ice. "You don't answer anything. You don't look at them. You walk. I'll handle it."

Ilya nods once. He doesn't trust his voice.

Wyatt reaches across, pulls Ilya's hood up, tugs it forward, then shrugs off his own jacket and drapes it over Ilya's shoulders before opening the door.

The noise hits like a physical force. Questions overlap as they are yelled in his direction, flashbulbs burst white in the dark, voices call his name again and again. It feels like he is being hunted for sport.

Wyatt steps into it without hesitation, one arm firm across Ilya's shoulders, guiding him forward with controlled pressure and gentle support. Security pushes through from the hospital doors, but the funnel is tight and aggressive.

"Back up," Wyatt says once, low and edged and dangerously controlled.

They're almost inside when someone shouts, sharp and clear: "What relationship do you actually have with Hollander? You're reacting like he's your boyfriend!"

The word hits harder than the cameras. Ilya's shoulders tighten involuntarily and his face shows the pressure for just a moment. A shutter clicks.

Wyatt hears it. Ilya feels it, but can't bring himself to care in the moment. Then they're through the doors seconds later, the hospital swallowing them into bright, sterile light.

Inside, everything is too clean. Too fluorescent. The television in the corner runs looping aerial footage of flashing lights in the forest clearing. Metros staff sit scattered in chairs, rigid and pale. The players who weren't injured or just needed minor help sat quietly together, looking completely shell shocked. No one even glanced his way. Perhaps that was a good thing. He knew how much they had changed when Shane had come out as gay.

A nurse approaches, tablet in hand. "Mr. Rozanov?"

He nods.

"You're listed as Mr. Hollander's emergency contact. We were going to call you soon to let you know how he is"

The words feel almost unreal, and echo a little strangely like there is a delay. She speaks carefully, professionally, and every word seems to drop into Ilya's chest.

"Mr. Hollander suffered a concussion, multiple fractured ribs, and minor lacerations. He's currently unconscious and lightly sedated, but he is stable and is expected to make a full recovery. I can take you to him shortly."

He feels the air rush back into his lungs at the word stable. "He'll recover?" he asks.

Her eyes are kind and understanding. "Yes. We really do expect a full recovery."

Relief doesn't come cleanly. It comes like dizziness. He sits down in the nearest chair.

"There's more as well. Before he was headed into surgery, Mr. Pike authorized us to disclose details to you in the belief you would be able to pass them on to his wife."

Ilya looked up again at that. "Hayden is in surgery?"

"Compound femur fracture. Prognosis is very good. Will take him out for the season, but he should be back at it for the next."

"Oh, that's good. I will let Jackie know. She'll be relieved."

She continued " He also wanted to tell you that Mr. Hollander was assisting him during descent. Mr. Pike's restraint failed. Mr. Hollander helped secure him."

The image forms without permission. Shane half out of his seat, bracing himself against gravity, forcing Hayden back into position while the plane dropped around them.

Of course he did.

Of course he would.

The rivalry between Ilya and Hayden — sharp, theatrical, mostly harmless — flashes through his mind. The chirps. The smirks. The way Shane always mediates them like they're two stubborn children. "He saved him," Ilya says quietly.

The nurse nods.

“Any serious injuries?” Wyatt asks. “Obviously, you can’t share details, but our community is smaller than you’d think”

The nurse’s expression is guarded. She quickly looks around. “On record, I can’t tell you anything. Off record – no players were seriously injured. The pilot is in critical condition and was rushed to surgery, but all the players are accounted for.”

That sits differently. The difference between catastrophe and survival is sometimes one person. Ilya is grateful to the man who got his Shane out alive and makes a note to send a donation to his family.

His phone vibrates in his hands, and he looks down. The photo of his reaction to the press outside is already circulating. The caption is speculative and invasive.

His stomach drops.

Wyatt’s phone buzzes. He looks down, squeezes Ilya’s shoulder and answers. “Harris,” Wyatt says, stepping a few feet away but staying within sight.

Ilya watches him closely.

Wyatt listens more than he speaks. Nods once. Says, “Yeah.” Then quieter: “We’re inside.”

There’s a pause. Wyatt’s jaw tightens.

“Who?” he asks, his voice a scary level of calm. Now Ilya is nervous.

Another pause.

He exhales through his nose, slow.

“Okay. Don’t fire him yet.” His eyes shift to Ilya. “There’s going to be someone else who will have something to say when the time is right. He deserves it.”

Ilya’s eyes flicker.

Wyatt turns slightly away, lowering his voice, but Ilya still catches pieces.

“...you don’t leak from inside...”

“...he’s at the hospital...”

“...Ilya doesn’t need this...”

There’s a stillness to Wyatt’s posture that says enough. “*Oh,*” Ilya thinks, “*He’s being really protective. I need to thank him too.*”

A minute later, Ilya’s own phone buzzes with a text from Harris.

Harris:

Ilya, listen to me.

You don't owe anyone anything tonight.

We've got you

We're handling the media.

You focus on Shane. That's it.

There's nothing corporate about it. Nothing performative. It reads like a friend. The warmth is real, absolutely, but the edge beneath it is sharper.

MHL Captains Chat:

Stone:

They're spinning it hard. This is fucking stupid.

MacKinnon:

Photo's everywhere. What the hell. They've completely lost the plot.

Connor McDavid:

They're implying confirmation of a story that doesn't fucking matter right now.

Hunter:

We stop this. Right now. This is about the landing and the crew. This is about the surviving players and the hockey community at large. Anyone feeding gossip is out of line.

Crosby:

I've played with and against Shane and Hayden for years. They're good men. We don't speculate about someone's private life in a crisis – or ever, because it's not our fucking business.

Public statements begin appearing almost immediately, but for a few minutes, they feel scattered. Individual voices trying to steady something that is still shaking. Then the shift happens.

Instagram

@SidneyCrosby87

A photo fills the screen: an old Team Canada locker room, red and white jerseys everywhere. Shane in the center of it, helmet off, cheeks flushed from a win, one arm slung around Sidney Crosby's shoulders. Hayden Pike in the background, grinning wide, holding up three fingers in celebration.

I've shared the ice with Shane Hollander and Hayden Pike in some of the biggest games of my career.

They're leaders. They're competitors. And they're good men. Please give them space, and

stop the wild speculation. We're all hoping for recovery, and what matters right now is waiting to hear about the Metros.

The comments begin stacking underneath it in real time.

@CMcDavid97

With you, Sid. Thinking about them and their families.

@NMacKinnon29

All behind the Metros tonight. Stay strong.

@StoneyMark

Respect. Hoping for good news.

@ScottHunterNYA (via RePost for Instagram)

Well said. There's no room for speculation in a moment like this.

@CareyPricey

Holding the line for them.

@HockeyCanada:

The hockey community stands united. 

Fans follow quickly, and within minutes, screenshots of the post are circulating on Twitter.

SportsNet runs a headline:

Crosby calls for unity and privacy after Metros emergency landing.

TSN follows:

League captains rally around Shane Hollander and Hayden Pike.

The tone online doesn't change entirely — rumor accounts are still trying to spin narratives in corners of the internet — but the center of gravity shifts. The loudest, most respected voices in hockey have decided what tonight is about.

Ilya looks down at his phone again. He realizes that he hasn't updated Jackie since he spoke to the nurse. He takes a breath and quickly heads to his texts.

Ilya:

I'm at the hospital now.

His thumb hesitates for a second before he continues.

Ilya:

Pike told them they could talk to me so I could talk to you. He made it clear before surgery.

He swallows.

Ilya:

He's in surgery, but he's okay. Broken leg. They expect full recovery. He'll be good as new before next season.

He stares at the screen for a long moment, then types the part that sits heavy in his chest.

Ilya:

Shane saved him.

The typing bubble appears almost instantly.

Jackie:

Oh my god. Thank you, Ilya. My parents are stuck in traffic but they will be here soon. Can I see him? And is Shane okay? The news just keeps saying "unknown injuries." I can't get through to anyone.

He exhales slowly, steadying his hands.

Ilya:

Concussion. Broken ribs. Unconscious but stable. They expect him to wake up.

A longer pause this time.

Jackie:

Are you okay?

Ilya:

Yes. No. He will be angry with me. The press is all over. I have not seen him yet.

Three dots appear. Disappear. Appear again.

Jackie:

That is not your fault. He won't be mad. And if he is I'll give him another concussion.

He leans back against the wall, closing his eyes briefly.

Ilya:

Come as soon as they're there. I'll make sure someone brings you in through the side entrance. You won't have to deal with media.

Jackie:

Thank you.

Another pause.

Jackie:

I know you and Hay chirp each other nonstop but... thank you for being there.

He reads that twice. His throat tightens. He lowers the phone slowly, staring at the screen long after the conversation ends.

Wyatt finishes his call and steps back beside him. “Harris is handling it,” he says quietly. “You don’t need to think about any of that crap right now.”

Ilya nods, but he’s still staring at the last line Jackie sent.

The nurse approaches again, voice soft. “You can see him now.”

Ilya pockets his phone.

The hallway feels longer than it should.

The nurse walks ahead of him with soft, measured steps, and Ilya follows like he’s walking toward something sacred and dangerous all at once. The fluorescent lights above are dimmer here, casting a muted glow over pale walls and polished floors. The sounds of the lobby — phones, murmurs, distant televisions — fade behind him until there is only the faint hum of ventilation and the rhythm of his own breathing.

Every step feels deliberate. Heavy. As though the air has thickened. The nurse stops at a door and presses it open gently.

For a moment, Ilya doesn’t move. Then with a shaking breath, he steps inside.

The room is dim, the overhead lights lowered to a soft amber that pools gently around the bed. A monitor hums beside it, the steady beep precise and even, like a metronome marking time. The air smells faintly of antiseptic and something metallic beneath it.

Shane is there.

That’s the first thing Ilya truly registers. Not the oxygen tubing or the bruises. Not even the bandages carefully wrapped around his torso. Just that he is there, he is alive, and he is the most beautiful thing he has ever laid eyes on.

He looks impossibly pale against the white sheets. A deep violet bruise shadows his temple, creeping into his hairline. There is a faint scrape across his jaw. His lashes rest heavy against his cheeks, casting small shadows over the freckles that dot his skin.

He looks smaller like this. Younger, almost.

Unprotected in a way he never looks under arena lights.

For a moment, Ilya just stands at the foot of the bed, hands curled into fists at his sides because he doesn’t trust himself to reach out yet. His chest feels tight again, but this time it

isn't panic — it's awe. Relief. Grief for what almost was.

He takes one step forward.

Then another.

He reaches the side of the bed slowly, as if sudden movement might fracture something fragile in the air. His eyes move over Shane's face carefully, memorizing every detail — the slope of his nose, the faint crease between his brows even in unconsciousness, the freckles scattered across his cheekbones like constellations.

"You're alive," he breathes, barely audible.

His hand lifts without his permission and hovers for a second before gently brushing against Shane's cheek. His fingertips are careful, reverent, tracing lightly over the freckles beneath his eye.

He remembers the first time he noticed them up close. Remembers thinking that this beautiful, awkward boy was going to be someone important. How he had felt his stomach flutter when they shook hands. He had known, even then, that this was going to matter.

"Мой глупый герой," he whispers.

My foolish hero.

The words are tender, not mocking. His voice trembles at the edges. He leans forward and presses a slow, careful kiss to Shane's forehead, just at the edge of the bruise, lips lingering there for a breath longer than necessary.

"Ты напугал меня," he murmurs against his skin.

You scared me.

He inhales shakily and finally lets himself sit.

The chair scrapes softly against the floor as he pulls it closer to the bed. He reaches for Shane's hand again, this time fully wrapping his fingers around it, threading their hands together the way they do when they get to be alone.

He squeezes gently. "Я люблю тебя," he says quietly.

I love you.

The words feel different in Russian. Softer. Deeper. As if they come from somewhere rooted.

He leans forward and rests his forehead against their joined hands, closing his eyes. His breathing finally begins to even out, syncing slowly with the steady rhythm of the monitor beside them.

For a moment, the world narrows to this.

The rise and fall of Shane's chest.
The warmth of his palm.
The faint scent of hospital soap and something underneath that is still unmistakably him.

"I'm here," he whispers, barely a sound. "Я здесь."

I am here.

He doesn't see the figure who pauses at the partially open door, or hear the faint click of a camera lens adjusting.

From the angle in the doorway, the shot is almost cinematic.

Ilya bent forward, forehead pressed to their intertwined hands. Shane pale against white sheets. The intimacy is unmistakable and tender.

The image is captured in silence, but posted within minutes.

Twitter — @HockeyWhispers

 **EXCLUSIVE:** Rozanov at Hollander's bedside.

Sources confirm emotional scene at hospital.

#Metros #Centauris #Hollanov

Chapter End Notes

Well.

He's alive. As promised.

You're welcome.

... but also I am not sorry for that last beat.

This chapter was about intimacy and privacy and what it means when something sacred gets turned into spectacle. Ilya doesn't know about the photo yet. He doesn't know what's about to hit. He only knows that Shane is breathing and that he finally got to say I love you after fighting.

Next chapter? We deal with the fallout.

Harris has a list.

Scott and Sidney are not amused.

And the internet is about to lose its mind.

Thank you for reading, screaming, and emotionally suffering with me. I adore you all. Truly. You guys are what keep me coming back.

Not sure if the next one will go up this weekend, but I promise you won't have to wait for too long!

Chapter 4: Control

Chapter Summary

The photo changes everything.

When a stolen image of Ilya at Shane's bedside explodes across social media, Yuna Hollander shifts instantly from mother to manager. Protective. Precise. Furious. As she coordinates with Harris and demands control of the narrative, two of hockey's biggest voices — Sid and Scott — quietly begin redirecting the spotlight away from gossip and back toward gratitude, recovery, and the pilot who saved them all.

While the league rallies and the media storm shifts, Ilya remains unaware of the strategy unfolding beyond the hospital walls. He's exactly where he belongs: at Shane's side.

But privacy is fragile, and protection comes in many forms. In Ottawa, Harris reminds the organization what loyalty really means. And in a quiet hospital hallway, Wyatt Hayes makes it clear that some lines do not get crossed twice.

The adults are handling it now.

And that might be more dangerous than the headlines ever were.

Chapter Notes

Surprise!

Okay. Deep breath.

This chapter is a little different.

We're pivoting slightly here — not away from the angst (don't worry, I would never), but outward. After the emotional intensity of the hospital scene, I wanted to widen the camera and show you what's happening around them. The grown-ups are stepping in. The captains are closing ranks. The PR machines are spinning — but in the right direction this time.

This is a breather in the sense that no one is actively plummeting from the sky anymore... but that doesn't mean the storm is over. There are still injuries. There are still leaks. There are still consequences. And there are still conversations that haven't happened yet.

Also: yes, I absolutely leaned into protective energy in this one. Yuna in manager mode. Harris in feral-but-calm mode. Sid and Scott playing chess. Hayes choosing violence

(politely).

We're not done hurting yet.

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

The photo hits just before the Hollanders get to the bridge.

Yuna doesn't see it because she's scrolling. She sees it because the notification forces itself across the top of her screen while she's halfway through answering a text from one of Shane's cousins. The car is moving slowly through traffic, headlights bleeding red across the dashboard. David's hands are steady on the wheel. The radio murmurs low updates about hospital transfers and emergency crews.

She almost ignores it.

Almost.

But the preview text catches her eye, and she opens Instagram.



EXCLUSIVE: Rozanov at Hollander's bedside.

The image loads in high resolution, crisp and invasive.

Ilya bent forward in a hospital chair, forehead pressed against Shane's hand. Their fingers intertwined. The room dim around them. The monitor glowing softly in the background. Shane pale and unconscious beneath sterile sheets.

It is unmistakably intimate.

It is unmistakably private.

It is unmistakably stolen.

Her thumb stills. For a moment, the world narrows to the small rectangle of light in her hand. For a full second, Yuna feels nothing.

Then the rage arrives.

"How did they get that?" David asks quietly, eyes never leaving the road.

"That's not through glass," Yuna says, voice level in a way that feels almost detached.

"That's a hallway angle."

She zooms in slightly, studying shadows, door frame alignment, the reflection in the monitor screen. "They were standing at the door."

David exhales through his nose. "So someone let them."

Yuna doesn't answer. Instead, she opens her contacts and taps Harris' name.

He answers before the first full ring finishes. "Yuna."

"You've seen it," she says.

"Yes."

"Is this separate from the locker room leak?" she asks.

There's the faintest shift in his tone. "We identified the source of the earlier leak," he replies. "We're handling that internally. Hayes has a plan."

She files that away under plausible deniability. "And this?" she presses.

"Not ours," he says. "Hospital security is reviewing footage. We're pushing on that."

A pause.

"What do you need from us?" Harris asks finally.

The question is deliberate. Yuna closes her eyes briefly, organizing her thoughts.

"I want every media request for Ilya routed through me," she says evenly. "No other player statements without coordination. No off-the-cuff reactions. I want the hospital speaking to no one except through an agreed channel."

"Done," Harris replies immediately.

"And I want the story redirected," she continues. "We need to shift the focus somehow.."

There's a pause. Then, coldly and quietly, Harris answers, "We're already working on that."

"And Harris," she adds, her voice dropping slightly. "Whoever was in that hallway — I want them identified."

"They will be," he says, his voice growing colder still.

Across the border, Sidney Crosby sees the photo before the push notification even finishes loading.

"For fucks sake," he mutters under his breath, "you'd think there was no god damn plane crash."

He'd watched the earlier footage from the parking lot — the questions shouted, the way Rozanov's shoulders had tightened for half a second before he disappeared inside. He'd known it would escalate. He just hadn't expected it to be this fast.

Scott calls before Sid can decide how he should approach this.

“You’ve seen it,” Scott says without saying hello.

“I have,” Sid replies with a sigh.

Scott huffs. “That’s inside the hospital,” he says flatly. “That’s not outside. That’s not public access. That’s someone in a hallway.”

Sid studies the image now, eyes trained not on its intimacy but on the logistics. Door frame angle. Distance. Lighting.

“Yeah,” he says quietly. “That’s not accidental.”

Scott’s voice tightens, just slightly. “They’re turning it into the main fucking story,” he says. “Every rumour account is running with it. They’re not even pretending to wait.”

Sid leans back in his chair and exhales slowly. “So. We don’t let that become the story. They’re good guys, man. They don’t deserve this shit.”

“Agreed.”

There’s a beat of silence between them, the kind that comes when both of them are thinking three moves ahead. Scott breaks it first.

“This is a line they can’t be allowed to cross.”

“I know.”

“And if we let that stand, it becomes okay for them to keep doing. So. What should we do? People listen to you, and I already have a target on my back to a point.”

Sid’s jaw tightens as he thinks about that. He doesn’t like it when the boundary between public performance and private space gets blurred. And he absolutely does not like it when one of their own is bleeding on the inside and someone tries to monetize it. He runs his hand through his hair and lets out a breath. “We redirect,” Sid says finally.

Scott hums in agreement. “Pilot?” Scott asks thoughtfully.

“Pilot,” Sid agrees. “We center our statements and support on the crew, on the landing, on emergency response. On gratitude that the Metros are all safe. How hockey is at it’s heart a family and we support our own.” He thinks for a minute, a plan taking shape. “I’ll call SportsNet,” he says. “Offer to give a public statement about the incident. Frame it around leadership and recovery. Really play up the unity and the Canadian angle. You call TSN. Push something similar.”

“Already drafting something,” Scott replies. “If we can just shift the focus, maybe between the two of us, we can start to drown out the noise.”

Sid nods again, even though Scott can’t see it. “And Scott,” he adds, tone dropping slightly, “if anyone asks about Rozanov specifically…”

“They’ll get one answer,” Scott cuts in. “We don’t speculate about players’ personal lives. It’s not our business or concern, especially given the events of today. Lay on the guilt.”

Another pause. “Ilya shouldn’t have to fight this tonight,” he says more quietly.

“He won’t,” Sid replies. “We’ve both played long enough to know how fast this stuff spreads,” Sid continues. “But it only spreads if we feed it.”

Scott gives a low exhale. “I’ll talk to a couple of the other guys privately, too. Make sure nobody goes rogue trying to ‘support’ the wrong way.”

“Good,” Sid says. “I’ll check in with some guys on my end, too. Last thing we need is someone tweeting a heart emoji and confirming something accidentally.”

Scott huffs once, humourless. “Christ.”

Another pause. Then, softer: “You good?” Sid asks, glancing back down at the photo.

At the way Rozanov is folded in on himself, forehead pressed to Shane’s hand like he’s anchoring himself to the earth.

“No,” Scott says honestly. “But that’s not the point here. I just don’t want this to be taken from them more than it already has been. It should have been their call.”

Sid sighs. “Yeah. It should have.”

SportsNet — Breaking Coverage

The split screen transitions from aerial hospital footage to a remote Zoom window. Crosby appears in a dark hoodie, hair still damp like he just stepped out of the shower. There’s no backdrop, no media wall. Just a plain room. His expression is composed, but there’s something set in his jaw that hasn’t softened.

The SportsNet anchor speaks first. “Sid, thank you for joining us on such short notice. What’s your reaction to what we’re seeing tonight?”

Sid settles into his years of media training. “First off, I think everyone in the hockey world is grateful that the plane made it down,” he says, voice even and grounded. “That’s because of the pilot and crew. They did something extraordinary today. We’re lucky we’re talking about injuries and not something worse.”

The anchor nods.

“There’s been a lot of attention on the players involved. What do you say to that?”

Sid’s expression tightens just slightly. “I say we remember perspective,” he replies. “Hockey’s a tight-knit community. We compete hard against each other, but at the end of the day, these are guys we’ve shared ice with, locker rooms with, international tournaments with.

When something like this happens, it's not about rivalries or storylines. It's about people getting home safe."

He pauses.

"And I think right now, the focus should be on recovery. On the crew. On the families waiting. If that means taking a pause to make sure everyone's okay, I think that's something the league should seriously consider."

The anchor blinks. "Like a pause in the season?"

Sid nods. "We've postponed games before for less. This is bigger than games, or standings. We should be supporting the Metros however they need us to."

TSN — Live Segment

Scott appears on camera, dialled in from what looks like an office, sleeves rolled up, tie loosened. He looks less polished, more coiled. The TSN host doesn't waste time.

"Scott, you've spoken with other captains tonight. What's the feeling around the league?"

Scott leans forward slightly. "The feeling is gratitude," he says plainly. "That plane landed because someone did their job under pressure. That's the best case scenario in a truly awful situation."

The host looks a little frustrated he isn't getting the soundbite he wanted. "What are your thoughts on the Hollander/Rosanov situation? Surely you've all had a chance to discuss the implications —"

Scott interrupts. "I've played with Shane. I've played against Pike. They're competitors. They're leaders. But tonight isn't about headlines or speculation. It's about a crew that kept a disaster from becoming a tragedy. And I know the hockey community is incredibly grateful."

The host attempts to pivot.

"Yes, of course. But there's been significant social media attention on—"

Scott cuts him off again. "I'm not engaging with gossip during a time like this, or ever," he says calmly. "And I don't think anyone else should either."

A beat and the host scrambles.

"What I will say is this: the hockey community takes care of its own. If that means stepping back for a day or two, or even a week or two, or longer, while guys recover and families get answers, that's what we'll do. That's respect. The press should learn some."

Twitter / X

@SidneyCrosby87

Grateful for the pilot and crew who brought the Metros down safely today. Hockey is a community. Let's focus on recovery and the people who made sure everyone got home.

↳ 87.3K Retweets

↳ 214K Likes

@ScottHunterNYA

The story tonight is the crew. Full stop. Wishing recovery to the players and staff, and strength to the families.

↳ 54.1K Retweets

↳ 131K Likes

@CMcDavid97

Standing with the Metros. Thankful for the emergency response teams and the pilot. Hockey family first.

↳ Retweeted by @SidneyCrosby87

↳ Retweeted by @NathanMacKinnon29

@NMacKinnon29

Perspective matters. Appreciate the people who kept that plane in the air.

@MarkStone

Echoing what Sid and Scott said. Focus on recovery. Respect the families.

@CareyPricey

Proud of the crew. Thinking about everyone involved.

@HockeyCanada

*We are grateful for the skilled crew who safely landed the Montreal Metros aircraft. 🇨🇦
Our focus remains on recovery and support for all involved.*

↳ Retweeted by @SidneyCrosby87

↳ Retweeted by @ScottHunterNYA

Reposts

@WyattHayes30

Retweeted @SidneyCrosby87

@TBarrett55

Retweeted @ScottHunterNYA

@LucaHaas

Retweeted @HockeyCanada

@Boodram88

Retweeted @CMcDavid97

Within an hour, the tone of the coverage begins to change. The hospital photo stops looping on the major panels. Instead, SportsNet replays Sid's Zoom interview — his voice steady, measured, redirecting attention to the pilot and crew. TSN runs Scott's segment in full, analysts nodding as he shuts down speculation with quiet authority and discussing how it is so lovely for several of the biggest players in hockey to focus on gratitude for the crew.

Inside the hospital room, Ilya has no idea what has been happening. He is still sitting beside Shane's bed, fingers threaded through his, thumb moving in slow, repetitive strokes across familiar skin.

"Ilya," Yuna says softly as she and David slip into the room.

He startles slightly, lifting his head. His eyes are red-rimmed, jaw tight, but when he sees her, something inside him gives way.

She crosses the room in three steps and pulls him into her arms without asking permission.

He leans in with a quiet sob.

"I know," she murmurs into his hair, gently rubbing his back. "I know."

He exhales shakily. "They said he will recover. Concussion. Broken ribs. Stable."

"I know," she repeats. "I've already spoken to the nurse sweetie." She pulls back and studies his face, thumb brushing the tear off his cheek.

"You scared me," she says quietly. "Both of you."

He swallows. "I should have—"

She stops him with a look.

"No," she says firmly. "You do not get to carry guilt tonight. We don't want you to, and Shane certainly wouldn't. He would have reacted the same if the roles were reversed."

Her gaze shifts to Shane then, and she inhales sharply at the sight of him — pale, bruised, but breathing. She steps to the bedside and presses a kiss to his temple, careful around the bruise. “You absolute disaster,” she whispers fondly. “Always dramatic.”

“You stay,” Yuna tells Ilya quietly. “Hold his hand. That’s your job right now.”

He nods.

She takes the chair on Shane’s other side, reaching for his other hand while David gives Ilya his own hug.

“It’s okay, son. He’s going to be okay.”

The conference room in Ottawa feels smaller than it ever has.

The overhead fluorescents hum faintly, a sound that normally disappears into the background but tonight seems sharp against the silence. The long table is full. Every chair is occupied — media relations, digital staff, PR coordinators, equipment managers, video staff, communications interns who look like they’d rather be anywhere else. A few senior personnel sit near the front, hands folded tightly in front of them.

At the far end of the room, the mounted television plays a muted SportsNet panel. Sidney Crosby’s Zoom interview replays in the corner, his voice captioned beneath him. The chyron reads:

LEAGUE CAPTAINS CALL FOR UNITY AFTER METROS EMERGENCY LANDING

Harris stands at the head of the table. He rests his hands lightly on the back of an empty chair, fingers relaxed, posture straight but not stiff. He is dressed the same as he was earlier — jacket off, sleeves rolled once at the forearm — but something about him feels different now.

There is no warmth in his expression.

Wiebe stands to his left, slightly behind him. Arms folded loosely across his chest. Face impassive. He looks like he does behind the bench during a tight third period — composed, observant, completely immovable.

The door closes.

No one speaks.

Harris takes his time looking around the table. When he finally speaks, his voice is level. “You all know why you’re here.”

It isn’t a question.

No one answers.

A few people shift in their seats.

Harris nods once, as if confirming something for himself. “Earlier today,” he continues, “an internal reaction clip from our locker room was distributed externally. That footage included a private moment involving one of our players during a crisis situation.”

He pauses.

The word crisis hangs there.

“Additionally,” he says calmly, “descriptive commentary about that player’s emotional state was shared with members of the media before any official communication from this organization.”

He lets that sit.

There’s no anger in his tone.

That’s what makes it worse.

“We are not going to debate the definition of confidentiality tonight,” he continues. “We are not going to pretend this was accidental. We are not going to minimize what happened.”

His gaze moves deliberately from one face to another.

“Every individual in this room signed a non-disclosure agreement upon joining this organization.”

A few people nod faintly.

Harris continues, unblinking. “Those agreements are not symbolic. They are not ceremonial. They are binding legal documents designed to protect the privacy and safety of our players.” His jaw tightens just slightly. “And tonight, that trust was broken.”

A breath moves through the room — not loud, but collective. Harris straightens, removing his hands from the chair. “This is not about optics,” he says quietly. “It is not about public relations. It is not about damage control.”

His eyes sharpen. “This is about human beings.”

The words land heavier than anything else he’s said.

“One of our players believed he might lose someone he loves today.” He does not look away from anyone when he says it. “He reacted like a human being.”

A faint tremor runs through someone at the far end of the table.

Harris’s voice does not waver. “And someone in this organization decided that moment was content.”

Silence.

It is thick now.

Wiebe shifts slightly beside him — not impatient. Just present.

Harris continues. “We have identified the source of the initial leak.”

A subtle ripple of movement. A breath caught. A glance toward the back of the room.

He gestures toward a stack of folders placed neatly along the edge of the table. “Updated NDAs are being distributed tonight,” he says. “They include expanded digital conduct provisions, social media engagement restrictions during crisis events, and explicit language regarding third-party communications.”

He pauses again. “You will sign them before you leave. You don’t get to turn one of ours into a headline because you were bored.”

A younger staff member shifts uncomfortably. Someone else swallows audibly.

Harris leans forward slightly, palms resting against the table now. “Let me be absolutely clear,” he says softly. “Protecting our players does not end at the edge of the ice.” His eyes move deliberately across the room. “It extends to the hallway outside a locker room.”

The room stills further.

“It extends to their families.”

Another pause.

“It extends to moments when they are at their most vulnerable.”

He lets that breathe.

“If you cannot understand that distinction,” he continues evenly, “you are in the wrong organization. And if you ever forget that again, you will not be here long.”

He steps back.

“Sign the updated NDA before you leave this room.”

At the hospital, Wyatt Hayes waits at the nurses’ station. He leans one forearm casually against the counter, posture loose, shoulders relaxed. He asks the nurse about visiting hour protocols. About security rotations. About whether the staff has eaten yet tonight. His tone is conversational. Easy. He even smiles once.

But his eyes never stop moving, scanning the area for any more cameras. So when he sees a man with a hat down low, trying to hide his phone in his hand and walking seemingly

aimlessly down the hall towards the door Ilya had walked through, he straightens ever so slightly. He continues nodding along to whatever the nurse is saying. “Yeah, that makes sense,” he replies mildly.

The man slows near Shane’s door.

Glances left.

Glances right.

Wyatt’s smile fades.

The man reaches for the handle of the door, glancing around quickly before easing it open and lining up his phone. Wyatt doesn’t hesitate; he just moves. He crosses the distance in four long strides, places his hand on the door and just as gently closes it again.

The man jerks back. “Hey—”

Wyatt turns, and looks at him without saying a word. The man’s mouth opens into something halfway between a defense and a smirk. “It’s public interest, and —”

Wyatt’s hand shoots out and grabs the phone, dropping it to the floor. The man lunges instinctively to grab it. Wyatt steps into him and throws a punch into his jaw.

The man stumbles backward into the wall, hand to his face, looking at Wyatt in shock. Security rounds the corner almost immediately to see what is going on.

Wyatt doesn’t back away. He simply bends, picks up the broken phone, and hands it to the nearest guard. “This is the individual who posted the earlier hospital image,” he says evenly. “You’ll want to confirm whether anything else was sent.”

The man protests weakly. “That’s private property! You assaulted—”

Wyatt just looks at him. “You opened a hospital room door to photograph an unconscious patient and his family,” he says calmly. “You’re lucky that’s all I did.”

Security grips the man’s arms and begins escorting him away. Wyatt watches them, then he turns back to the nurses’ station. The nurse who had been speaking with him earlier stands frozen. Wyatt’s expression softens slightly — not warmth, exactly, but civility. He reaches for his phone, which she is still holding. “Thanks for hanging onto that,” he says politely.

He slides it into his pocket, straightens his sleeve once, and meets her eyes.

“I’d like to speak to your head of security, please.”

This chapter is about control — about who gets to tell the story, who gets protected, and what happens when the hockey world decides to close ranks instead of feed the fire. It's the calm strategic layer over top of the emotional wreckage.

But let's be very clear: this is not resolution.

Shane is still unconscious. Hayden is still in surgery. The media machine is still circling. The league hasn't made any official decisions. And there are going to be conversations — hard ones — when Shane wakes up.

This was the breath before the next impact, because even angst needs to breathe a little.

Thank you for staying in it with me. I promise we're heading somewhere. It might just hurt a little more before we get there.

Chapter 5: Awake

Chapter Summary

Shane wakes up.

That's the headline. That's the miracle.

Hayden is stable. Jackie is on her way. The nurses are calm. The beeping monitor is steady. Shane is bruised, exhausted, very much himself, and very much alive. (ust to keep reassuring you)

They say the things they didn't get to say in the kitchen that morning. They say the things they were saving for later.

And while they hold hands in the dim hospital room, the adults outside begin shaping the narrative — because if the world is going to talk about them, it's going to do it on the right terms.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is intentionally softer.

We've had the plane. The panic. The leak. The locker room. The photo. The punch (thank you, Wyatt - still love that for you).

I really wanted this to feel grounded. No dramatic speeches. No heroic monologues. Just exhaustion, relief, fear, and that bone-deep "I thought I lost you" kind of love. Ilya is fluent. He is not suddenly forgetting English because he's emotional — but when he cracks, the Russian comes out. That felt honest and accurate to his character. Hopefully I did okay.

Also: yes, the media narrative is still moving. No, we are not done with that.

But for a moment, they get to just exist.

Let them have this one.

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

The room is quiet in a way that feels deliberate.

The overhead lights are dimmed low, casting a muted amber glow over white sheets and pale walls. It softens the sharp lines of hospital equipment, turns stainless steel and plastic into something almost gentle. The monitor beside the bed hums in steady rhythm — a clean, mechanical reassurance that feels almost holy after the last twelve hours. Each beep is precise. Predictable. Mercifully boring.

The oxygen line rests lightly beneath Shane's nose. A bandage shadows his temple, stark against skin that has gone several shades too pale. The bruising along his jaw has darkened into something deep and violent, creeping toward his ear. There's a faint scrape at the edge of his eyebrow. Tiny things. Manageable things.

Alive things.

Ilya hasn't moved much.

He sits in the chair angled toward the bed, knees nearly touching the frame, fingers threaded carefully through Shane's. His thumb brushes slow, absent strokes over familiar knuckles, tracing the ridges of bone and tendon like he's committing them to memory all over again. He has memorized this hand a hundred times before — in hotel rooms, in kitchens, on long flights where they pretended not to sit too close.

It feels different now.

Everything feels different now.

He's exhausted in a way that isn't just physical. It's structural. As though something inside him was taken apart at thirty thousand feet and put back together wrong. His chest still aches with phantom panic. His throat is raw from crying. His body keeps expecting another drop.

A soft knock breaks the stillness.

Ilya's head lifts instantly.

The nurse enters with quiet efficiency, tablet tucked against her palm, voice low and careful. "Just checking vitals."

He nods and shifts slightly to give her space, but he doesn't let go.

He doesn't think he could if he tried.

She adjusts a line with practiced hands, checks the monitor, shines a small penlight briefly across Shane's pupils. The beam flickers over freckled skin, over lashes that don't move.

"Good response," she murmurs. "He's young. Strong. Bodies like his tend to wake up fighting."

Ilya almost laughs at that.

Of course he would.

Of course Shane would wake up swinging.

“Concussion protocol means we’ll let him come around naturally,” she continues. “Pain management is in place for the ribs. We’ll reassess sedation levels over the next hour.”

Over the next hour.

The phrase lodges in Ilya’s chest like something heavy and immovable.

An hour is both nothing and unbearable.

An hour ago, he thought Shane was dead.

An hour from now, he might hear his voice.

The nurse finishes her checks, offers a small nod, and slips back out, the door clicking softly behind her.

Silence settles again.

Yuna rises slowly from her chair across the bed. She has barely spoken for twenty minutes, but she has not once looked away from her son. She watches him the way only a mother can — not just seeing, but counting. Breaths. Swallows. Tiny shifts in muscle. She has been memorizing him, cataloguing proof that he is still here.

David stands beside her, one hand resting gently against the back of Ilya’s chair. It isn’t pressure. It isn’t possessive. It’s grounding. A quiet acknowledgment that he is here too.

“You need coffee,” Yuna says gently.

“I’m fine,” Ilya replies automatically, eyes never leaving Shane’s face.

She gives him a look.

It is the exact look she gave him the first time he showed up at her house pretending he hadn’t just played through a sprained wrist. The look that says: I love you. I see through you. Don’t argue.

“We’ll be ten minutes,” she says, already reaching for her coat. “You don’t move.”

The command is soft but absolute.

He nods.

David squeezes his shoulder once before following her out.

The door closes softly behind them, and then it is just the two of them again. The room settles around him again, the quiet stretching thin and fragile.

Ilya shifts closer to the bed, the chair legs scraping softly across the floor as he moves until he’s nearly pressed against it. He studies Shane’s face like he’s trying to memorize it all over

again.

The freckles first. Those damn freckles. The thick, dark lashes resting against bruised skin. The sharp line of his profile — nose straight and stubborn, mouth slightly parted beneath the oxygen tubing. Even unconscious, he looks composed. Beautiful in a way that makes Ilya's chest ache.

"You are not allowed," he murmurs suddenly, voice low and shaking.

He leans forward again, pressing his forehead gently against Shane's knuckles.

"You are not allowed to leave me like this."

The words come out in a fractured mix of languages, instinct overriding coherence.

"Ты не имеешь права... you don't get to do that." His thumb tightens around Shane's hand. "You don't get to scare me like that. Not ever again."

His breathing wavers. "I don't care if Pike was falling out of his seat," he whispers fiercely. "You don't get to be hero if it means I lose you."

His jaw tightens, eyes burning. "I demand to go first," he says hoarsely. "You hear me? Я требую. I go first. I will not—" His voice breaks. "I will not learn how to live in a world without you."

The monitor continues its steady rhythm, unbothered by ultimatums made to fate.

He lifts Shane's hand slightly, pressing his lips against the back of it.

"Ты мой," he breathes. "You're mine. And I am not built to survive you."

The confession hangs there, raw and unfiltered.

He swallows hard and rests his head back against their joined hands, eyes closing for just a moment.

"You don't get to leave me," he whispers again, softer now. "Я не отпущу тебя."

I will not let you go.

Ilya's phone buzzes softly in his hand.

Hospital Liaison:

Hayden Pike — Surgery Complete.

Compound femur fracture successfully repaired. No complications. Stable and in recovery.

The breath leaves Ilya in a slow, quiet exhale.

Good. He thinks

Another message lights up his phone.

Jackie:

Parents are here. I'm heading over now.

He types carefully, thumbs slower than usual.

Ilya:

Surgery went well. He is stable and in recovery. Clean repair, they say. Wyatt will meet you at the employee entrance — east side. Not main doors. The press is terrible.

The typing bubble appears.

Jackie:

Okay. Thank you. Is Shane awake yet?

Ilya looks at the bed, eyeing the steady rise and fall of Shane's chest.

Ilya:

Not yet. Nurse says soon, though.

Jackie:

Good. I'll pop in to see you both once I've checked on Hay.

He switches chats.

Ilya → Hazy:

Jackie Pike is on her way. Meet her at the east staff entrance please? She shouldn't have to go through the press.

Hazy:

On it. How's Hollander?

Ilya:

They say he'll wake up soon.

Hazy:

Good. I'm glad he's gonna be okay Rozy.

Ilya sets the phone face down on his thigh and sighs. And that's when he feels it, a small movement against his fingers.

He freezes.

Another twitch.

“Shane?” he whispers.

Shane's brow furrows faintly. His lashes tremble. A small, confused sound slips from him, breath catching wrong.

Ilya is on his feet instantly, chair scraping softly.

“Hey. I’m here,” he says quickly, leaning closer. “Я здесь. It’s okay.”

Shane’s eyes open slowly. They’re unfocused at first. Glassy. Searching.

Then they land on Ilya, and the recognition and relief hit.

“Hey,” Shane rasps.

The relief that tears through Ilya is violent. It steals his breath. He laughs and sobs at the same time, hand tightening around Shane’s.

“You’re awake,” he says, voice breaking. “You idiot. You’re awake.”

Shane blinks sluggishly. “Feel like I got hit by a truck,” he mutters, wincing.

“You got hit by an airplane,” Ilya replies drily, thumb brushing carefully over Shane’s knuckles. “Broke your ribs and got a concussion. But you’re okay. Doctors say full recovery.”

Shane squints at him. “You’re crying?”

Ilya huffs out a broken sound. “I thought you were dead.” The words just fall out of him. “I got the messages after practice. Then saw the news. Engine failure. Unreachable. They say hard landing.” His jaw tightens. “I thought this was it.”

Shane’s expression shifts, the pain giving way to something softer and sweeter. “Didn’t die,” he murmurs.

“You almost did.”

Shane swallows carefully and winces. “Hayden,” he mutters. “Seatbelt broke. He was coming out of his seat. I just—”

“Of course you did,” Ilya cuts in, frustration and awe braided together. “Of course you go help him.”

“He would do same,” Shane insists weakly. “Is he okay?”

“He had surgery for a broken leg. He’s fine. Jackie is on her way to him now.”

Shane closes his eyes for a moment. “Thank god.”

Ilya’s thumb moves up to Shane’s cheek, tracing carefully over a bruise, over freckles he knows better than his own reflection.

“Ты напугал меня.” he says quietly.

Shane blinks slowly. “English,” he mumbles. “I can’t try to translate right now.”

“You scared me,” Ilya repeats, softer now. “Don’t do that again.”

A faint, sleepy smile ghosts across Shane's mouth. "Bossy."

Ilya shakes his head, tears still falling but slower now.

"Don't be angry with me," he says, voice rough. "But I...I think I told them."

Shane frowns slightly. "Told who what?"

"The locker room. When news broke. I—" He exhales shakily. "I said you were mine."

Shane stares at him.

"I didn't think," Ilya continues, words stumbling now, not because he doesn't know them — because they're tangled in fear. "There were probably cameras. Staff. I just... I thought I lost you. I didn't care who heard anything."

Silence stretches between them as Shane studies him through sedation-heavy eyes.

Then — slowly — he smiles. "You said I was yours?"

Ilya lets out a shaky breath. "Yes."

A pause.

"That's so sweet," Shane whispers. "Of course I'm yours."

Ilya blinks. "That's not... that's not problem for you?"

Shane squeezes his hand — weak but deliberate. "You thought I was dying," he says softly. "And you chose me. I'm not mad. How could I be mad at that Ilya? I probably would have done the same or worse."

Something in Ilya cracks open at that. "I love you."

"I love you too," Shane murmurs. "And you're here."

Ilya bows his head, pressing his forehead gently against their joined hands again. "You don't get to leave me," he whispers. "You understand? I will not survive."

Shane's eyes drift, heavy with medication. "Not going anywhere," he murmurs. "Just to sleep for a bit okay?"

Ilya leans in and presses a careful kiss to his forehead. "Мой глупый герой," he breathes. "My foolish hero."

Shane doesn't fully understand the words — but he understands the tone.

"Love you," he whispers, closing his eyes again. It's slurred. It's exhausted. It's the most beautiful thing Ilya has ever heard.

Ilya's voice breaks again, but steadier this time. "Я люблю тебя."

Then, softer, in English: “I love you too.”

Harris → Yuna

How is everything? We're getting swamped with media requests for Ilya, but I'm keeping them tied up right now. Troy has offered to be the sacrificial lamb if you're okay with that. He figures since he's out anyway, it would help distract, but as promised, running it by you first. Thoughts? Input? Ideas?

Yuna:

He's a good man, your partner. I don't want to put Ilya in front of the press now, but I'm working on an angle. Do you and Troy have a rough plan?

Harris:

He's going to talk about the shock of the whole team, how he's upset for the kids at camp seeing this, and being devastated and supportive of his friend and colleague as he navigates a challenging situation. Nothing specific, but not avoidant either.

Yuna:

Okay, we'll let that run then if he's good with it. Have him focus more on the camp and the impact, highlight the work Ilya and Shane do and their collaboration and why it matters so much to the two of them. I like that angle. Pivot and shift the narrative. Was the Sid interview your idea?

Harris:

No that was a surprise, but we threw a bunch of support behind both him and Hunter.

Yuna:

Smart. Okay. I'm heading back to Shane's room. Keep me in the loop.

Harris:

You got it.

Chapter End Notes

So.

They're alive. They've said it. You're welcome. And I'm sorry. Because now comes the complicated part.

The picture exists. The speculation exists. These two stubborn assholes are absolutely not going to let someone else write their story for them.

And I promise — we are not done hurting them yet. But from here on out, the hurt has purpose.

Thank you for staying with me through the chaos. ❤️

Chapter 6: Closing Ranks

Chapter Summary

After hours of chaos, fear, and speculation, the night finally slows enough for the people who matter to find each other.

Jackie Pike arrives at the hospital after watching the crash coverage spiral across every screen in her house. She is reunited with Hayden, and gets to check on Shane and Ilya.

Downstairs, Wyatt Hayes is dealing with a very different kind of problem. The photographer who violated the team's privacy is sitting in hospital security, and Wyatt makes it very clear that the Centaurs are paying attention — and that if the hospital doesn't get its house in order, someone else will.

Wyatt leaves with the name of the man responsible... and one more piece of information for Yuna.

The fallout is only beginning.

Chapter Notes

After the chaos of the crash and the immediate aftermath, I wanted to spend some time with the people orbiting the boys — the partners, teammates, and friends who quietly hold things together when everything starts falling apart. Jackie, in particular, deserved a moment to walk into the situation herself rather than only experiencing it through news alerts and secondhand messages, and I decided that she was going to get her moment to shine.

We also get a clearer look at the protective network forming around Shane and Ilya. The team, their families, and even a few very stubborn goalies are starting to close ranks. He didn't even have to hit anyone this time. Not that it won't happen again...but shhh
spoilers

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

Jackie Pike cannot believe how crazy the press is when she finally arrives at the hospital. Once again, she finds herself grateful for Ilya Rozanov, knowing he has someone watching out for her, and she doesn't have to walk the gauntlet.

She already knows everything she can without actually talking to someone. She watched it unfold on every screen in her house while her parents fought traffic to reach the kids and felt helpless as the coverage switched from facts to speculation and back to gratitude. She paced until her legs hurt, trying to stay calm for the kids while she frantically tried to get information about Hayden. No she's finally here and she can't help but feel concerned for the sheer level of insanity that is surrounding the hospital.

She parks in the back of the lot, wraps herself in a hoodie and slips around to the side, following the signs that read Staff Entrance Only. Standing by the door looking lost in thought and repeatedly checking his phone is the Centaurs' goalie Wyatt Hayes, just like Ilya told her. She breathed a sigh of relief.

"Hello Mrs. Pike. Glad to see you made it. Lets get you to where you need to go, huh?" Wyatt says with a soft smile.

"Jackie, please" she replies automatically. "And thank you for meeting me here. I guess you don't know anything about Hayden, but how is Ilya holding up? Any news on Shane?"

His eyes darkened a little as he double-checked his watch. "Ilya is a mess, but he says Shane should be waking up soon. Could have been much worse. I'm glad he hasn't been on social media though. I don't know how he'd handle that shitshow."

She sighed. "Yeah. I saw." They fell in step together as he lead her to the nurses station where the information she needed the most was waiting.

"Hi Sarah, this is Mrs. Jackie Pike. She's here for Hayden Pike – think we can send her in the right direction?" Wyatt greets the nurse.

"Of course, Wyatt. Mrs. Pike, if you could follow me?" the nurse, Sarah, says with a gentle voice. Jackie takes a deep breath and follows her down the hall to the room Hayden is in. She hates that's she going into this blind, but she braces herself and steps through the door Sarah so graciously held open for her.

Hayden is half-propped in the hospital bed, one leg elevated and braced in a configuration of metal and padding that looks aggressively complicated. His hair is flattened in the back, his face pale beneath the bruising that shadows his jaw. But his eyes are open and he looks over at her with slow recognition, and then a lopsided grin tugs at his mouth.

"Hey," he says, like they've just run into each other at the rink.

She crosses the room in three steps and leans over him carefully, pressing her forehead to his. "You absolute pain in my ass," she breathes.

He hums faintly. "That's rude. I'm heroic."

"You broke your leg."

He squints down at the brace like it's news to him. "Allegedly."

Her hand moves to his cheek, thumb brushing just beneath the bruise there. He leans into it automatically.

“I tried to send you a message,” he says suddenly, words slightly slurred at the edges. “My phone just refused to connect to the wifi. I wanted you to know how much I love you, and the kids...”

Her chest tightens. “Hayden,” she says gently. “I know. Baby, it’s okay.”

“I didn’t want you watching that on TV,” he mutters, eyes drifting but fighting to focus. “Didn’t want you stuck at home thinking—”

She cups his face lightly. “I had updates,” she says. “Ilya texted me the whole time. Shane messaged him and told him to tell me that you loved the kids and me.”

That caught his attention. “He did?” Hayden asks.

“Yes.”

He exhales, visibly relieved. “Good,” he murmurs. “Fuck I really, really don’t want to like him,” he mutters. “But he’d move heaven and hell for Shane.”

His gaze clears a fraction. “Wait. Shane?” he asks.

“He’s okay,” she says. “Concussion and broken ribs. Ilya is with him – and I’ll go check on him after I know everything I need to about you.”

Hayden closes his eyes for a second. “Okay,” he breathes. “Okay.”

He swallows, wincing faintly. “Does he know?” he asks.

“Know what?”

“That it wasn’t...” He squints, searching for words through the fog. “That I wasn’t... like... panicking?”

She almost laughs. “I don’t think Shane’s evaluating your composure,” she says softly.

Hayden huffs. “I stayed cool though, right?”

“You were flailing,” she deadpans.

He looks offended for half a second, then winces again. “Seatbelt snapped,” he mutters. “I was not flailing. I was strategically airborne.”

She laughs despite herself, the sound shaky but real.

“And Shane?” he asks again, more seriously this time. “He’s really okay?”

“Yes.”

A pause.

“And Rozanov really texted you?” he adds.

There it is. She studies him. He was so protective of Shane, and cautious to trust Ilya no matter how happy he made him. “He’s with Shane,” she says. “Hasn’t left, from what I can tell.”

Hayden nods slowly. “God, I don’t want to like that man,” he murmurs almost to himself. He shifts slightly, then immediately regrets it, jaw tightening as pain spikes through his leg.

“Does he know what’s going on?” Hayden asks after a moment.

“With Shane?”

“With... everything,” he clarifies vaguely, hand making a weak circling motion. “I wasn’t unconscious. I heard the noise.”

She hesitates.

“I don’t actually know,” she says thoughtfully. “If he hasn’t left Shane, he might not know anything yet.”

Hayden’s mouth tightens faintly. “He’s not great at that part,” he mutters. “The press. He’s... very direct.”

She smiles faintly. “That’s one way to put it.”

“He loves him,” Hayden says, words softer now, drifting at the edges of sedation. “Shane. He —” He waves a hand vaguely. “It’s obvious they just work, ya know? Like we do.”

Jackie studies him.

“He didn’t get a choice in how that plays out,” Hayden continues slowly. “Invasive fuckers.” He squints toward the ceiling. “But he should get to decide it. Not cameras.”

She nods once. “I know.”

Hayden’s eyes close again, the combination of medication and exhaustion pulling hard now. “I’m sorry,” he murmurs, voice fading. “That you were alone.”

She leans closer, kissing him lightly. “I wasn’t,” she whispers. “I had Ilya doing his best. And you’re alive and going to be okay. That’s what really matters.”

His hand shifts weakly in search of hers. “Shane good?” he asks one more time.

“Yes.”

“Tell him...” He frowns, thinking. “Tell him I didn’t mean to bleed on him.”

She laughs softly through the tightness in her chest. “I’ll pass it along.”

He nods, satisfied, drifting further. “And make sure Rozanov knows,” he adds faintly, eyes barely open now, “that he’s still an asshole. And I appreciate him being so good to you even though he had to have been all fucked up worried about Shane.”

There’s no bite in it. Just sleepy affection. She squeezes his hand gently. “Rest,” she tells him.

He’s already asleep.

Jackie stays with Hayden as the medication drags him under. Within minutes, his grip on her hand loosens, and his head tilts slightly toward the pillow, the tension finally draining from his face. She watches him for a moment longer than she needs to.

She brushes her thumb once across his knuckles, then carefully slides her hand free and stands. Leaving a light kiss on his forehead, she slips towards the door.

The hallway outside the room is quieter than she expected. Hospitals always have that strange nighttime calm — a low hum of machines, distant footsteps, the occasional murmur from a nurse’s station. The chaos outside the building feels very far away in here.

But she knows it’s still there. She also knows exactly where she’s going next.

The nurse at the station recognizes her immediately. “Mrs. Pike,” she says gently. “Your husband’s doing very well after surgery. Is he asleep now?”

Jackie nods. “Yes he is, thank you. I’m just happy it’s not worse.” She hesitates for a second, then adds, “Shane Hollander?”

The nurse gestures down the hall. “Second door on the right. Mr. Rozanov is with him.”

She murmurs another thank you and heads down the hallway. She stops and takes a quick look through the window of the door.

Ilya Rozanov is sitting in a chair pulled tight against the side of the bed, his forearms resting on the mattress, his head bent forward slightly. One of Shane’s hands is wrapped in both of his.

He looks... wrecked.

His hair is flattened in the back like he’s been running his hands through it for hours. His shoulders are tight with exhaustion. There’s a stiffness to the way he’s sitting that tells her he hasn’t moved in a long time.

Shane is asleep, looking peaceful. Even from the doorway she can see the bruising along his jaw and the pale bandage near his temple. The oxygen line rests lightly beneath his nose, the monitor beside the bed blinking out a steady rhythm.

But he’s alive too, and she is so grateful.

Jackie exhales quietly and lightly knocks on the door before poking her head in.

Ilya's head lifts instantly. For a split second, his expression is pure alarm — the reflex of someone who has been bracing for bad news all night. When he realizes who it is, that alarm shifts into something closer to embarrassment.

He pushes himself to his feet.

“Jackie,” he says, his voice rough. “It is good to see you.”

For a moment, neither of them speaks.

Jackie steps into the room and lets the door close softly behind her. Up close, the exhaustion in Ilya's face is even clearer. His eyes are red-rimmed, the skin beneath them shadowed with fatigue.

“Well, you look terrible,” she says matter-of-factly.

He blinks.

Then, unexpectedly, he lets out a small breath that almost sounds like a laugh. “Yes,” he admits.

She glances down at Shane, then back at him. “Hayden's okay,” she says. “I got to talk to him. He says you're still an asshole, but to thank you for everything.”

The tension that leaves his shoulders is immediate. “Good,” he murmurs. “He... he tried to stand up earlier. Doctors were not impressed. He is an idiot sometimes, yes?”

She smiles faintly. “That sounds like him. And yes, yes he is.”

For a moment, they both look at Shane.

“He saved him,” Ilya says quietly after a second. “He didn't even hesitate.”

“I know,” Jackie replies.

Another small silence settles between them. Then she reaches out and squeezes his arm gently. “Thank you,” she says.

He frowns slightly. “For what?”

“For making sure someone was taking care of my husband while I couldn't get here. For being willing to talk to me when you were also dealing with the same fears. For being here for Shane and loving him so much.”

The words land harder than she expected.

Ilya's eyes drop briefly, like he doesn't quite know what to do with that.

“Of course,” he says softly. “You are family. And Shane...is everything.”

Jackie studies him for a moment, smiling softly at that. She glances down at Shane again. “Does he know Hayden’s okay?”

Ilya nods. “I told him when he woke up. He wasn’t awake for long, but I made sure he knew.”

“Good.”

Another pause.

Jackie gestures lightly toward the chair. “You should sit before you fall over.”

“I am fine,” he says automatically.

“You look like you’ve been hit by the plane too.”

That actually makes him smile.

Reluctantly, he sits again.

Jackie moves to the other side of the bed, resting a hand gently against Shane’s shoulder. “Hey, kid,” she murmurs softly.

Shane doesn’t wake, but the corner of his mouth twitches slightly, like some part of him recognizes the voice. She presses a quick kiss to his cheek. “Thank you for being so stubborn and saving him. Ruby told me to tell you that you still owe her and Jade a tea party, so rest up and get out of here quick, okay?”

Then she looks back at Ilya. “Have you checked any socials recently?”

He frowns slightly. “No,” he says. “I did not want to. I do not want to be angry here.”

She nods slowly. “That might have been the right call. Let Yuna handle it. This is more important.”

One last squeeze of Shane’s hand and she walks around the bed to give Ilya a hug. “Our men are stubborn, you know. They’ll be out of here before we know it and driving us nutty again. When you’re able, try to see if there’s a place to change and shower, okay? You need to remind Shane that you’re too hot to leave behind for something as mundane as dying.”

Ilya huffed out another soft laugh. “I will tell Hayden you said that”

Jackie smiled and pecked him on the cheek. “Don’t worry, so will I.”

When the door closes behind her, Ilya looks back at Shane. “You have good people,” he murmurs.

Wyatt Hayes does not rush. He patiently kills time chatting with the nurses, checking in on the Metros players he's friendly with, and offering coffee.

So when the hospital security officer finally appears at the nurses' station and asks if he would come downstairs, Wyatt simply nods, pushes himself off the counter, and follows him down the hallway without a word.

The elevator ride is quiet.

The security guard keeps glancing at him like he expects a confrontation, but Wyatt doesn't give him one. His hands rest loosely in the pockets of his jacket, shoulders relaxed, expression neutral. Anyone who didn't know better might assume he was just another visitor.

The guard leads him down a short corridor and stops in front of a frosted glass door.

Hospital Security – Administration

Inside, the office is brightly lit and almost aggressively tidy. A desk dominates the center of the room, and behind it sits a man in a suit jacket who looks like he hasn't slept much either tonight.

Standing near the far wall, flanked by two security officers, is the photographer, sporting a deep bruise along his chin and a bloody lip. No phone in sight.

His expression when he sees Wyatt is somewhere between rage and humiliation.

Good Wyatt thinks to himself, suppressing a smile as he shifts his attention back to the man behind the desk.

"Head of security, I presume?" Wyatt asks.

The man stands, extending a hand. "Daniel Mercer. Mr. Hayes, thank you for coming down. We appreciate your cooperation while we sort this out."

Wyatt looks at the offered hand for a moment before shaking it once.

Then he sits down without being invited.

The photographer shifts against the wall behind him, muttering something under his breath that Wyatt doesn't bother acknowledging.

Mercer clears his throat.

"We're very sorry about what happened upstairs," he begins carefully. "We're investigating how this individual gained access to that hallway."

Wyatt leans back slightly in the chair. "You should," he says.

Mercer nods. "We take patient privacy extremely seriously."

Wyatt's gaze flicks toward the man by the wall again. "Do you?"

The room goes quiet. Mercer shifts slightly behind the desk.

"Mr. Hayes—"

Wyatt lifts one hand gently, cutting him off.

"Let's not do the script," he says calmly. "I've been in locker rooms for years. I know what damage control sounds like."

Mercer's mouth closes again.

Wyatt folds his hands loosely in front of him. "There are multiple injured professional hockey players in your hospital tonight," he continues. "One of them is unconscious. The other just came out of surgery. Several more have been patched back together. All after a genuinely horrific experience."

Mercer nods slowly. "Yes."

"And yet," Wyatt says, his voice still perfectly even, "a photographer managed to walk into the hallway outside one of your private rooms, open the door, and take a picture."

No one speaks.

Wyatt leans forward slightly now. "So either your security is incompetent," he says, "or someone inside your building sold access."

The words land in the room like a dropped weight.

Mercer's jaw tightens. "We are looking into—"

"You should look faster," Wyatt replies. "Before someone decides to inform the public, and the league, that your security team was giving access to one of these injured players for a stupid speculative fluff piece instead of focusing on the absolute horror these men and their families have been going through."

Mercer exhales slowly. "Mr. Hayes, threatening to go to the press—"

Wyatt tilts his head slightly. "I didn't threaten anything."

A beat.

"I clarified that you should clean your house," he continues, "before someone goes public and tells them hospital security was selling access to injured players. I never said that someone would be me."

The silence that follows is absolute.

Even the photographer stops shifting.

Mercer studies Wyatt for several long seconds. Then he turns to one of the guards near the wall.

“Is he wearing a press badge?” he says.

The guard pulls a press credential from the photographer’s pocket and hands it over.

Mercer reads it once, then slides it across the desk toward Wyatt.

“His name is Colin Mercer,” he says. “Freelance.”

Wyatt glances down at the badge.

“Freelance for who?”

Mercer hesitates.

Then he sighs.

“A Canadian gossip blog,” he says. “One of the smaller ones. They pay for sensational stories.”

Wyatt reads the name printed beneath the logo.

He nods once.

“Good,” he says.

He stands.

The meeting is clearly over.

Mercer rises with him, still trying to recover some sense of authority.

“We’ll be reviewing all security footage and access logs from tonight,” he says. “If any staff member was involved, they will be terminated.”

Wyatt pauses at the door.

He turns back just once.

“You might want to hurry,” he says calmly. “These things can take on a life of their own, you know.”

Then he leaves.

The hallway outside the office is empty. Wyatt walks a few steps down it before pulling his phone from his pocket.

He scrolls once and presses a contact. The call connects almost immediately.

“Yuna.”

Her voice is steady.

“Hayes.”

“I have some information for you.”

There’s a small pause.

“I’m listening.”

Wyatt glances once back toward the security office door.

“Colin Mercer,” he says. “Freelance photographer. Works for a blog called NorthLine Hockey.”

Silence stretches on the other end of the call.

Then Yuna exhales slowly.

“Thank you, Wyatt.”

He slips his phone back into his pocket and turns toward the elevators.

Chapter End Notes

And now the other side of the story begins.

The immediate danger may be over, but the world outside the hospital hasn’t stopped moving, and the boys still have to face their next challenge.

Fortunately for Shane and Ilya, they’re not facing that alone.

The next chapters will start digging into the fallout — the media storm, the choices that come with suddenly losing privacy, and the way a team (and a family) decides what they’re willing to protect. We’ll probably cry more. There might be a tea party. There will be a whole lot of love and tough choices.

It’s a different type of chaos, it’s a different kind of pain, and I’m sorry.

But also, not sorry.

Thanks for sticking with me so far, for every comment, every kudos, every share. I appreciate you all more than words can ever say.

Chapter 7: Control the Narrative

Chapter Summary

While the media scrambles for scandal and the captains' chat turns into a surprisingly wholesome support group, Yuna Hollander calmly begins redirecting the narrative like the terrifyingly competent woman she is.

Meanwhile, Shane is awake, concussed, and mostly concerned about stopping his extremely Russian boyfriend from starting an international incident on social media.

Ilya Rozanov has other ideas. Obviously.

Chapter Notes

Hello friends!

Surprise! The devil works hard, but apparently I work like Yuna Hollander.

This chapter is a bit of fun: we've got media chaos, terrifyingly competent agent behaviour from Yuna, the NHL captains accidentally forming a support group, and Shane Hollander trying very hard to prevent his boyfriend from committing several crimes on Twitter.

Also, yes, the hospital photo situation is gross. Unfortunately, that part is... not particularly unrealistic, and it was important to highlight that a bit for realism. I think you'll like where we're taking it though.

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

Yuna Hollander does not panic.

She has raised one son, adopted another, whether he realizes it or not (though she really hopes he realizes it), negotiated endorsement deals across three countries, and once convinced a Canadian airline to hold a plane for fifteen minutes because a seventeen-year-old hockey player had misplaced his passport.

Panic has never been particularly useful.

Still, as she stands in the quiet hallway outside Shane's hospital room, Wyatt Hayes's voice echoes in her ear.

Colin Mercer. Freelance photographer for NorthLine Hockey.

Of course it is. They have always been a little bit scummy.

She steps a little farther down the corridor before pulling her phone from her pocket again. She really hoped the coffee she was holding for Ilya would still be hot – or at least warm – by the time she made it back to Ilya. The hospital at this hour hums quietly around her—soft monitors, distant footsteps, the low murmur of nurses’ voices. Down the hall, Shane’s room remains closed, the small window glowing softly.

Inside are the two boys she cares about most in the world. *God let me be able to protect them.*

She scrolls once through her contacts and taps Harris. He answers on the second ring.

“Tell me you’re calling with good news,” he says.

“I have information,” Yuna replies.

That’s enough to quiet him.

“Go ahead.”

“The photographer who took the hospital picture has been identified.”

Harris exhales slowly.

“Well that’s something.”

“Colin Mercer,” she says. “From NorthLine Hockey.”

There’s a brief pause.

Then Harris sighs.

“Of course it’s fucking NorthLine.” Harris mutters.

“You know them too?”

“Unfortunately, I have had the displeasure,” he replies. “They survive on rumours and outrage. Sensational headlines, manipulated photos, the usual crap.”

Yuna leans lightly against the wall.

“Do you want this buried?” he asks. “Because I don’t know if that is something we can actually do. Once it hits the socials, it can take on a life of its own, as you’ve been undoubtedly seeing.”

She considers the question for a moment.

“No. I know we can’t do that.”

Another pause.

“Then what are we doing?” Harris asks.

“We redirect.”

Harris hums thoughtfully.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning,” Yuna says calmly, “that we start talking about their bond from coming up together in the league. Their mental health initiatives, the camp, their support of the LGBTQ community...make that the highlight reel. It buys me time to talk to them and see what they want to say. Or not say.”

“And pair that with the work Hunter and Crosby already started? Troy is still willing to sit with the press. He’s desperate to help in any way he can.”

“Exactly.”

Harris chuckles quietly.

“I’ll have the Centaurs media team boost that angle. And the camp. The charity work. Remind people why they care about these two.”

“And make it more than hockey.”

There’s a pause.

Then Harris asks quietly, “How are they?”

Yuna glances back down the hallway, toward the faint glow of the room’s window.

“Ilya is exhausted,” she says honestly. “Shane woke up briefly and spoke to him, he says, which helps.”

“That’s good.”

“Yes.”

A moment passes.

“Do they know about the photo?” Harris asks.

“No,” Yuna replies. “And I would prefer they didn’t yet. Ilya has been avoiding social media.”

“Good. For as much trouble as he can be, sometimes that man is remarkably self-aware.”

“They’ve had enough to manage in the last day.”

“More than enough.”

She straightens slightly.

“There is one more thing,” she says.

“I’m listening.”

“If Mr. Mercer intends to pursue this story further,” Yuna says calmly, “I would like to know how he gained access to that hallway.”

Harris’s voice sharpens.

“You think someone tipped him off.”

““I think photographers rarely find the correct corridor by accident.”

Another pause.

“Leave that part to me,” Harris says quietly. “I do enjoy a good old fashioned expose.”

She smiles faintly.

“I suspected you might. I’m going to get back to them now, but keep me posted. If you need anything from me as their agent just let me know.”

The call ends.

Yuna stands for a moment in the quiet corridor, listening to the low hum of the hospital around her. Then she picks up the coffee again and turns back toward Shane’s room.

Security Office

Colin Mercer is having a very bad night, despite managing to get a photo that might finally get people to take him seriously.

His lip is split. His jaw aches. His camera is currently sitting in an evidence bag on the desk across the room. His phone has been smashed. And the goalie who punched him is apparently friends with half the staff in this building all of a sudden.

“This is ridiculous,” Colin snaps.

Daniel doesn’t look up from the monitor in front of him. “You’re the idiot who got careless. Now we have to figure out a way out of this mess.”

Paused on the screen is security footage from the hallway upstairs. Wyatt Hayes stands clearly in frame at the far end of the corridor, arms folded, watching.

And there, in the corner of the shot, is Colin—cracking the door open and lifting his phone.

“Cousin or not,” Daniel says without looking away from the screen, “you were attempting to photograph a patient through a hospital room door. You broke the very simple rules I gave you about being here to cover the crash. You got the shot you needed and went back for more like a complete moron.”

“He’s a public figure. This is a huge scoop. They’re clearly in some sort of romantic relationship,” Colin said indignantly. “And the public deserves to know they’ve been lied to.”

“One of them is also clearly a patient. That’s against the rules.”

Colin scoffs.

“You think the league isn’t going to want that story? You think they’re going to support them for this?”

Daniel finally looks up.

“The league is the least of your problems right now.”

Colin leans back in his chair.

“I didn’t break in,” he says. “You told me where to go to get access to the players.”

Daniel’s expression doesn’t change.

“And what part of stay away from the patient rooms wasn’t clear?”

Colin shrugs.

“That’s where the story the fans deserve to see is. It’s not right to keep them in the dark.”

Silence settles across the room.

Daniel studies him carefully.

“You might want to rein in that entitlement,” he says quietly. “You’re currently sitting in a hospital security office with footage of yourself committing a privacy violation. Once you realize how serious this situation is about to become, you’ll change your tune. We are both about to get buried.”

Captains Chat

Sid:

Heard Pike made it out of surgery. Good news.

Hunter:

Yeah. Leg fracture. He’ll be fine. Probably back to annoying everyone in a couple weeks.

MacKinnon:

Jesus. Glad it wasn't worse. Metros are gonna miss him – he's leading the league in assists this year. If we even get back to the season.

McDavid:

Anyone heard from Rozanov? It's weird when he's not in here giving us shit.

Tavares:

Not yet. And not expecting to, honestly. Bet Yuna Hollander's got him on a short leash. She's fucking terrifying.

Horvat:

Media's losing its mind. It's actually kinda gross.

Sid:

Let them.

MacKinnon:

Assholes. Did you see that picture from NorthLine?

Hunter:

That was so invasive. I can't believe someone let them get close enough.

McDavid:

You know Rozanov hasn't left that hospital.

Hunter:

If he had we'd know something was very wrong. So that's good news.

Sid:

When he posts something—and we all know he will—we boost it. They deserve that.

MacKinnon:

Yeah.

Tavares:

Agreed.

Hunter:

Let them control the narrative.

Marchand:

Rozy – when you see this, you fucker – we got you. And also you should spill the tea. How did you bag Hollander???

Hunter:

Okay that's actually a valid question...

Shane is propped slightly upright now, pillows arranged carefully behind his shoulders. The bruising along his jaw has darkened, and the bandage near his temple stands out starkly against pale skin. Ilya keeps looking at it like he might be able to undo the damage if he stares long enough.

But Shane's eyes are open, and he's watching Ilya scroll through his phone with growing irritation.

"That expression usually means you're about to start a fight," Shane says affectionately.

Ilya doesn't look at him but he does smile softly. "I am considering it."

Shane groans.

"Please don't start a war while I'm on concussion protocol. It's just social media."

Ilya finally glances at him, his eyes soft with affection and exasperation.

"These people are idiots."

"Again," Shane says dryly, "not new information."

Ilya tosses the phone onto the blanket beside him with a huff. "There was a photograph." Ilya says. "Of us."

Shane sighs. "Of course there was. This was big news."

"No, Shane, a photograph of *us*. Me, holding your hand and crying."

Shane's mouth tightens slightly. "Yeah. I figured you meant something like that. Can I see it?"

Ilya watches him carefully. "You are not supposed to look at screens." He pauses, carefully choosing his words. "You are not angry?"

Shane shrugs slightly. "I'm annoyed. I'm frustrated. But honestly? We were going to tell people eventually. And you rushing over here when you didn't know what you were going to see or learn was actually kind of sweet. I know I would have been a disaster."

Ilya's voice is quiet.

"Not like this, though. We were supposed to choose. And you would have been bigger disaster."

Shane reaches out gently, brushing his fingers against Ilya's wrist. The contact steadies him immediately. "Ilya. We'll handle it."

Ilya exhales slowly and meets Shane's eyes.

"Together?"

Shane smiles faintly. “Yeah. Together. Now, more importantly; are you actually going to kiss me now or what?”

Ilya laughed. “What you almost die and you think you get to make demands of me?”

But he stood and leaned over the bed, pressing his lips to Shane’s, murmuring in Russian ““Я пойду первым, любовь моя. Ты не имеешь права оставлять меня так.”

I go first, my love. You don’t have the right to leave me like that.

Shane kissed him back. “English, baby, English. I can’t keep up right now.

Ilya smirked and lightly caressed his face. “No.”

Yuna walks in to find them laughing together. Shane has pulled Ilya into the bed with him, and seeing his 6’3” body trying to fold himself into the bed without taking up too much room is both ridiculous and heartwarming.

“Well, this is a better sight than the one I left,” she said brightly.

“Hi Mom,” Shane said with a small smile. “Where’s dad?”

“He decided you and Ilya would be more comfortable in clean clothes, so he just made a run to your place to get some. Should be back in an hour or so.” She handed Ilya the coffee.

“Sorry that took so long. So many calls came in. You’re quite popular today, it seems.”

“I’m sorry for making so much extra work for you.”

She waves it off with a shrug. “It’s what you pay me for. Quite well I might add. So Shane – how are you feeling sweetie?”

He sighed and leaned back against the pillow. “Like I got hit by an airplane” he said wryly.

“More worried about my boyfriend starting fights on the internet though.”

She raised an eyebrow, “Oh, so you’ve finally seen the chaos I take it?”

“Yes. It is a good picture though. Maybe I can steal it and share it. Brag about my beautiful boyfriend.”

“So you guys are just going to go at it head on?”

Shane nodded. “I know I said I wanted to wait, but we don’t have the option now. And honestly, I don’t want to hide him anymore. It’s exhausting.”

“And I am too sexy to resist, no?”

Shane threw an extra pillow at him. “Asshole.”

Yuna smiled at them both. “You guys are cute. Okay. I actually like you taking the picture and posting it yourself Ilya. Just...remember you’re media trained, right?”

Ilya gasped as if wounded. “Mama Yuna, you know you can trust me. This doubt is unfair!”

She buried her face in her hands to hide the grin, her shoulders shaking in smothered laughter.

Shane peers at the phone in Ilya’s hands. “You’re not tweeting,” he says firmly.

“I am captain,” Ilya replies.

“That’s not how captain works.”

“It absolutely is.”

“No. Captain means you set an example.”

“I am setting example of honesty.”

Shane sighs.

“You’re going to start an international incident from a hospital chair.”

“I have many things to say.”

“I know,” Shane mutters. “That’s the problem.”

He shifts slightly, wincing as his ribs protest.

Ilya’s expression softens immediately.

“Careful.”

“I’m fine,” Shane says. Then he points at the phone again. “Instagram.”

Ilya narrows his eyes.

“Instagram.”

“Yes.”

“Not Twitter?”

“Absolutely not Twitter.”

Ilya sighs like a man being denied basic human rights.

“Fine.”

Shane waits.

“Post once,” he says. “Keep it simple.”

Ilya frowns at the screen.

“Simple.”

“Yes.”

“You are asking Russian man to be simple. This feels discriminatory.”

Shane snorts.

“Ilya.”

“Yes, yes.”

His thumbs move across the screen.

Shane leans slightly closer, watching.

“You’re being nicer than I expected,” he says after a moment.

Ilya raises an eyebrow without looking up.

“You should see the first draft.”

“Should I be worried?”

“Very.”

A few more seconds pass.

Then Ilya hits post.

@IlyaRozanov81 – Instagram

Photo 1:

The photo taken through the hospital door: Ilya sitting beside Shane’s bed, their hands clasped, his head bowed toward Shane’s knuckles. Sombre and beautiful.

Photo 2:

A new photo taken moments ago. Shane grins despite the bruising, while Ilya leans over the bed, recreating the infamous All-Star Game kiss from years ago.

Caption

Hockey is a small world.

Tonight I am grateful to the pilot and crew who brought my friends home alive.

Hayden Pike is out of surgery and doing well. And Shane Hollander is recovering and exactly as stubborn and pretty as always.

Thank you to everyone who has sent support.

And to the person who took the first photo – thank you. You were right about one thing, and that is what mattered.

That moment mattered. Shame you missed the next one.

As for the rumours:

Yes. He's mine. Apparently, this was not obvious to everyone. No. You may not interview him about it.

Yes, he knows I posted this.

Shane reads the caption slowly. His eyebrows climb higher with every line.

“...that’s actually pretty restrained,” he says.

Ilya glances at him and smirks.

“You should see the first draft.”

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: the first draft of Ilya’s caption was, in fact, much worse. I know. I wrote it.

But Shane is alive, the boys are together, and the internet is about to lose its mind for entirely different reasons now.

Next chapter we get to deal with:

the media meltdown

the captains absolutely boosting the post

teammates discovering the chaos

the Metros reacting in the stupidest way possible (cuz fuck em)

and possibly Yuna Hollander becoming the most feared woman in professional hockey

or something like that. Who knows. They are kind of telling me where we're going, and I'm just along for the ride.

As always, thank you for reading, commenting, sharing, and generally enabling this adventure. Your comments and kudos and shares feed my soul and remind me why this is fun in the first place. I write this for me, but now also for you. And to my Discord girls - you know who you are - I love you <3

Chapter 8: Bonus Chapter - Ilya's First Draft

Chapter Summary

By popular demand, Ilya's first draft of his Instagram post

Chapter Notes

Okay, you crazy Loons - you asked, so you shall receive! Enjoy Ilya in all his unhinged glory as a bonus chapter while I'm hard at work on the next chapter for you. I mean, I had it written anyway, so why not!

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

@IlyaRozanov81 – Instagram

Well.

Apparently, the internet has discovered that I love Shane Hollander.

Congratulations. You have solved the mystery. Sad it took a plane crash for you to not be oblivious. It's been years.

If the person who took that picture was hoping to embarrass me, you will need to try harder. I have scored playoff overtime goals in Montreal. The boos shook the building. This is nothing.

If you were worried like I was, Shane is fine. He is concussed, stubborn, and already trying to tell me what I am allowed to post on the internet. He is lucky he is so pretty. Or maybe I am lucky he's so pretty. (I am very lucky.)

For anyone asking questions:

Yes. He's my boyfriend.

No. You may not interview him about it.

No. I do not care if that makes you uncomfortable.

And to the photographer who thought sneaking pictures through a hospital door was a good idea, next time knock. If you really wanted to watch, I would have happily kissed him properly for the camera. Maybe you would have learned something.

Chapter End Notes

There you go - hope it lived up to expectations! See you in the next chapter, where we will enjoy some fun, some humour, some romance....and some rage. We all need a little more rage, right?

Thanks for all the love, the kudos, the comments, and the support. It means everything.

Chapter 9: Spin

Chapter Summary

Ilya breaks the internet.

The league rallies, the captains chat loses its mind, and Harris works overtime to make sure the conversation stays where it belongs: on the Irina Foundation.

But not everyone is celebrating.

Chapter Notes

We've got media spin, internet chaos, the captains chat being exactly as feral as you'd expect, and the hockey world reacting in real time to Ilya Rozanov absolutely detonating the internet with one Instagram post.

whistles innocently

Clearly, that's all there is here.

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

The camera light blinked red.

Harris settled back in his chair with the kind of ease that made people forget, briefly, that every question he asked was deliberate. Across from him, Troy Barrett looked faintly suspicious of the entire setup, which Harris considered both reasonable and deeply unhelpful.

"You've worked with the Irina Foundation camps for years now," Harris said, glancing once at his notes before looking back up. "And given that the entire internet is currently acting like it has just discovered Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov are capable of having feelings, I thought perhaps we might offer them a more useful story."

Troy snorted. "Good luck with that."

Harris smiled faintly. "I am, as ever, an optimist."

Troy gave him a look that suggested this was obvious nonsense, but let it go.

"So," Harris said, "tell me about the camp."

Troy leaned back a little, arms folding loosely over his chest. “The public version?”

“The true version,” Harris said mildly. “You can decorate it a little if you like.”

That got the smallest laugh out of him. “The camp raises money for the foundation’s mental health work,” Troy said. “That’s always been the heart of it. Kids, families, outreach, support programs. Making it easier to ask for help before things get bad.”

Harris nodded, but didn’t interrupt.

“And over the last few years,” Troy continued, “they’ve also pushed to make sure that support actually reaches kids who don’t always see themselves reflected in hockey spaces. LGBTQ kids included.”

This time, Harris let the silence sit for a second. “Was that always part of the vision?”

Troy shrugged one shoulder. “Maybe not at the beginning in so many words. At seventeen, they were mostly just two idiots under too much pressure and almost forced into this rivalry. But the older they got, the more they figured out what they wanted to do for others.”

“You’re talking about when they first met, the Prospects Cup,” Harris said.

Troy’s mouth twitched. “Yeah. Prospects Cup.”

He rubbed a hand over his jaw. “People talk about that tournament like it was destiny or mythology or some shit. Really, it was just two seventeen-year-olds with every scout in the world staring at them like they were already franchises instead of kids.”

“And they were both being called generational talents.”

“Which is a ridiculous thing to put on anybody that age,” Troy said flatly.

Harris inclined his head. “I don’t disagree.”

Troy exhaled slowly. “They were competitive as hell, always trying to outdo each other. But even then...” He shook his head. “Even then, you could tell there was something different there. Nobody else in that building understood the pressure the way the other one did.”

Harris watched him quietly.

“So how did that become the foundation?” he asked.

“It didn’t. Not right away.” Troy shifted in his seat. “The foundation came later, after Rozy was signed by Ottawa.”

Harris’s eyebrows lifted just slightly. “A traumatic event for everyone involved, I’m sure.”

“For Holzy especially,” Troy said dryly. “Though he’d deny that under oath.”

Harris made a soft hum of agreement and motioned for him to go on.

“Ilya called him that summer,” Troy said. “Said he wanted to talk about an idea he had. Or so the story goes. The public story was simple enough: they wanted to stop the performance of hating each other.”

“And the private story?”

Troy looked at him for a long moment, as if weighing how much to say.

“Same story, really,” he said at last. “At least, what is mine to share. Just with more swearing.”

That got a real laugh out of Harris.

“They care about the same things,” Troy said. “Mental health. Kids growing up under pressure. Kids feeling like there wasn’t room for them in the sport unless they fit one very narrow, specific box.” He paused. “And they are, unfortunately, very good together when they are working toward the same thing.”

“Unfortunately?”

Troy smiled despite himself. “Have you met them? Spent time with them together?”

Harris’s mouth twitched. “Regrettably, yes.”

“They still argue like they’re seventeen,” Troy said. “But the camp works because both of them mean it. It’s not branding. It’s not PR. They show up. They coach. They listen. They make it very hard for those kids to believe they don’t matter.”

The room was quiet for a beat.

Then Harris asked, softer now, “And off the ice?”

Troy looked straight into the camera.

“They’ve had each other’s backs for a very long time. Way longer than any of us knew.”

Captains Chat

The captains’ chat lit up the second Ilya finally reappeared.

Rozanov:

You fuckers gossip like women. What, are you all WAGs now?

MacKinnon:

Oh, look who decided to rise from the dead.

Sid:

Nice to see you back, Rozy.

Rozanov:

Apologies for my absence. I was occupied.

Marchand:

Busy posting hard-launch hospital-romance content?

Rozanov:

You say this like it is insult. Have you seen my boyfriend? Obviously, you have. You are very jealous, Canadian Ratboy.

MacKinnon:

He's got you there.

Marchand:

You could have warned us you had Hollander level game.

Rozanov:

Why?

Marchand:

Because now I look stupid.

Rozanov:

This is not new.

Marchand:

That's rude.

Rozanov:

You really are jealous.

Marchand:

Of what exactly?

Rozanov:

That my boyfriend is prettier than you.

MacKinnon:

Again, not a high bar.

Sid:

Glad he's okay. That was a fucked up day and a half.

There was a beat before Ilya answered.

Rozanov:

He is concussed, stubborn, and trying to control my access to social media.

Marchand:

I always knew he was a smart man. Though being with you might take some points off.

Rozanov:

Traitor.

Hunter:

Honestly, probably for the best. You don't need to find yourself arrested.

Rozanov:

You all have no vision.

Marchand:

No, we just don't want Yuna to kill us by association.

Rozanov:

A fair concern.

That got a run of laughing reactions.

Hunter:

But seriously, Rozanov, inquiring minds. How did you pull Hollander?

Rozanov:

A gentleman doesn't kiss and tell. Lucky for you, I am not a gentleman. However, I do love my boyfriend, and he is doing that hand-waving thing, so I'll just say I have what he wants.

Marchand:

...nope the intrusive thought wins. And what is that, Rozy?

Rozanov:

9 inches :-P

More laughing reactions

Sid:

Oh my god Rozanov

MacKinnon:

**laughing emoji* Jesus dude*

Hunter:

I did not need to know that.

Stone:

Um...what did I miss?

Rozanov:

Shane is now 5 shades of red and making a high-pitched squeaking noise. I should take care of him.

The post spread like wildfire.

For the first few minutes, it moved the way things always did online – quickly, chaotically, bouncing between private messages and group chats before anyone had really decided what to make of it. Then the hockey world caught up.

Players began reposting it. Former teammates commented. Fans lost their minds in increasingly creative ways. Within the hour, the side-by-side edits of the old All-Star Game kiss and the new hospital photo were everywhere.

Someone had slowed the second photo down into a dramatic edit set to orchestral music.

Another account posted the two photos side by side with the caption *Enemies to lovers but make it hockey*.

It had twenty thousand likes before Ilya even finished reading the comments.

Hockey Twitter, as usual, had absolutely no chill.

A few of the comments made him snort despite himself.

@Sid87

Glad you're both okay.

@NathanMacKinnon29

Finally.

@ConnorMcDavid97

Happy you're okay, Hollander.

@BoHorvat53

Subtle. Real subtle.

@BradMarchand63

I KNEW IT AND ALSO I DESERVE CREDIT FOR KNOWING IT

@BradMarchand63

also this means I was right for YEARS and I expect apologies

The Ottawa Centaurs official account reposted the photo not long after.

@OttawaCentaursOfficial

We're glad all the Montreal players are safe. Wishing Shane Hollander a smooth recovery. Please respect their privacy while he heals.

Within minutes the locker room followed.

@BBQWithBood

About time the rest of you caught up.

@WyattHayes

Try not to break the internet boys.

@TroyBennett

We are never hearing the end of this.

@LilHaas

Glad you're both okay. That's what matters.

@CoachWiebe

Proud of you both.

Ilya scrolled slowly through the reactions, leaning back in the chair beside Shane's hospital bed. The faint glow from his phone lit the quiet room while the monitor by the bed continued its steady, rhythmic beeping.

The next comment made him pause.

@HaydenPike

Posting this from a hospital bed, but worth it.

Glad I don't have to keep this secret anymore.

Love you, Shane. You're an asshole, Rozanov. *kissing emoji*

Ilya actually laughed and commented back with a kissing emoji of his own. *Let them figure that out*, he thought to himself.

The fan reactions continued pouring in beneath them.

Most of them were supportive. Some were emotional. Parents thanked them for the Irina Foundation camp. Former campers posted photos from summers spent at the rink – kids in oversized jerseys standing beside Shane, Ilya, Hayden, Troy and Wyatt.

One comment made Ilya stop scrolling for a moment.

That camp saved my life.

He read it twice before moving on, telling himself his eyes were just blurry because he was tired.

Not all of the comments were kind, of course.

They were all about what he expected to see. Mocking remarks, dismissive jokes, and the occasional former player posting something vague about keeping politics out of hockey. Another account liked a comment calling the whole thing a distraction from the game.

The internet moved quickly, as always. Speculation about them playing against each other, and other players commenting that they're upset about having to share a locker room. Nothing even remotely original.

Ilya stopped scrolling and stretched out on the cot they had provided him. He might as well get some sleep, he figured.

At the hotel near the hospital, Yuna Hollander watched a completely different set of screens.

Three monitors glowed in the dim light of her hotel suite. One tracked trending tags. Another monitored engagement spikes and media pickup. The third displayed a document she had been quietly building all afternoon.

At the top of the page sat a name.

Colin Mercer.

Beneath it ran a growing list of notes – hospital access policies, security logs, visitor records, and a series of questions about how a freelance photographer had managed to gain access to a restricted corridor. A note about how the head of security shared a last name with him.

Yuna read through the document once more and added another line beneath his name.

Potential civil violation.

Her phone buzzed again. She ignored it.

Instead, she switched screens, watching the sports coverage that had begun to roll across every major network exactly as Harris had intended.

Clips from the interview played across the broadcast. Troy Barrett spoke calmly about the Irina Foundation while footage of the summer camp filled the screen – kids laughing on the ice, borrowed gear stacked along the boards, NHL players kneeling beside them explaining drills.

One analyst gestured toward the footage. “This,” he said firmly, “is the story that actually matters.”

Another nodded. “The Irina Foundation has been raising money for mental health initiatives for a while now. Their summer camp alone funds support programs for hundreds of families.”

“And recently,” the host added carefully, “they’ve expanded that outreach to include LGBTQ youth in hockey spaces.”

A brief pause followed.

Then one of the analysts smiled faintly. “You’ll notice most reporters are being very careful about how they approach this story.”

The host laughed. “Well...would you want Sidney Crosby mad at you? Or Ilya Rozanov?”

The panel laughed with him.

Exactly where she and Harris had wanted the conversation to go.

She finally checked on social media. The results were more mixed there, as she had expected. But there was support there from multiple players and teams. Even a few of Shane's teammates had said something.

But the Montreal Metros front office remained silent.

At first that had been easy to explain. The crash had shaken everyone. The team had been scattered across a waiting room, and trying to get back home to rest and recover. People were still processing. No one expected immediate statements.

But as the hours passed, the silence began to feel heavier. Yuna had a gnawing feeling in her gut that this was not going to go well. Sure enough, the statement appeared across every sports feed at once:

Montreal Metros — Official Statement

The Montreal Metros organization is aware of recent developments involving Shane Hollander.

While we are grateful for Shane Hollander's bravery in the recent emergency and his recovery, the organization expects all players to maintain professionalism and uphold the standards of the Metros organization both on and off the ice.

The team will be conducting an internal review regarding Shane Hollander's conduct related to the public statements and social media activity surrounding this incident.

The Metros remain committed to maintaining a culture focused on team accountability and respect for the game.

Further comment will be provided following the completion of this review.

Yuna stared at the screen for a long moment and sighed. This was going to break Shane's heart.

Colin Mercer stared at his new phone until the images started to blur and his drink was empty. Rozanov's post was everywhere.

The first photo — *his photo* — had been swallowed whole by the rest of it. Reframed. Redeemed. Made into something noble, romantic, intentional.

Worse, the second photo had turned the whole thing into a story people wanted to celebrate.

He had the break he needed to finally fully launch his career, and Rozanov had turned back on him.

By the time the sports channels started picking up Troy Barrett's interview, Colin understood with a sick twist in his gut that he was no longer part of the story at all.

Unless he made himself one.

On the television mounted above the bar, Troy's voice carried over footage from the camp.

"They show up. They listen. They make it very hard for those kids to believe they don't matter."

Colin laughed once, bitter and humourless.

"Yeah," he muttered. "We'll see."

He scrolled down to a contact and pressed call. "What would I need to completely bury this asshole who stole my picture and my story?"

The voice on the other end responded with a mocking laugh. "Get a better one. Or at least more compromising. The Metros would love to have something to bury this with."

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: consequences.

The Metros have opinions, the media has questions, Colin Mercer has decided to become a problem, and Yuna Hollander is about to begin what can only be described as a legally sanctioned war. Maybe with Wyatt's help. That could be fun.

Also, at some point, Shane is going to have to also face the reality of going public.

That should go well.

Shouting out my Discord group for always being the best cheerleaders as always, and for all of you. I see those who come back and comment every time, and I love you all for it too. Even though you are all probably going to hate me in another chapter or two.
blows kisses

This is for me, sure, but I also do this for you. Thanks for the comments, the kudos, the sharing, and for sticking with me through this all.

See ya in the next one!

Chapter 10: Aftershocks

Chapter Summary

After the chaos of the crash and the internet discovering Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov's relationship all at once, morning arrives with unexpected quiet.

But the hockey world doesn't stop moving just because two people nearly died. The internet is doing what the internet does best—turning everything into edits, jokes, and discourse.

Behind the scenes, though, the fault lines are already forming.

The Montreal Metros are angry.

And someone out there has decided Shane Hollander's perfect reputation is a problem that needs fixing.

Meanwhile, Shane and Ilya are just trying to get through one more day without the world ripping them apart.

It turns out love might be the easy part.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a little quieter than the last one, but don't get comfortable. We're in the "aftershocks" part of the story where everyone starts reacting to what happened—and unfortunately, hockey culture is not always known for being calm, rational, or emotionally mature.

Also, yes, the Irina Foundation camp is canon-compliant. I just took a slight creative liberty and expanded slightly to include broader outreach because I refuse to believe these idiots wouldn't support queer kids in hockey spaces.

Anyway.

Grab a coffee. Things are about to get messy.

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

Morning arrived slowly in the hospital.

The light came first—pale winter sunlight creeping through the narrow gap in the curtains and spreading across the quiet room. Machines hummed softly, monitors blinking in steady rhythms that had finally begun to sound almost normal after the chaos of the previous day.

Shane woke to that sound.

For a moment, he didn't move. The fog of having a concussion still lingered at the edges of his thoughts, and his body felt heavy in that strange way that comes after too much adrenaline and too much sleep.

Then he became aware of the warmth around his hand.

He turned his head. Ilya was asleep in a cot beside the bed, his body twisted at an angle that could not possibly be comfortable. One long arm stretched awkwardly across the gap between the cot and the bed, his hand still loosely wrapped around Shane's.

The position looked ridiculous.

And disarmingly full of all the things left unsaid after everything.

Shane watched him quietly.

Ilya's hair was a mess. There was a faint shadow of stubble along his jaw, and dark circles still under his eyes. He was also drooling a little, not that Shane would ever point that out to him.

He looked like a man who had simply run out of energy and stopped wherever he happened to be.

Shane remembered yesterday, too. They hadn't meant to come out like that, all cornered and rushed into it.

They had talked about it before, obviously — planned for it even. A quiet announcement someday when the timing felt right. Something controlled. Something that didn't turn their lives upside down overnight.

But when Ilya felt like he had to protect them, there had been no hesitation. He showed up not knowing what he was walking into. He had sat for hours just holding his hand, and when someone tried to turn that moment into a scandal, Ilya had simply taken the story back. He knew that if the roles had been reversed, there was no promise he would have handled it so well.

Shane studied the man sleeping beside him, eyes tracing every inch of him that he could see and committing it to memory.

If this was the price of loving Ilya Rozanov, he'd already paid it – and would pay it again.

The door opened quietly.

Yuna stepped into the room with two coffees in her hands and the expression of someone who had already been awake for several hours longer than anyone else. Fully in manager mode and driven.

She stopped when she saw Shane watching her, and her face softened slightly.

“Well,” she said softly, “good morning, sweetheart.”

Shane shifted slightly against the pillows.

“Hi, Mom.”

She handed him the coffee before setting the other one beside Ilya.

“He still asleep?”

Shane glanced toward the cot with a soft smile that even he knew looked mushy. “Like the dead.”

Yuna studied the scene for a moment — the long awkward stretch of Ilya’s arm, the way his hand still held Shane’s even in sleep.

Her mouth softened even further. “He hasn’t let go since yesterday.”

Shane didn’t answer.

He didn’t need to.

Yuna pulled the other chair closer and sat down.

“So,” she said gently, “you probably want to know what the world has been doing overnight.”

Shane huffed softly. “I assume it’s been normal and reasonable.”

“Completely,” she said dryly. “No chaos at all.”

His mouth twitched.

Then her tone shifted into professional mode. “The internet is split,” she said carefully. “There’s a lot of support. A lot of players have posted. The foundation coverage is helping redirect things.”

She hesitated. “But the crash shook your team badly. And right now some of them feel like the story has shifted away from that.”

Shane stared at the blanket. “That’s not what we wanted to do. We just wanted them to... I don’t know, have some measure of control I guess?”

“I know. But intent and perception are not always the same thing.”

Shane nodded slowly.

“There’s also the reality,” Yuna added, “that hockey isn’t always the most progressive environment.”

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

“Your teammates are processing a lot right now. Fear. Relief. Anger. Some of them will support you immediately. Some will struggle.”

“And management?”

Yuna exhaled slowly. “They released a statement last night that was... well, colder than anticipated.”

Shane’s stomach tightened.

“They’re creating distance,” she said. “Positioning themselves in case the locker room reaction turns ugly.”

Ilya stirred.

“...what reaction?”

His voice was rough with sleep, but he blinked and sat upright, immediately alert.

“Why are we talking about locker room reactions?”

Yuna met his eyes calmly. “Because Shane needs to be prepared for the possibility that things go south with Montreal.”

“South?”

“Badly south.”

The room went still.

“The trade deadline is coming up,” she continued.

Shane frowned. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“You have a no-trade clause. I think you should waive it.”

Ilya sat upright so fast the cot creaked. “Absolutely not. They’ll trade him somewhere far away. Somewhere I can’t follow. We’ll never see each other.”

“I’m not saying it’s happening,” Yuna replied calmly. “I’m saying you should consider being open to it.”

“Why?”

“Because if the locker room fractures, management may decide moving Shane is easier than dealing with the fallout.”

Ilya's expression hardened. "They almost died."

"Yes," Yuna said quietly. "And yet here we are."

He stood and began pacing. "This is ridiculous."

"They might not even mean it that way," Shane said softly. "The past couple of days was rough for everyone."

"They mean it," Yuna replied. "They're investigating you for misconduct."

"What about Ottawa?" Ilya asked. "You could see if he can be traded there. We could use someone as strong as Shane."

"Cap space," she said simply. "You both have very large contracts. You're both WORTH those contracts."

Ilya frowned. "So you're saying we can't play together."

"Not necessarily Ilya. I'm saying it will be complicated."

She leaned back slightly. "But I'm looking into every option."

"I am not letting them separate us because of this. I am not losing him."

Shane watched him for a moment, letting his words wash over him.

Then he reached out and took Ilya's hand. "Ilya. You won't lose me. We'll figure it out."

A soft knock interrupted them, and Wyatt Hayes stepped into the room carrying a cardboard tray of coffee.

"Morning," he said carefully. "Brought reinforcements. Also more coffee, because I figure you needed it."

Behind him, David appeared with a duffel bag slung over one shoulder.

"Clean clothes," he announced. "Because you both look like absolute disasters."

Ilya glanced down at himself. "That is rude but accurate."

Wyatt set the coffees down and walked over to fist-bump Shane.

"Nice to see you awake and aware. How're you feeling, Hollander?"

"Like I got hit by an airplane." He said deadpan

Wyatt winced and laughed. "Fair."

Across the city, Harris sat at the kitchen table staring at three open news feeds.

Troy stood at the counter pouring coffee.

“You’ve got that look again,” Troy said.

“What look?”

“The one where someone is about to regret their life choices.”

Harris glanced up, smiling wryly. “Only if they insist.”

Troy smiled back fondly, then he leaned down and pressed a quick kiss to the top of Harris’s head.

“Try not to ruin anyone before breakfast.”

Harris reached up, catching Troy’s wrist before he could step away. “You can do better than that.” He said with a grin

Troy rolled his eyes, but leaned down and kissed him anyway. “I’ll be in the gym if you need me, menace.”

Harris nodded and turned back to his screen, wondering if, as the PR manager, he could persuade ownership to make an offer for Shane Hollander to join the Centaurs.

Colin Mercer sat in a bar that had opened far too early, drinking something far too strong for the time of day.

Rozanov’s post was everywhere.

The first photograph — *his photograph, god damn it* — had been swallowed whole by the rest of it. Reframed. Redeemed. Made into something romantic. That second photo ruined everything.

Now, the story wasn’t about a scandal or Hollander’s first misstep of his career. It was about love. It made him sick. He was finally supposed to have the shot that was going to take him to the big time, and now he had NOTHING.

Mercer scrolled through his contacts, trying again and again to find someone with anything he could use to drag Shane Hollander. Former teammates. Junior coaches. Anonymous sources.

Shane Hollander’s reputation was spotless.

Which was beyond infuriating.

But hockey had never been a welcoming place for change, and there were plenty of people willing to complain about it. Some of them even worked in Montreal.

Mercer smiled slowly as a plan started to take shape. If he couldn't break Shane Hollander with facts...

He'd break him with narrative.

Later that afternoon the doctor returned with a tablet in one hand and the expression of someone who had already repeated the same instructions several times that day.

"Good news," she said, glancing between them with a soft smile. "Your scans look stable and the concussion symptoms are improving. That means we're comfortable releasing you this afternoon."

Shane straightened slightly. "Finally."

The doctor held up one finger. "That does not mean you're fine," she said firmly.

Ilya nodded immediately, sitting at the edge of the chair and looking like he was about to take notes.

Shane sank back against the pillow with a sigh.

She tapped a few notes on the tablet before continuing. "You're on strict concussion protocol for the next several days. That means rest. Real rest. No strenuous activity, no training, no skating, no workouts, and absolutely no contact sports." She glanced over at Ilya and winked. "No matter how enjoyable they may be."

Ilya laughed. Shane grimaced. "That's the worst thing you've said so far."

"I'm not finished," she said calmly.

She looked directly at Ilya. "You'll need to stay with him for the next forty-eight hours. Concussions can worsen unexpectedly, and we want someone nearby in case symptoms spike."

"Of course I will be there," Ilya said immediately.

The doctor nodded approvingly. "Good."

She continued scrolling. "No travel for at least two days. Ideally longer, but we'll reassess once the headaches and dizziness settle. If you experience worsening headaches, confusion, nausea, light sensitivity, or difficulty concentrating, you should come back immediately."

Shane gave a small sigh. "Yes, doctor."

She wasn't finished, though. "As for the ribs."

Shane groaned softly. Ilya lightly smacked his arm. "Hush. I need to listen."

"Two fractures," she continued. "They're stable, which is the good news. The bad news is that ribs take time to heal and they're going to hurt."

"They already do," Shane muttered.

"They will hurt more tomorrow," she replied calmly. "And the days after."

Ilya's attention sharpened immediately. "What should he avoid?"

"Pretty much everything," she said. "No lifting. No twisting. No sudden movements. No extracurriculars," again, she glanced at Ilya with a smirk, "and definitely no hockey."

Shane made a face. "Now you're just being cruel."

"Absolutely, it's in my job description." She said cheerfully. "You'll also want to sleep partially upright for a few nights," she added. "Deep breathing exercises every couple of hours to prevent lung complications. It's uncomfortable, but important."

Ilya nodded like someone receiving tactical instructions. *He's having way too much fun with this*, Shane thought to himself, smiling about it anyway.

"And pain medication?" Ilya asked

"He needs to take it," she said simply. "Especially at night. Broken ribs make people avoid breathing deeply because it hurts, and that can lead to other problems."

Shane rubbed his face. "So the official medical recommendation is that I sit still and be miserable."

"Correct," she said pleasantly. She handed him a printed packet. "Follow-up with your team physician within the week. No return to skating until concussion symptoms are completely resolved and you're cleared through the full protocol."

She paused at the door, glancing between them. "And if anyone pressures you to rush back sooner than that," she added, "you have my number and my report."

Then she left.

The room was quiet for a moment.

Ilya looked at Shane. Shane rolled his eyes. "I hate doctors."

Ilya leaned back in the chair, satisfied. "You are alive. This seems like acceptable trade to me."

Shane shifted slightly against the pillows and immediately winced.

Before he could say anything, Ilya was already moving.

“Careful,” he muttered, stepping closer to the bed. He adjusted the stack of pillows behind Shane’s back with surprising gentleness for someone his size, lifting him just enough to settle them into a better angle so his ribs wouldn’t pull when he breathed.

“Better?” he asked.

Shane tested a breath.

“Yeah,” he admitted quietly.

Ilya studied him for another second, as if checking that the pain had actually eased. Then he leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to Shane’s forehead.

Shane blinked up at him. “You’re hovering.”

“Yes,” Ilya said simply.

Shane huffed out a quiet laugh.

“Fair.”

The door swung open with considerably less subtlety than hospital etiquette probably recommended, and the first thing Shane heard was the squeak of rubber wheels on tile.

“Sup, idiots,” Hayden announced.

He was slouched in the wheelchair like someone who had decided posture was a problem for another day. His hair stuck up in several directions, and a faint bruise had begun to bloom along one side of his jaw. One leg was wrapped and braced, stretched stiffly out in front of him like an inconvenient piece of luggage.

Jackie walked beside him with one hand on the back of the chair, steering him carefully into the room.

“You look terrible,” Hayden added, squinting critically at Shane.

Ilya glanced up from where he’d been perched on the edge of the bed.

“You look worse.”

Hayden considered that for a moment. “That’s fair.”

Jackie laughed softly and nudged the wheelchair closer.

“You’re both disasters,” she said fondly. “Honestly, I’m amazed the doctors didn’t just put you in matching rooms.”

Shane shifted slightly against the pillows, smiling despite the ache in his ribs. “How’re you feeling, Hay?” he asked.

Hayden lifted one shoulder. “Like I lost a fight with physics and got into a wrestling match with gravity and my best friend.”

“That tracks,” Ilya said, rubbing his mouth to hide his smile.

Hayden pointed lazily at him. “And you look like you haven’t slept in a week.”

“That also tracks,” Jackie added, scooting around Hayden’s chair to give Ilya a hug and a peck on the cheek. “Hi hun”

Ilya shrugged and squeezed her back. “Sleep is overrated.”

Jackie studied him for a moment before reaching out and hugging Shane gently.

“You scared a lot of people yesterday, shithead. Nice to see you awake.”

“Thanks,” he said quietly, returning the hug. “Sorry for freaking you out.”

Hayden had meanwhile noticed the phone sitting on the bedside table.

His eyes narrowed.

“Oh, hey,” he said slowly.

Shane groaned immediately.

“Don’t.”

Hayden ignored him completely.

“So,” he continued, looking between them with exaggerated patience, “you two have been hiding this whole epic love story for years—”

“It is not epic,” Shane muttered.

“—and the way you decide to tell the world is with a dramatic hospital hard launch and a revenge Instagram post?”

He shook his head.

“I gotta say, I expected something slightly less chaotic.”

Ilya lifted his chin.

“It was very effective.”

“It was extremely effective,” Hayden agreed. “The internet is having a great time.”

Shane covered his face with one hand. “I don’t want to know.”

“You definitely don’t,” Hayden confirmed cheerfully.

Jackie smiled at both of them. “For what it’s worth,” she said gently, “a lot of people are really happy for you.”

Shane lowered his hand slowly. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Hayden leaned forward slightly in the chair, wincing as his leg shifted. “But seriously,” he added more quietly, glancing between them, “I’m glad you’re both okay.”

The room went still for a moment.

Then Ilya nodded once.

“Yes.”

Shane exhaled slowly.

“Yeah.”

Hayden leaned back again and scrubbed a hand through his hair.

“Group chat’s been a circus,” he added casually. “Mostly people making terrible jokes and arguing about whether Rozanov planned the whole internet meltdown.”

Ilya snorted. “I absolutely did.”

Hayden smirked.

“Some of the guys are a little...weird about it,” he admitted after a moment. “Not everyone’s had time to process the last twenty-four hours.”

Jackie shot him a quick look.

Hayden lifted both hands defensively. “Hey, I said *some*. Most of them are just relieved we didn’t die.”

Shane nodded slowly. “Yeah, about what I expected.”

Hayden clapped his hands once, decisively ending the topic. “Alright,” he said brightly. “That’s enough emotional vulnerability for one day.”

Jackie rolled her eyes.

“You started it.”

“Yeah,” he admitted. “But that doesn’t mean I have to enjoy it.”

Eventually the room grew quiet again.

Hayden and Jackie had gone back to his room, since he was going to be in the hospital for a bit longer. Wyatt had taken the empty coffee cups with him. Yuna and David had headed back to their hotel room to pack up, since Shane was being discharged. Even the hallway noise outside had faded into the soft, distant murmur of hospital life.

For the first time all day, it was just the two of them again.

Shane sat on the edge of the bed, his socked feet resting lightly against the cool tile floor. The effort of standing earlier had clearly taken more out of him than he wanted to admit. One hand rested carefully against his ribs, his fingers moving slightly with each slow breath.

Ilya sat beside him, close enough that their shoulders touched, just a soft, grounding touch.

Neither of them spoke for a while.

Shane stared down at his hands. He could still feel the echo of the day in his body — the feeling of falling, the fear when Hayden's seatbelt broke and the desperation that caused him to grab him, the relief when he woke up and Ilya was right where he'd needed him to be. It all blurred together in the strange way trauma sometimes did, moments replaying out of order.

But one thing was painfully clear.

Nothing about his life was quiet anymore. And it was all about to change.

"I'm not sorry we're out," Shane said at last, his voice barely above a whisper.

Ilya didn't hesitate; he just slid an arm around him and pulled him close. "I know."

Shane swallowed. He had imagined this moment so many times over the years. Imagined what it would feel like to finally stop hiding. To stop watching every word, every glance, every touch in public.

To stop pretending that the most important person in his life was just another rival across the ice.

He let out a slow breath. "I just didn't want it to cost so much."

The words hung in the air between them.

Ilya didn't answer right away. Instead, he turned and wrapped both his arms around Shane, pulling him gently against his chest.

Shane didn't resist. He leaned into him immediately, his forehead pressing lightly against Ilya's shoulder.

For a moment, neither of them moved.

Ilya's hand slid slowly up Shane's back, steady and warm, the kind of touch that didn't try to fix anything but refused to let him face it alone.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Ilya said quietly. “We didn’t do anything wrong. And we still don’t know what, if anything, will happen.”

Shane laughed softly, though it sounded a little rough around the edges. “I know that.”

He did know. That wasn’t the problem.

The problem was that hockey had been his whole life for so long he didn’t know where the edges of it ended anymore.

His team.

His city.

The locker room he’d fought so hard to belong to.

The career he’d built piece by piece since he was seventeen years old and stepping into arenas that felt too big for someone his age.

All of it suddenly felt... fragile.

“I worked so hard for this,” Shane murmured.

Ilya’s arms tightened slightly around him. “I know.”

Shane closed his eyes. “I love you,” he said quietly.

Ilya exhaled slowly against his hair. “I know that too.”

For a moment, it felt like they might stay there forever — two exhausted men standing in the quiet of a hospital room, holding onto each other while the world outside spun wildly out of control.

Then Ilya’s phone buzzed. The harsh sound cut sharply through the stillness.

Ilya pulled back slightly, gently pressing a kiss to Shane’s temple and reached for it. The screen lit up in his hand.

A message from Yuna.

He read it once.

Then again.

Shane watched his expression change.

“What?” he asked quietly.

Ilya hesitated. Just for a second, like he was worried about his reaction.

Then he turned the phone so Shane could see.

The message was short.

Management wants to meet tomorrow to talk about the investigation. I told them 2 days, as per the doctor's orders.

Shane stared at the words.

And just like that—

the calm ended.

Chapter End Notes

Well. Here we go.

If you were hoping the hockey establishment would react calmly and respectfully to two superstar players coming out under extremely dramatic circumstances...

...I admire your optimism.

Now. Into the breach we go!

Also: more soft moments with Shane and Ilya because if I'm going to hurt you emotionally later I need you properly attached first.

As always, thank you for reading, yelling in the comments, and enabling my extremely ridiculous obsession with emotionally damaged hockey players.

See you in the next one.

And remember:

Never underestimate a Russian man with Wi-Fi and a boyfriend.

Chapter 11: Lines in Ice

Chapter Summary

Shane Hollander thought the worst of the storm might finally be passing.
He was wrong.
The Montreal Metros want the distraction gone.
The media is digging for cracks in his reputation.
And someone inside the organization seems more than happy to help them find one.
Shane refuses to lie about who he loves—even if it costs him the team he built his career with.
Unfortunately, hockey has a long memory... and an even longer list of people who think it should stay the way it's always been.
Meanwhile, Ilya Rozanov is discovering that anger might be the easiest part of loving someone.

Chapter Notes

Hello friends and welcome back to hockey feelings, institutional bullshit, and Ilya Rozanov slowly reaching the point where violence starts to seem like a reasonable career path.

This chapter is where the lines between fiction and real-world celebrity worship start to blur a little bit more. We've moved past the internet chaos and into the part where teams, media, and the league start reacting—sometimes well, sometimes... not so well.

Also yes: the hockey politics in this chapter are very intentional. Locker rooms are complicated places, and this story is leaning into that reality.

I never wanted to make a point with any of this, not directly, and yet it seems so important now. Hold on to your butts, folks.

Also - Yuna and Harris are plotting.
Anyway.

(Also, if there are typos, know that I wrote this on like no sleep, and I regret nothing. Just ignore them. I'll try and get back to edit them later.)

The Montreal Metros front office looked exactly the way it always did. Neutral walls. Framed jerseys. Polished wood desk. Everything was arranged with the kind of careful professionalism that suggested calm control, even when the conversation inside the room wasn't calm at all. The highlights over his career were scattered around too – he'd been the face of the franchise his entire career.

Shane sat across from the GM, the president of operations, and the head coach in a chair that was just uncomfortable enough to make him aware of his ribs every time he breathed too deeply. His phone sat in his pocket, recording app going (his Mom insisted, just in case)

The general manager folded his hands. "We're glad to see you recovering well. What you did for Pike took a lot of courage, and we respect that."

Shane nodded once. "Thanks."

The word felt thin.

The GM leaned back slightly. "Obviously, this has been a difficult week for the organization."

Shane waited.

"The crash was traumatic for everyone involved," the coach added carefully. "Players, staff, the league. A lot of people were shaken."

"I know. I was there."

"And then," the GM continued, "the situation with social media happened."

There it was. Shane kept his face and voice neutral. "Rozanov posted because someone tried to turn a private moment into a scandal. It was the only option we had."

"Yes," the GM said smoothly. "We understand that. And we and the league fully support diversity, as you know."

A pause. "But the timing has complicated things."

Shane frowned slightly. "Complicated how, exactly?"

The coach cleared his throat. "Well... the narrative around the team has shifted."

"From a near tragedy," the GM added, "to other matters."

Shane stared at them. "You mean my relationship. That was outed without my consent or knowledge at first."

"We mean the public reaction."

Shane felt something tighten in his chest.

The GM leaned forward slightly. “The team is fragile right now, Shane. Players are still processing what happened. Emotions are high.”

“So you’re saying this is my fault.” Shane stated dryly.

“No,” the GM said quickly. “We’re saying it’s a distraction we don’t need right now.”

Silence settled across the room.

Shane’s ribs throbbed where he’d shifted slightly in the chair.

The GM spoke again. “There may be a way to calm things down.”

Shane’s stomach dropped. “What way is that, exactly?”

The GM spread his hands slightly. “If you clarified the post.”

“Clarified.”

“Yes. Stated that it was meant humorously. That the media misinterpreted the situation.”

Shane blinked. “You want me to say it was a joke. Stuff my boyfriend and I back in the closet. For media spin.”

“We want the focus back on the team.”

“And if I don’t?”

The GM didn’t answer immediately. The pause felt loaded, almost weaponized.

Instead he said carefully, “Then we may have to reconsider your role moving forward.”

Shane stared at him. “You’re threatening to bench me. For being gay.”

“We’re protecting the team.”

Shane let out a slow breath. He had spent his entire career learning how to control his temper in rooms like this. But something inside him had already snapped.

“No.”

The word came out quiet.

The GM blinked. “Excuse me?”

“No,” Shane repeated.

The GM’s expression hardened slightly.

“You need to understand the position we’re in.”

“Oh, I understand perfectly.” Shane leaned forward. “I nearly died on your team plane two days ago.”

Neither of them spoke.

“And the problem you’re worried about,” he continued, “is that people found out who I love.”

The room went very still.

“This isn’t about that,” the GM said.

Shane laughed once. “Sure.” He stood slowly, ignoring the sharp pull in his ribs. “You know what? Let me make this easy for you, so you can stop trying to tap dance around the discrimination laws and find your loopholes.” He met their eyes. “I’ll waive the no-trade clause.”

That got their attention. The GM straightened, and the coach dropped his mouth open.

“You’re serious.”

“Completely.” Shane picked up his jacket, hissing at the pain the motion caused. “You can do whatever you think is best for the team.”

He turned and walked towards the door, but at the last moment, he paused and turned to look at the men sitting there in stunned silence.

“But I’m not pretending he doesn’t matter. Not anymore. I choose him.”

Shane sat in the car outside the arena for a long time before turning the engine on. He knew it was going to be bad. He didn’t think it would be that bad. He wondered how his mom had figured it out.

His phone buzzed once with a notification.

Metros Team Chat:

You have been removed from the conversation.

He stared at it, and a surprised laugh burst out of him. He wasn’t even traded yet and got booted from the team chat? He was still their captain. He’d been with them for years. Hundreds of games, endless road trips, weddings, every milestone for these guys.

And it was all gone in one quiet line of text, like he meant nothing now that he was gay.

Shane swallowed and opened another chat.

Captains Chat.

Shane:

Hey guys. Thanks for the support.

Sid:

You good?

Shane:

Define good. Just met with management.

Hunter:

Well that's bullshit. How did that go?

Shane:

Well it didn't go great, that's for sure

Marchand:

Define "didn't go great"

Shane:

They asked me to say the Instagram post was a joke.

The replies came immediately.

Marchand:

ARE YOU KIDDING ME

MacKinnon:

That's bullshit

Sid:

Jesus

Hunter:

Let me guess. "Team culture."

Shane:

Pretty much.

Stone:

That's insane.

Marchand:

Did you tell them to go fuck themselves

Hollander:

More politely than that.

Marchand:

Coward.

Ilya:

Brad. Do not be rude to my boyfriend.

Hunter:

What are you going to do?

Hollander:

Well, I waived the no-trade clause.

Several typing bubbles appeared at once as the chat exploded.

Sid:

You're serious.

Shane:

Yeah.

Ilya:

angry face emoji* *crying face emoji

Marchand:

Okay first of all. Respect

MacKinnon:

Yeah. That took guts.

Hunter:

If they move you, New York could use a centre who doesn't panic under pressure.

Marchand:

Boston too! Ever since Rozy abandoned us we have been lacking in that department.

Ilya:

I did not abandon you. I moved to Canada because of Shane. Who is far prettier than you.

Marchand:

Imagine the chaos

Sid:

Pittsburgh's always happy to take good players.

Stone:

Vegas could make space.

Marchand:

Look at this man getting recruited in real time. Shane MOTHERFUCKING Hollander.

Hunter:

Point is

You've got options.

Ilya:

Fuck all of you. He needs to come to Ottawa, obviously. I am in Ottawa. We would own the East.

Sid:

You deserve a team that has your back. Regardless of where it is.

Shane stared at the screen.

For the first time that day, the knot in his chest loosened slightly.

Then Marchand added one more message. Because of course he did.

Marchand:

Also Rozanov is going to murder someone. So you're gonna need a solid contract to afford bail.

Shane huffed out a tired laugh at that.

Shane:

Yeah. Probably.

He headed back to his apartment, where the Russian in question was waiting for him.

Back in Ottawa, Yuna and Harris were already planning.

Three laptops were open across the dining table, each one glowing with spreadsheets, cap projections, and roster charts. The television on the wall played muted sports coverage that was already looping highlights from the crash and the subsequent media circus.

Harris leaned back in his chair, scrolling through a contract breakdown.

“Cap space is the issue,” he said, tapping the screen thoughtfully. “Ottawa is comfortable, but not *that* comfortable.”

Yuna didn’t even look up from the notes she was making. “Cap space is always the issue,” she said calmly. “That doesn’t make it insurmountable.”

Harris studied her for a moment. “You’re seriously thinking Ottawa.”

“I’m thinking anywhere that won’t treat him like a liability,” she replied. Then she paused, finally lifting her eyes to meet his. “But yes. Ottawa.”

Harris turned his laptop slightly so she could see the roster projection. “They’d have to move at least one contract,” he said. “Possibly two.”

“That’s manageable.”

“It’s still a big swing.”

Yuna leaned back in her chair. “It’s also the smartest move they could possibly make.”

Harris raised an eyebrow. “Go on.”

“Shane Hollander is the best player in the league,” she said simply. “Reliable, disciplined, plays heavy minutes, excellent leadership reputation. He’s also twenty-eight and entering the prime years of his career.”

Harris nodded slowly. “I’m aware of all of this. Which is exactly why Ottawa can’t afford him.”

“He’s also from Ottawa,” she continued. “Born and raised. Played junior there. Half that city already thinks he should have been a Centaur from the beginning.”

That made Harris smile faintly. “Homegrown star narrative,” he said.

“Exactly.” She tapped the table once with her pen. “Now add the Irina Foundation.”

Harris leaned forward slightly. “Community impact,” he said.

“Community loyalty,” she corrected. “Those camps have raised millions for mental health initiatives. Kids across Ontario know both their names.” She paused. “And right now the entire hockey world is watching what happens to him next.”

Harris’s smile widened. “You’re saying the optics would be incredible. We’d be able to leverage the younger generation’s support to drown out the noise.”

“I’m saying Ottawa would look like the smartest organization in the league.”

He glanced back at the cap sheet. “Because we’d have Rozanov AND Hollander, potentially even on the same line occasionally.”

“Yes.” Yuna nodded. “Put them on the same roster and suddenly you’re not just adding an elite player. You’re adding chemistry, leadership, and a narrative that every fan in the league already understands.”

Harris leaned back in his chair, thinking.

“Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander on the same line,” he murmured.

“Exactly.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “That team instantly becomes a contender.”

Yuna smiled slightly. “They become terrifying.”

“Our division rivals would hate it.”

“Which is always a bonus.”

Harris laughed quietly.

“Playoff odds would jump overnight,” he said. “Ticket sales would spike. Jerseys. Media coverage.”

“And loyalty,” Yuna added softly.

Harris glanced up. “Explain.”

“He would take a discount,” she said. “For his home team. I can guarantee that.”

Harris blinked. “You’re serious. That changes the game.”

“Not a massive one,” she clarified. “But enough to make the math work.”

“Because he wants to stay with Ilya.”

“Yes.”

Harris nodded slowly. “And because Ottawa is home.”

“That too.”

He sat back again, considering everything. For a moment, the room was quiet except for the soft murmurs from the TV. Then Harris smiled.

“I like this angle.”

“Of course you do.”

He turned the laptop fully toward himself again. “Homegrown star returns to Ottawa,” he said, already typing. “Reunites with longtime rival and foundation/life partner. Strengthens playoff push.”

Yuna nodded. “And sends a very clear message about what kind of organization Ottawa wants to be.”

Harris looked up at her. “That part will likely be what I can sell ownership.”

“Good.”

He cracked his knuckles lightly.

“Alright,” he said. “Let’s draft something persuasive.”

Yuna smiled faintly. “Let’s win before it turns into a bidding war. When he hits the market, there will be a lot of interest. I’d rather we get it done before then.”

And together they started building the proposal that might change the entire balance of the division.

Colin Mercer sat in the corner booth of a restaurant that prided itself on discretion. The lighting was low. The tables were spaced far enough apart that conversations blurred into background noise. The kind of place where nobody asked questions as long as the bill was paid.

Mercer checked the time on his phone.

Right on cue, two men approached the table.

One of them had the kind of rigid posture that came from years behind a bench, shoulders squared and jaw set like he was permanently evaluating a lineup. The other leaned back into the booth with the casual confidence of someone who had spent most of his adult life in locker rooms and didn't particularly care who knew it.

Mercer put his phone down on the table and smiled politely. "Gentlemen. Lovely to see you on such short notice, and in such trying times."

The man across from him gave a short nod. "You said this couldn't be discussed over the phone."

"It couldn't," Mercer said.

A server appeared, poured water, and disappeared again without speaking.

Only once the table was quiet did Mercer continue.

"I'll be direct," he said. "The situation with Hollander isn't going away."

The man on the bench side of the table scoffed quietly. "Media cycle will move on."

"Not this one." Mercer tapped the table lightly. "People love a story about a rivalry. They love a love story even more."

The second man's mouth twisted slightly. "Yeah, well. Some of us are getting pretty tired of hearing about it."

Mercer watched him carefully. "That's exactly my point."

Silence stretched for a moment.

Then Mercer leaned forward slightly. "You don't beat a story like this by denying it, or ignoring it and hoping it goes away."

The coach-looking man frowned. "Then how exactly do you think we can change it?"

"You change the story."

Both men watched him now.

Mercer slid his phone across the table. The screen displayed a half-written article draft. "Right now the narrative is simple," he said. "Two star players come out after a near tragedy. The hockey world rallies around them. Brave. Romantic. Inspirational. Annoying."

The second man rolled his eyes.

Mercer shrugged, and then smiled coldly. "But narratives are fragile things." He tapped the screen again. "All it takes is a different angle."

"What angle?"

Mercer maintained his smile. "The locker room."

Neither man spoke.

Mercer continued calmly. "Players are shaken from the crash. The team is trying to regroup. Emotions are high." He spread his hands. "And suddenly one player becomes the center of a completely different story."

The coach shifted slightly in his seat. "You're suggesting—"

"I'm suggesting," Mercer interrupted gently, "that some players might feel the focus has shifted away from the team."

The other man leaned forward. "And if they did?"

Mercer's smile widened just a fraction. "Then that would be worth reporting."

A long pause followed. Finally the man beside the coach spoke.

"You want quotes."

"Anonymous ones, of course."

"About what?"

Mercer ticked points off on his fingers. "Distraction. The crash. Team culture. Focus." He looked between them. "Nothing dramatic. Nothing inflammatory. We don't want to push too hard against the picture now and lose you support." His voice dropped slightly. "Just enough to suggest there's tension."

The coach stared at him. "That's a hell of a narrative to spin."

Mercer shrugged. "I don't spin anything." He tapped the phone again. "I report what sources tell me."

The other man let out a short laugh. "You're a piece of work."

"I'm a journalist."

Another silence settled over the table. Then the coach spoke quietly. “Let’s say—hypothetically—there were players who didn’t appreciate how this unfolded.”

Mercer waited.

“And let’s say they felt the team was being turned into... something else.”

Mercer’s smile returned. “That would be a very interesting perspective.”

The other man leaned back again. “And what happens after you run this?”

“The conversation changes,” Mercer said simply. He picked up his phone. “It stops being a love story, and starts being a problem.”

The coach exhaled slowly. “And you’re sure this will stick.”

Mercer nodded. “Hockey fans understand locker room dynamics. The men, in particular, will be looking for ways to bury this. The hockey world is not exactly known for its comfort with political issues.” He paused. “They also understand when a player becomes a distraction.”

The man beside him glanced at the coach. A silent conversation passed between them. Then he looked back at Mercer.

“You’ll have sources.”

Mercer smiled again, a little brighter this time. “Good.” He opened the article draft again. “Then let’s get to work.”

A moment later he began typing.

The headline appeared on the screen.

Inside the Montreal Metros Locker Room Divide

Mercer hit save, and sent off a quick email to his editor. “Got it. Check it over – but this will be enough to run tonight.”

Later that evening, as they cuddled on the couch watching a movie, Shane finally told Ilya everything in more detail. The meeting with management. The way they had danced around the conversation before finally saying what they really meant. The threat to bench him. The suggestion that he walk back the Instagram post.

When he got to the moment he refused, and waived the no-trade clause, Ilya sniffled a little. “For me, sweetheart? Really?”

Shane met his eyes. “I will never hide you again, Ilya.”

Ilya had already been emotional reading the captains chat. Marchand had been furious on Shane's behalf, Hunter had immediately started calculating trade possibilities, and Crosby had quietly told Shane he deserved better. Seeing these giants in the league support them was something special.

But hearing it from Shane himself was different.

Ilya lightly kissed Shane's forehead. "They actually said that to you."

"Yes."

"And they expected you to lie about us."

Shane shrugged, though the motion pulled slightly at his ribs. "Pretty much. Keep it friendly and all that."

Ilya ran a hand through his hair, and sighed. "They cannot do this. Pretty sure there are rules preventing it"

"They already did. They're looking for loopholes."

The words settled between them like something heavy.

For a moment neither of them spoke. Then Shane said quietly, "What if they send me somewhere you can't follow?"

The question had been sitting in the back of his mind all afternoon. It finally felt too big to ignore.

Ilya's jaw tightened. "Then I will figure it out."

Shane gave a tired laugh. "That's not really how contracts work."

"Then I will learn."

Shane looked up at him. Despite everything—despite the fear, the uncertainty, the possibility that the league might scatter them across opposite sides of the continent again—Ilya looked completely certain. Like the outcome had already been decided.

The locked eyes "We will make it work," Ilya said quietly.

Shane let himself lean into him more, lightly resting his forehead against Ilya's.

Ilya slid a finger under his chin and raised his face, and leaned in and kissed him. The kiss started slow and gentle, and careful.

It deepened almost without thinking, the kind of kiss that came from years of holding back and finally not having to.

Shane's hand slid into Ilya's hair.

Ilya's arm tightened around his waist—

—and Shane winced.

Ilya froze instantly.

They pulled apart at the same time. “Doctor’s orders,” Ilya muttered.

Shane groaned, dropping his forehead against Ilya’s shoulder. “Worst rule ever.”

Ilya snorted softly and pressed a quick kiss to Shane’s temple.

Then Shane’s phone buzzed; the sound cut sharply through the quiet room. Both of them looked down at it and saw a news notification from NorthLine Hockey. Ilya grabbed the phone and opened the app, swearing in Russian when he read the headline.

Inside the Montreal Metros Locker Room Divide

For a moment Shane didn’t move. Then he started reading.

Anonymous teammates. Concerns about team culture. Claims that the locker room was “uncomfortable.” Suggestions that the team was being distracted from the crash.

Each paragraph made his stomach sink a little further.

Shane read one quote again, and felt his chest go cold. He knew that voice, the way the words were strung together.

Comeau.

Of course it was fucking Comeau.

“Fuck” Shane whispered, the sound sad and full of pain. Ilya took the phone back and read the whole article in silence, his expression tightening with every line.

When he finished, he looked back at Shane. His voice was very calm.

Too calm.

“They picked the wrong fight if they think it’s going to be this simple.”

NorthLine Hockey

Inside the Montreal Metros Locker Room Divide

By Colin Mercer

In the aftermath of last week’s frightening team flight incident, the Montreal Metros have been working quietly to stabilize a locker room still processing the shock of nearly losing several players and staff members.

But according to multiple sources close to the organization, tensions inside the team have grown following the sudden public revelation of defenseman Shane Hollander’s relationship

with Ottawa Centaurs captain Ilya Rozanov.

Hollander and Rozanov made headlines earlier this week when Rozanov posted an emotional message on social media confirming their relationship after a photograph taken at the hospital circulated online.

The post quickly went viral, drawing praise from fans and several high-profile players across the league.

Inside the Metros organization, however, the reaction has reportedly been more complicated.

Several players who spoke to *NorthLine Hockey* on the condition of anonymity described a locker room still struggling to process both the recent crash and the sudden shift in public attention.

“We just went through something really serious,” one player said. “A lot of guys are still shaken. The focus should’ve been on the team and getting everyone home safe.”

Another source echoed that sentiment, suggesting the timing of the public announcement created tension among players trying to refocus on the remainder of the season.

“It’s not about who someone dates,” the source said. “It’s about the situation. We’ve got guys recovering from injuries, the team trying to regroup, and suddenly the whole conversation is about something else.”

While several teammates have publicly expressed support for Hollander, others privately questioned how the situation unfolded so quickly in the days following the crash.

“There’s a time and place for everything,” another player said. “Right now the team needs stability.”

The Metros organization released a brief statement earlier this week acknowledging the situation and confirming that an internal review regarding the events surrounding the social media post is underway.

Team officials declined to comment further when contacted by *NorthLine Hockey*.

League sources say the situation has placed Montreal’s leadership in a difficult position as they balance the privacy of their players with the realities of a locker room still working through a traumatic week.

Several players emphasized that the issue is less about Hollander personally and more about the impact on team focus during a critical point in the season.

“Hockey’s always been about the room,” one player said. “You’ve got to trust the guy beside you. When things get bigger than the team, that’s when problems start.”

For now, the Metros appear focused on regrouping and preparing for the return of regular season play.

But as the story continues to unfold both on and off the ice, it's clear the team faces more than just the physical recovery from last week's incident.

They also face the challenge of keeping a fractured narrative from becoming a fractured locker room.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry (I'm not really sorry)

Shane drawing a line was always going to come with consequences, but unfortunately hockey front offices are not widely known for emotional intelligence. True in fact AND in fiction.

Next chapter we start getting into the on-ice fallout, because the season is going to resume, and there are some scores Ilya very much wants to settle.

Which means one very important thing is coming soon: We're heading back to the rink for some hockey. Ottawa vs Montreal.

And Ilya Rozanov is about to have some feelings about that.

See you there. 🏒

Chapter 12: Power Play

Chapter Summary

After the chaos of the hospital, the story moves to the ice.

While Yuna quietly prepares a legal response that could shake the league, the Ottawa Centaurs begin to consider the unthinkable: bringing Shane Hollander home. Across the NHL, rumours swirl, front offices start calculating, and one very smug reporter prepares to push his narrative even further.

But before any of that can play out, Montreal has to skate into Ottawa.

Shane watches from the stands wearing Ilya's jersey.

Ilya notices.

What follows is less a hockey game and more a message.

And the first real counterattack in a war that's only just begun.

Chapter Notes

Alright friends. We're returning to some hockey. As a Canadian, I know hockey pretty well - but I tried to make it accessible for everyone.

This chapter contains three things I love deeply:

Petty revenge hockey

Lawyers who wake up and choose violence

Ilya Rozanov being an absolute menace on skates

A quick note on the legal stuff: I did my best to base the lawsuit elements on actual Canadian law (Canadian Human Rights Act, PHIPA privacy violations, defamation standards, etc.), but this is still a fanfic, not a legal brief. Catherine Bouchard is operating under the proud tradition of "fictional lawyers who are extremely good at their jobs."

Also yes — Shane wearing Ilya's jersey in the stands is deliberate. For reasons. (And for me, because it tickles my funny bone)

For those who know, you know.

Enjoy the game.

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

Morning sunlight spilled across the polished desk in Catherine Bouchard's office, glinting softly off the glass frames of law degrees arranged along the wall.

The office overlooked Parliament Hill, the skyline crisp against a pale winter sky. Snow clung to the edges of rooftops and the bronze roof of the Centre Block caught the light like burnished metal. It was the kind of office designed to project quiet authority—neutral walls, clean architectural lines, expensive furniture chosen for restraint rather than show.

Across the desk, Yuna Hollander sat perfectly still.

Her coat was folded neatly over the back of the chair beside her. Her hands rested loosely on the table, fingers laced together in the same composed posture she used when negotiating contracts worth millions of dollars.

Three items lay on the desk between them.

A printed copy of the photograph.

The NorthLine Hockey article.

And a phone.

Catherine Bouchard tapped the screen, replaying the recording Shane had captured during his meeting with the Montreal front office.

The voices filled the room. They were exactly as Shane had described to her – measured, corporate and oh so carefully neutral in tone. The kind of language executives used when they believed they were being reasonable, but the meaning behind the words was unmistakable.

Clarify the situation.

Calm the narrative.

Reconsider your role.

Yuna watched Catherine's expression rather than the phone. The lawyer didn't interrupt the recording. She didn't react outwardly either. She simply listened, fingers steepled lightly beneath her chin.

The recording ended, and silence settled over the office.

Catherine removed her glasses and leaned back in her chair. "Well," she said calmly. "That's spectacularly illegal."

Yuna inclined her head slightly. "That was my impression."

Catherine reached forward again, tapping the article with one manicured finger. “You’ve got two very strong angles here.”

She slid the paper slightly across the desk, scanning a paragraph again. “First, defamation.” Her tone shifted into something crisp and analytical. “Mercer’s article clearly implies that Shane disrupted team stability and damaged the locker room environment. Those kinds of claims directly affect a player’s reputation, contract value, and career longevity. As well, he deliberately misrepresented facts – hockey fans know Shane’s position and the fact he’s the captain. That was sloppy.”

Her finger moved to another section of the article. “Anonymous sources are common in journalism,” she continued. “But if those sources were coordinated or encouraged by the organization, then we’re no longer dealing with speculation. We’re dealing with a narrative designed to damage a professional reputation.”

She lifted the phone containing the recording. “And then there’s this.”

Her expression sharpened slightly as she replayed a short portion of the conversation — just long enough for the implication to settle again in the room.

Clarify the post.

Protect the team.

Reconsider your role.

Catherine paused the recording. “The Metros threatening disciplinary action unless he denies his relationship?” she said evenly. “That crosses directly into discrimination under the Canadian Human Rights Act.”

She set the phone back down. “You have a backup of this somewhere safe, I assume?”

Yuna nodded. “Several.”

Her tone remained calm, but there was something colder beneath it. Encrypted cloud storage. External drives. Copies with Harris.

Contingencies were a habit, and a necessity.

Catherine’s mouth curved slightly in approval. “Perfect.”

She tapped the phone again. “With your permission, I’d like to archive a copy here as well. Evidence chain is easier to establish if we maintain redundant custody.”

“Of course.”

Catherine opened a slim folder beside her laptop and made a brief note.

Then Yuna reached into her bag again. “There’s one more thing that might interest you.”

Catherine looked up. A folder slid across the desk. This one was thicker. Catherine opened it, flipping through the pages slowly.

Employment records.

Hospital organizational charts.

Security clearance logs.

A photograph of a man standing outside a hospital entrance.

Her eyebrow lifted slightly.

“Daniel Mercer? Head of hospital security?”

“Yes.”

“Is Colin Mercer’s cousin?”

“Yes.”

Catherine turned another page.

Visitor access logs.

Security camera stills.

Time stamps.

“How did you get this?” she asked mildly.

Yuna didn’t answer the question. “He allowed Mercer into a restricted corridor outside the trauma unit,” she said instead. “The photograph was taken there.”

Catherine leaned back slightly. “That corridor should have been closed to press.”

“It was.”

“And he let Mercer through anyway.”

“Yes.”

The lawyer’s expression sharpened with interest. “Well,” she said, tapping the document lightly, “that adds another layer.”

She flipped to the last page. “If he facilitated access to a patient care area, that’s potentially a breach under the Personal Health Information Protection Act.”

Yuna nodded once. “I assumed as much.”

“At minimum,” Catherine continued, “he’s looking at termination. Possibly civil liability if the hospital decides to protect itself.”

“And the other Mercer?”

Catherine smiled slightly. “If we establish that the photo was obtained through an unlawful breach of hospital access policy...” She tapped the NorthLine article again. “...then his credibility collapses.”

Yuna considered that. “It’s a start.”

Catherine closed the folder and folded her hands over the desk. “I’d love to take on these cases.”

Yuna met her gaze. “So we can proceed?”

“Oh, absolutely.” Catherine leaned forward slightly. “We file against NorthLine Hockey and Colin Mercer for libel.”

Her finger tapped the desk once for emphasis. “And against the Montreal Metros organization for discriminatory retaliation tied to sexual orientation.”

The words settled into the room with quiet weight.

Yuna nodded once.

“Good.”

“We’ll include the hospital as a defendant under negligence and privacy breach. If their head of security facilitated Mercer’s access, the hospital failed in its duty to protect patient privacy.”

“Good. I want every institution that enabled this held accountable.”

Catherine studied her for a moment. “You don’t seem surprised at any of this, or what it will entail.”

“I’m not.”

The lawyer tilted her head slightly. “Most clients want the problem to disappear quietly,” she said. “Private settlements. Quiet apologies. Damage control.”

Yuna reached for the photograph and slid it back into the folder. The image of Shane lying unconscious in a hospital bed disappeared beneath the paper.

“I want them to understand they made a mistake.”

Catherine replaced her glasses. A faint, satisfied smile appeared at the corner of her mouth.

“In that case,” she said pleasantly, “we’ll make sure they understand.”

Across the city, several hours later, the Ottawa Centaurs front office was significantly less serene.

The afternoon sun slanted through the tall windows overlooking the rink, throwing long bands of light across the conference table. The arena itself sat quiet below them, hours away from puck drop, but the building already carried that familiar low hum of game-day preparation.

Inside the Centaurs' executive meeting room, three laptops sat open across the table, their screens glowing with spreadsheets, salary cap projections, and roster breakdowns. A whiteboard along the wall displayed depth charts and line combinations, magnets marking players who could move before the trade deadline.

Harris leaned back in his chair, studying the numbers on his screen.

"Cap space is the issue," he said thoughtfully.

Across from him, Alex Desjardins rested his elbows on the table, fingers steepled. The Centaurs' general manager had the patient expression of someone who had survived two decades of NHL negotiations and had learned long ago that the first version of any deal was rarely the real one.

Yuna sat beside Harris, perfectly composed.

Her meeting with Catherine Bouchard that morning had been brief, efficient, and exactly as productive as she had expected. The legal wheels were already turning.

Now she was turning the hockey ones. "Cap space is always the issue," she said calmly. "That doesn't make it insurmountable."

Desjardins didn't respond immediately. Instead, he glanced at Harris's screen. "Eight point two million cap hit," he said.

Harris nodded. "Through next season."

Desjardins leaned back slightly. "And you want me to take that on a week before the deadline."

"We want you to consider it," Harris corrected.

The GM looked at Yuna. "You're asking me to inherit a media storm."

Harris didn't look up from the spreadsheet. "We're asking you to win the division."

That got his attention.

Desjardins' eyes shifted back to the numbers. "Go on."

Yuna leaned forward slightly. “Shane Hollander is the best two-way center in the league.”

Desjardins gave a small shrug. “I’m aware.”

“Twenty-eight,” she continued. “Prime career years. Elite defensive instincts, strong transition game, and he plays twenty-three minutes a night without falling apart.”

Harris rotated his laptop so the GM could see the analytics model. Zone entry numbers, defensive recovery rates and faceoff percentages.

“Top five defensive forwards in the league by expected goals against,” Harris said. “Top three offensively.”

Desjardins studied the screen. “And you think Montreal’s just going to hand him to me.”

“No,” Yuna said evenly. “They’re going to want assets.”

“Which I would have to give up.”

“Which you have.”

Desjardins leaned back again. “I’d be paying a premium for a player at the center of a controversy.”

Harris shrugged slightly. “Or acquiring a second franchise center entering his prime.”

Yuna added quietly, “Who grew up fifteen minutes from this arena.”

That made the GM pause.

“Hometown narrative,” Harris said. “That will ensure we sell a lot of tickets.

“Exactly.” Yuna folded her hands neatly. “Half this city already believes he should have been a Centaur.”

Desjardins glanced toward the rink below them through the office window. “Fans also tend to forget salary caps exist.”

“That’s why we’re here,” Harris said.

Desjardins looked back at him.

“Let’s talk math.” Harris tapped the spreadsheet. “If Montreal retains part of the contract, or moves a smaller deal back the other way, the cap hit becomes manageable.”

“You’re assuming Montreal cooperates.”

“They will if they’re trying to move him quietly.” Yuna continued. “And if they believe the locker room situation is becoming unstable.”

The GM’s eyes narrowed slightly. “You think it’s that bad.”

“I think,” Yuna said calmly, “they’ve already decided Shane is easier to move than the players who are complaining.”

Desjardins nodded slowly. “That sounds like Montreal.”

Silence hung in the room for a moment. Then Harris said, “Now add the Irina Foundation factor.”

The GM frowned slightly. “The charity camps?”

“Yes.”

Yuna leaned back. “They’ve raised millions for mental health programs across Ontario. Youth hockey associations across the province know Shane and Ilya by name.”

“And right now,” Harris added, “the entire hockey world is watching what happens next.”

Desjardins rubbed his chin. “You’re saying the optics would be excellent.”

“I’m saying Ottawa would look like the smartest organization in the league.”

He tapped the table thoughtfully. “Rozanov and Hollander on the same roster.”

Harris grinned. “That team becomes terrifying.”

“Playoff terrifying,” Yuna added.

Desjardins chuckled softly. “Our division rivals would hate it.”

“Which is always a bonus,” Harris said.

The GM studied the roster board on the wall again. “You’d put them together?”

“Sometimes,” Harris said.

“Sometimes?”

“Two elite centers lets you run two dominant lines. As well, when the need arises, Rozanov can play wing.”

Desjardins nodded slowly. “That’s a nightmare matchup in the playoffs.”

“Exactly.”

Then Yuna dropped the final piece. “If Ottawa acquires Shane,” she said calmly, “he’ll take a hometown extension discount next season.”

The room went still.

Desjardins leaned back slowly. “That changes the math.”

Harris nodded. “Exactly.”

The GM stared at the roster board for several seconds. Rozanov’s magnet sat at the center of the top line. He imagined what it would look like to also have Hollander up there.

Finally he exhaled. “If Montreal shops him at the deadline,” he said slowly, “I’ll make the call.”

Yuna didn’t smile. “They will. We look forward to hearing from you.”

The Canadian Tire Centre was loud long before the puck ever hit the ice.

The arena always carried a certain energy on rivalry nights, but tonight it felt different — sharper somehow, electric with the kind of anticipation that spreads through a building when everyone knows the game means more than two points in the standings.

Ottawa fans had shown up early, filling the lower bowl while warm-up music thumped through the speakers. Jerseys dotted the stands – red, black, and white everywhere – and conversations buzzed with speculation about the week’s chaos. Especially that the league was suddenly realizing that two of its biggest stars had been in love for years.

On the ice, players circled through warm-ups in smooth looping patterns. Pucks snapped against boards and posts, sticks cracked against the ice, and the familiar rhythm of NHL pregame routines settled into place.

Wyatt Hayes stretched near the crease while defensemen peppered him with practice shots. At the far end, Rozanov glided lazily through the neutral zone, collecting a loose puck and snapping it cleanly off the crossbar with the kind of casual precision that made rookies stare.

Up in the stands, a ripple of recognition spread. Someone in the lower bowl leaned forward, squinting.

“Wait.”

Another fan followed their gaze.

A phone came out.

Then another.

Halfway up the lower bowl, seated quietly among the Ottawa crowd, Shane Hollander sat with his cap pulled low and his hands tucked into the sleeves of a black Centaurs jersey. The name stitched across the back read:

ROZANOV.

It took about thirty seconds for the first photo to hit social media. Two minutes for it to spread. Five for the entire arena to start noticing. Phones lifted like a field of tiny cameras as

whispers moved through the rows.

That's Hollander.

Is that actually him?

Holy shit, he's wearing Rozanov's jersey.

Down on the ice, the players were slower to catch on, but they always did eventually.

Wyatt Hayes was the first. He straightened from a stretch near the crease, squinting up into the stands as the noise shifted slightly. Then he grinned.

Skating past Rozanov during a slow warm-up loop, he gave him a gentle shove with his glove. "Your boyfriend's here."

Ilya didn't even look up from the puck sliding across his stick blade. "Yes," he said calmly. "I know."

Wyatt blinked. "You knew?"

Rozanov finally flicked the puck toward the net with effortless precision. It rang off the post. Only then did he glance briefly toward the stands.

Just long enough to confirm what he already knew. Shane sat there quietly, watching him with a smile on his face.

Ilya turned away again like it was nothing to see Shane in his jersey, but it was definitely doing something for him.

Wyatt snorted, knowing the truth of it. "Just checking."

Ilya smirked faintly. "Try to keep up, Hazy."

The puck dropped and the game exploded to life.

The Canadian Tire Centre had been buzzing for nearly an hour already, but the second the puck hit the ice the building shifted into something louder, sharper, electric with anticipation.

Montreal came out hitting. Hard.

The opening shift looked less like hockey and more like controlled chaos, red jerseys slamming into Ottawa players along the boards as if they'd decided physical intimidation was the only language worth speaking tonight.

"Montreal wasting no time setting a tone tonight," the broadcast play-by-play announcer said. "They're coming out extremely physical."

“They’re angry,” the color analyst replied. “This entire week has been chaos around this team. You can feel it spilling onto the ice.”

Glass rattled as two players collided in the corner. The Ottawa crowd roared anyway.

Midway through the first shift, Comeau drifted past Rozanov along the boards while the puck cycled behind the Montreal net. He leaned in just enough for the words to carry. “Your boyfriend enjoying the view?”

Ilya didn’t even break stride. “He has excellent taste.”

Comeau scoffed and shoved off toward the corner.

On the Ottawa bench, Boodam snorted. “Oh this is gonna be fun.”

The play turned instantly. Montreal’s defenseman tried to force a pass across the blue line. Boodam stepped up aggressively, reading it perfectly. His stick flashed out.

The puck popped loose.

“Turnover at the line!”

Barrett was already moving. He scooped the puck cleanly and cut toward the slot while Montreal scrambled to recover.

Rozanov was there, waiting. Of course he was. With a quick deke, Barrett slid the puck across to him.

For a split second the play slowed. Rozanov’s stick loaded.

He heard the crowd.

He knew Shane was watching him, and wearing his jersey, and he wanted to show off a little bit.

The shot snapped off his blade like a rifle crack. The puck screamed past the goaltender and slammed into the back of the net.

Goal.

The arena detonated.

“ROZANOV OPENS THE SCORING!”

The Ottawa bench erupted. Barrett slammed his stick against the boards. “Told you!”

Ilya glided past the net, teammates swarming toward him. But as the celebration broke apart he lifted his head slightly toward the lower bowl.

Just long enough.

Shane sat there in the Rozanov jersey, laughing and shaking his head in disbelief.

Ilya couldn't help but smile back at him.

Montreal pushed back immediately. They didn't like being embarrassed. A hooking call sent them to the power play and suddenly the ice tilted.

Shots came fast.

One from the point.

Pad save.

Another from the circle.

Glove save.

Rebound kicked loose.

Stick save.

Wyatt Hayes moved like a machine inside the crease, calm and precise while red jerseys crashed toward him from every direction.

“Montreal pressing hard here on the man advantage—”

A defenseman wound up and fired a one-timer.

Hayes exploded across the crease.

Glove up.

SNATCH.

The puck vanished into leather. For a split second the arena held its breath, then it erupted.

“HAYES!”

“HAYES! HAYES! HAYES!”

On the Ottawa bench, Haas smacked the boards.

“Atta boy Hazy!!”

Hayes simply dropped the puck for the referee and reset his stance like it was another Tuesday.

The second period turned ugly. Montreal's frustration started leaking into everything. Late hits. Cross-checks. More chirping than actual hockey.

“Keep talking,” Barrett muttered from the bench. “See how that works out. You’re just gonna make him mad.”

One Montreal defenseman skated past Ilya near center ice and muttered something low enough that only Rozanov could hear.

Something about Shane, obviously. Ilya heard every word clear as day. For a moment the anger roared through him, white hot and almost blinding. But he chanced a quick glance up at Shane, and took a breath. Inside his head the calm settled in.

Good. Now I have a reason.

The next shift lasted exactly eight seconds. The defenseman collected the puck near center ice and turned up ice. Rozanov stepped into his lane.

The hit landed like a car crash.

Clean and hard, a perfect shoulder through the chest. The defenseman folded backward and the puck skittered loose.

The arena lost its mind.

“Oh my goodness, what a hit from Rozanov!”

Rozanov skated past slowly. “Careful,” he said quietly. “You don’t want them to see you cry.”

Barrett was laughing as he also skated by. “Oh he’s mad tonight.”

Minutes later, Ottawa struck again. Barrett carried the puck across the blue line and slid it wide to Haas, who drove hard toward the crease.

Montreal’s defense collapsed on him. The shot hit the goalie’s pads, and the rebound bounced straight out. Ilya was already there and ready.

He buried it glove side.

2–0.

The crowd thundered. In the stands, Shane laughed helplessly as he watched Ilya celebrate with his line. *God. Ilya is absolutely unhinged tonight.* He thought to himself, with a sense of pride – and a sense of satisfaction.

By the third period the game had completely tilted. There was no saving it for Montreal. They looked tired, bitter, and defeated.

Ottawa looked hungry.

Barrett made it 3–0 on a slick passing play that left Montreal’s defense spinning in place.

The Ottawa bench exploded again.

“Barrett from Boodam and Haas!”

Moments later, it happened again. Ilya collected the puck near the blue line and danced around a defender like he was skating through practice. The shot snapped low.

Goal.

Hat trick.

For a split second, the arena fell silent.

Then the crowd roared, and the hats started flying.

They rained down across the ice while the crowd screamed.

“That’s a hat trick for Ilya Rozanov!”

Shane stood with everyone else, shaking his head in disbelief. *Typical Ilya.*

With two minutes left Montreal pulled their goalie. After a brief scrum behind the net, the puck bounced loose and slid towards center ice. Ilya beat everyone to it, and glided across the red line and fired.

The puck slid across the ice and into the back of the empty unguarded net.

Fourth goal.

And the crowd went feral.

The final horn sounded. For a moment the arena was nothing but noise.

Red and white jerseys poured off the Ottawa bench, sticks raised, players colliding around Wyatt Hayes as the goalie grinned behind his mask.

“Thirty-two saves and a shutout for Hayes tonight,” the broadcast voice said. “And what a statement win for the Centaurs.”

Across the ice, the Montreal players peeled away slowly. A few of them glanced up toward the stands, toward where Shane Hollander was standing, proudly wearing his Rozanov jersey. He met Comeau’s eyes briefly. The look on his face wasn’t subtle.

The crowd noticed.

A ripple passed through the lower bowl as fans started pointing.

Someone shouted first.

“HOL-LAN-DER!”

Another voice joined.

Then another.

Within seconds the entire section was chanting.

“HOL-LAN-DER! HOL-LAN-DER! HOL-LAN-DER!”

The sound rolled down toward the ice like thunder.

Shane blinked in surprise.

He hadn't expected that.

Down on the ice, Ilya heard it. He turned slowly, helmet tucked under one arm, scanning the stands until he met his eyes. He shook his head once, almost amused with it, then lifted his stick to point at him and blew him a kiss.

The crowd roared even louder.

And for one brief moment, in a building full of noise and light and victory – everyone knew exactly who that game had been for.

he locker room was chaos after the game. Music blasted from a portable speaker somewhere near the equipment racks, half the team still buzzing with post-game adrenaline as gear clattered onto the floor and sticks leaned haphazardly against the walls.

Someone was already replaying highlights on a tablet. Ilya's first goal. The hit in the second period. And the empty-net dagger that had sealed the night.

Barrett dropped heavily onto the bench beside his stall, still breathing hard as he pulled off his gloves. He looked over at Ilya and shook his head.

“Four goals?” he said. “Trying to make us look bad or something?”

Ilya shrugged while untying his skates. “I was bored.”

Across the room, Boodam snorted. “Yeah, real boring night for you.”

Haas leaned back against his locker with a towel around his neck. “You realize you're going to have to answer questions about this for the next week, right?”

Ilya waved a dismissive hand. “They started it.”

Barrett pointed at him. “That is absolutely not how the league sees it.”

At the far end of the room Wyatt Hayes finally removed his mask, running a hand through sweat-damp hair as he looked around expectantly. “Excuse me,” the goalie said dryly.

The room quieted slightly.

“Can we acknowledge the shutout? I mean, I was pretty fucking badass tonight too.”

A few players laughed. Boodam tossed a roll of tape at him.

“Nice game, Wyatt.”

Hayes caught it one-handed and grinned. “Thank you. Some of us had to actually stop pucks tonight.”

Ilya glanced up from his stall. “Very good, Hazy,” he said solemnly. “You may live.”

Laughter rolled across the room again. Even Hayes cracked a smile.

Someone near the door shouted, “Media in five!”

Groans echoed through the locker room. Barrett dropped his head back against the locker. “Great. I’m Johnny on the spot today - I get to explain how Rozanov turned into a one-man wrecking crew tonight.”

“Be creative,” Ilya suggested.

Before anyone could respond, the locker room door opened again and Harris stepped inside. He wasn’t supposed to be back here yet, and he was smiling.

That immediately caught everyone’s attention.

He held his phone loosely in one hand. “Oh,” he said casually. “Perfect timing.”

Barrett narrowed his eyes as he studied his boyfriend. “That smile worries me.”

Harris walked over, kissed him on the cheek, called Ilya over and turned the screen toward them.

The headline filled the display.

Breaking News: Lawsuit Filed Against Montreal Metros and NorthLine Hockey

Filed in Ontario Superior Court on the grounds of defamation and human rights violations.

For a moment the locker room went very quiet. Someone whistled softly.

“No way.”

Barrett leaned forward to read it again. “Oh man,” he said. “That’s gonna ruin somebody’s week.”

Haas let out a low laugh. “Mercer’s gonna love that.”

Ilya took the phone and read the headline slowly, eyes scanning the first few lines of the article. His expression didn’t change, but the corner of his mouth twitched slightly.

Then he looked across the room toward the doorway, where Shane was standing shyly with his hands in his pockets, nervously looking at Ilya. And still looking a little stunned by the way the crowd had chanted his name.

Ilya handed the phone back to Harris.

“Your mother,” he said thoughtfully as he turned back to Shane, “is terrifying.”

Shane sighed, and huffed out a small laugh. “You have no idea.”

Across the locker room Boodam leaned back against the bench, shaking his head. “Man,” he muttered. “Tonight just keeps getting better.”

Harris glanced down at his phone again.

“Let the real game begin, gentleman.”

Chapter End Notes

And that, my friends, is what we call a statement game.

Ottawa wins 5–0.

Hayes gets the shutout he deserves.

Ilya commits several acts of extremely attractive legal violence.

And somewhere in Montreal, several executives are realizing they may have made a catastrophic miscalculation.

Meanwhile:

The lawsuit has officially been filed, the trade deadline is approaching, and Colin Mercer is about to discover that Yuna Hollander is not someone you want as an enemy

Next chapter we return to chaos:

media fallout, league pressure, trade rumors, and the slow realization that this story is getting much bigger than anyone expected.

Except Yuna.

Yuna absolutely expected it.

Yuna orchestrated it. It's gonna be fun. Can't wait to see you there!

Chapter 13: Trending

Chapter Summary

The lawsuit against the Montreal Metros and NorthLine Hockey detonates across the internet, and the hockey world does what it does best: reacts loudly, quickly, and with absolutely no mercy.

Trade rumours begin almost immediately. The internet reacts normally, of course.

Ottawa quietly starts asking a very interesting question:

What if Shane Hollander played for the Centaurs?

Chapter Notes

Hey, friends, fans, newbies, loons -

This chapter is basically the “oh no the internet found out” phase of the story. That's what we're here for, right?

The lawsuit drops and suddenly the entire hockey world is involved. Fans, media, former players, current players, and the league itself all start reacting at once, which is exactly how modern sports scandals work.

It also marks the moment where Mercer officially loses control of the story he thought was going to be his big break, and heads into full villainy. Instead of the story turning against Shane and Ilya, the hockey community starts rallying around them—especially after Pike reminds everyone what actually happened during the crash.

The other thing happening here is that the possibility of Shane leaving Montreal starts moving from background rumour to something much more real.

Ottawa is starting to look less like a hypothetical and more like a destination.

Buckle up, and keep your hands and feet inside the ride at all times!

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

The story broke the way all modern scandals did. Loudly, online, and everywhere all at once.

Within an hour of the lawsuit filing, every major hockey outlet had picked it up. Push notifications lit up phones across the league as the headline spread from one newsroom to the next.

SportsNet.

TSN.

The Athletic.

CBC.

Even the American outlets that usually treated Canadian hockey drama like background noise suddenly decided this one was worth paying attention to. Added to the game that had just wrapped up being a spectacular blowout, the story just had everything – a plane crash, a secret relationship between two of the league’s biggest stars, an Instagram post that had broken the internet a week earlier, and a locker room controversy that was already spiralling out of control.

And now there was a lawsuit accusing both a major hockey publication and an NHL franchise of defamation and discrimination.

It spread faster than anyone in Montreal’s front office could contain. By the time the first team legal staffer finished reading the filing, the story had already been shared thousands of times. Analysts were discussing it on morning shows. Fans were dissecting it on message boards. Agents were texting each other links.

Phones buzzed across the hockey world as the notifications kept coming.

SportsNet Breaking News

A lawsuit filed in Ontario Superior Court names the Montreal Metros and NorthLine Hockey as defendants in a case alleging defamation and violations of the Canadian Human Rights Act.

The complaint stems from a recent NorthLine article discussing tensions inside the Metros locker room following the public revelation of Shane Hollander’s relationship with Ottawa captain Ilya Rozanov.

Within minutes the article had been shared thousands of times.

Screenshots spread across social media faster than anyone in Montreal’s front office could react. Fans reposted the headline. Analysts quote-tweeted the link. Group chats across the league started lighting up with messages that all said roughly the same thing.

Did you see this?

And then the internet did what the internet always did: It reacted.

Immediately.

And with absolutely no mercy.

Hockey fans, as a collective species, had never been known for their patience when it came to bad reporting. Within minutes, people had started pulling the article apart line by line. Screenshots appeared. Clips were reposted. Entire threads popped up dissecting the details like amateur detectives with too much time and a grudge.

Because fans had noticed something else in Mercer's original article.

Something small and incredibly stupid.

And once someone pointed it out, no one could stop seeing it.

@PuckAnalytics

Wait did this guy actually call Shane Hollander a DEFENSEMAN?

The replies stacked up almost instantly.

Screenshots of the article began circulating, the offending sentence circled in bright red.

@HockeyStatsNerd

*The captain of the Montreal Metros.
A Selke-calibre center.
And NorthLine labelled him a defenseman.*

@TapeToTapePodcast

*Shane Hollander has been the Metros' IC and captain for YEARS.
How do you get that wrong??*

@FourthLineEnergy

Imagine writing a smear article about a player and not knowing what position he plays.

Within minutes the mistake had turned into a meme.

@HockeyTwitterMemes

Colin Mercer: "Inside sources say Connor McDavid is a backup goalie."

@GoalieUnion

You're telling me the reporter who misidentified a franchise center also had "anonymous locker room sources"?
Sure buddy.

The mockery spread outward from fans to analysts, then to former players, and finally to current ones.

The moment that shifted the tone, though, came from someone who hadn't posted anything since the crash. In fact, someone who rarely posted anything at all.

Scott Hunter.

@ScottHunterNYR

Shane Hollander has been one of the best centers in the league for a decade.

If you're writing about hockey, you should probably know that.

Fifteen minutes later, another notification began climbing through the algorithm even faster, and not from a fan account or an analyst.

It came from Hayden Pike.

@HaydenPike

I'm home recovering and apparently have time for this now.

Shane Hollander is my captain and my best friend. He is also my hero.

When my seatbelt broke during the crash, he held me down so I didn't slam into the ceiling of the plane.

He saved my life.

His partner, Ilya Rozanov, showed up and kept watch. He also supported @JackieMrsPike even when he was terrified for Shane.

Maybe remember the kind of men they are before you spread this bullshit.

For a moment, the conversation paused.

The internet didn't actually go quiet — nothing online ever did — but the tone shifted almost instantly. The jokes and memes slowed as people read Pike's post again, realizing what he had just said.

The reminder cut cleanly through the noise.

This wasn't just some locker room gossip story. It wasn't a viral Instagram moment or a messy bit of hockey drama.

A plane had nearly fallen out of the sky. Shane Hollander had been inside it. And his team was pissed because his boyfriend went to the hospital to find out what was going on. Suddenly, the sheer ridiculousness of the situation seemed to take over social media.

Fans began reposting the message almost immediately. The tweet jumped from timeline to timeline as people shared it with commentary, screenshots, and increasingly angry captions.

Within twenty minutes it had been shared tens of thousands of times.

Replies flooded in beneath it.

@HockeyNorth

This is the part of the story Mercer conveniently left out.

@RinksideReport

Hollander saved Pike during the crash and someone thought the real story was “locker room tension.” Because he’s gay and dating Rozanov. Wow.

@PuckCulture

The more details come out, the worse NorthLine looks. Why is the homophobia in the Montreal organization more important here?

@RickNash

If a teammate keeps you safe during a plane crash, that’s the only leadership story that matters.

@PatrickSharp

*Hockey rooms are built on trust.
Sounds like Pike trusted Hollander when it mattered most.
Sounds like the rest of the team is far too concerned about who he goes home to.*

@ScottHunterNYR

Retweeting this because people need to read it.

RT @HaydenPike

Shane Hollander is my captain and my best friend...

Hunter rarely amplified anything online. When he did, people paid attention. His retweet pushed Pike’s message even further across the hockey world.

A few minutes later, another reply appeared beneath it.

@SidneyCrosby

Glad you’re recovering, Pike. Good to know Hollander still has supporters when it counts.

The message spread outward through the hockey world in widening circles.

Locker rooms.

Team group chats.

Agent phone calls.

Media desks.

In practice facilities across the league, players sat half-dressed on wooden benches between drills, scrolling through their phones while equipment managers sharpened skates nearby. Someone would read Pike's tweet out loud, and a small crowd would gather instinctively the way hockey players always did when something interesting happened.

"Did you see this?"

"You kidding me?"

"Yeah, that reporter's cooked."

Phones were passed around. Screenshots started flying.

Group chats filled with links and commentary. Players forwarded the tweet to teammates. Captains sent it to their agents. Agents forwarded it to general managers, usually with a short message that said something like *you seeing this?*

And in the middle of all that noise, somewhere inside the league offices in New York, a quietly overworked assistant added the lawsuit to a growing internal document labeled **Issues Requiring Monitoring**.

By the time the afternoon sports shows started discussing the lawsuit, Pike's tweet had already become part of the story.

Bright studio lights flashed across polished desks as panelists leaned forward in their chairs while graphics rolled across the screen behind them.

HOLLANDER LAWSUIT EXPANDS METROS NAMED IN DEFAMATION CLAIM PLANE CRASH HEROICS RESURFACE

Clips of Pike's tweet appeared beside footage of the Centaurs game, the broadcast looping Ilya's latest goal celebration while the conversation shifted from internet drama to something far more uncomfortable.

"Why is there suddenly all this talk about the locker room being uncomfortable?" one analyst asked, leaning forward. "Given everything that happened on that plane, that feels like a strange detail to focus on."

Another shook his head slightly. "Montreal is showing itself to be a deeply problematic organization stuck in an older idea of what's acceptable. Their determination to bury anything connected to Hollander is... interesting, especially this close to the trade deadline."

That got the table's attention.

"Hollander has a no-trade clause in his contract," the host added. "He's been the face of the franchise since his rookie season. Do you really think it's gotten to the point where he's asked to be moved—or they've told him he needs to?"

A third panelist shrugged. “If things are bad enough that he’s suing the team, I’m going to say yes. I would not be surprised if we hear that the Metros are shopping Hollander very soon.”

Another graphic appeared on the screen behind them.

TRADE DEADLINE – 7 DAYS

“Are we about to see a division shake-up?” the host asked. “Could Hollander go central? West?”

Someone laughed quietly at the end of the desk.

“Or do you think the league tries to prevent the possibility of Rozanov and Hollander ending up on the same roster?”

The panel broke into overlapping speculation.

And somewhere inside the Montreal organization, a few executives were beginning to realize something deeply uncomfortable.

They might have misjudged the situation.

And now they had absolutely no idea how they were going to fix it.

Two hours later, NorthLine Hockey finally issued a statement. It appeared everywhere at once—on their website, across their social feeds, pushed out through every platform they had. The language was exactly what you’d expect from a corporate communications team suddenly realizing they had a problem. Careful. Polished. Technically calm, while also managing to sound just defensive enough that anyone reading it could tell they were very much on the back foot.

NorthLine Hockey – Official Statement

NorthLine Hockey stands by the integrity of our reporting and the professionalism of our journalists.

Our article regarding internal tensions within the Montreal Metros organization reflected information provided by sources close to the team.

We are aware of minor factual corrections that have since been updated online and remain confident in the overall accuracy of the reporting.

We intend to vigorously defend ourselves against the legal claims that have been filed.

That did not help. If anything, it made things worse.

@PuckDropPodcast

“Minor factual correction” is a funny way to describe not knowing what position the team captain plays.

@HockeyNorth

NorthLine really said:

Yes we misidentified the captain of the team but trust us on the anonymous sources.

@RinkRats

Imagine doubling down instead of apologizing.

@BradMarchand63

I’ve been chirping Hollander for ten years and even I know he’s a center.

The tweet gained forty thousand likes in twenty minutes. The internet, predictably, took the statement as an invitation. Screenshots of the response began circulating almost immediately, each line picked apart by fans, reporters, and players who had spent years inside the sport and knew exactly how ridiculous the situation sounded. The phrase “*minor factual correction*” became the new punchline, repeated over and over beneath the original article until it was impossible to separate the statement from the mistake it was trying to downplay.

Captains Chat

Marchand:

YOU GUYS ARE SUING PEOPLE NOW??

MacKinnon:

This week has been insane.

Sid:

You good, Shane?

Shane:

Been better.

Hunter:

Montreal’s going to regret this.

Rozanov:

They already do.

Stone:

League office is going to lose their minds over this.

Marchand:

*Also for the record,
if anyone deserved to get sued it’s Mercer.*

MacKinnon:

The defenseman thing was brutal.

Marchand:

Buddy misidentified the captain of the team he was smearing.

Sid:

That probably won't help their case.

Hunter:

Trade rumors already starting.

Shane:

Not surprised.

Ilya:

What will you fuckers do when he lands in Ottawa?

Marchand:

Oh my god.

MacKinnon:

You are NOT subtle.

Ilya:

I am extremely subtle.

None of you knew I was with Shane motherfucking Hollander since before rookie season.

Shane:

For fuck's sake, Ilya.

Ilya:

What? It is true.

Hunter:

Kip owes me a hundred bucks.

Marchand:

HOW THE FUCK DID YOU TWO KEEP IT QUIET THIS LONG?

Hollander, seriously — you could have any guy anywhere and you end up with this fucker??

Shane:

Have you heard him speak Russian?

Ilya:

He means I have a good mouth.

Marchand:

OH MY GOD.

I mean, I get the accent thing but—

OH MY GOD.

Ilya:

Still jealous, I see, Brad.

You should be. Have you seen my boyfriend?

Shane:

Ilya. Stop.

Sid:

Yeah, I buy the timeline.

You two sound like an old married couple.

Ilya:

Shane! I have a new idea!

Shane:

You are not using Sidney Crosby to propose.

Marchand:

Counterpoint:

you absolutely should.

MacKinnon:

Brad no.

Marchand:

Imagine the headline.

Hunter:

Please do it.

Sid:

I am not officiating a proposal in a group chat.

Ilya:

Cowards. All of you.

Marchand:

I will absolutely be best man though.

Shane:

Pike might have something to say about that.

Across the city, Colin Mercer watched the internet tear his article apart.

His phone buzzed constantly on the desk beside him. Notifications stacked on top of each other so quickly the screen barely had time to dim before lighting up again — mentions, quote tweets, podcast clips, screenshots of his article circulating through hockey Twitter. Every few seconds another alert chimed in, another reminder that the story he had expected to dominate the cycle had somehow turned into a punchline.

He ignored most of them.

The lawsuit didn't bother him nearly as much as the mockery.

Defenseman.

The word had turned into a meme.

Rookie mistake.

Mercer refreshed the page again, jaw tight as the comments continued piling up beneath the article. Another analyst pointing out that the piece had misidentified the captain of the team it was supposedly reporting on. Another podcast clip laughing about it. Another fan editing the headline into something even worse.

Someone had posted a screenshot that read:

Inside the Montreal Metros Locker Room Divide — by the guy who thinks the captain plays defense.

It already had twenty thousand likes.

Mercer rubbed a hand across his mouth and leaned back in his chair. It wasn't supposed to go like this.

He had written controversial pieces before. Players hated him, fans shouted at him online, and teams stopped answering his calls for a few weeks. That was normal. Hockey reporting wasn't polite work.

But this was different.

This was people laughing at him.

The difference burned.

He refreshed the page again. Forty thousand likes now on Marchand's tweet. Pike's post about Hollander holding him down during the crash was climbing even faster, the replies full of fans suddenly remembering exactly what had happened on that plane.

Mercer tossed the phone onto the desk.

Then, ten seconds later, picked it back up again and dialled. Daniel answered on the third ring.

“You seeing this?” Colin asked.

Daniel didn’t bother pretending he hadn’t.

“Yeah.”

His voice was tight, the kind of tight that came from someone having a bad day of his own.

“They’re making a joke out of it,” Colin said.

“They’re making a joke out of both of us,” Daniel replied.

Daniel had been dealing with his own fallout all morning. The hospital investigation had started almost immediately after the lawsuit filing — quiet meetings with administrators, questions about corridor access logs, requests for security footage. Apparently, someone had suddenly decided patient privacy mattered very much.

Daniel exhaled sharply through his nose.

“This whole thing started because of that idiot hockey player,” he muttered. “And you not paying attention to the fact he was watching you take pictures.”

Colin leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling for a moment, hand absently rubbing his jaw where he could still feel the punch from Hayes.

“No,” he said finally. “It started because everyone thinks they’re smarter than the person telling the story.”

Daniel snorted. “So what now?”

Colin looked back at the laptop sitting open on his desk. The original article glowed on the screen. The comment section beneath it was a mess of sarcasm, screenshots, and fans dissecting every line like forensic evidence.

He could feel the anger building in his chest again.

Fine. If people wanted a story, he’d give them one.

“You know what the problem with hockey players is?” he said.

Daniel didn’t answer.

“They think the public loves them.”

Mercer cracked his knuckles and opened a new document. The blank page blinked patiently in front of him.

“Let’s see how much they love him when the next story drops.”

The trade rumours started circulating that afternoon. Hockey media treated trade deadline speculation like a sport of its own, and the combination of a lawsuit, a franchise captain, and a week that already felt like a season's worth of chaos was too tempting to ignore.

The first report came from one of the insiders.

@DregerReport

Several teams believed to be monitoring the Shane Hollander situation ahead of the trade deadline.

If Montreal makes him available, expect significant interest.

That alone would have been enough to start the conversation. But hockey media rarely stopped at one voice.

@NHLRumorsDaily

Early chatter connecting Hollander to:

Ottawa

Boston

New York

Vancouver

Calgary

Within minutes the replies filled with fans attempting increasingly creative trade proposals, amateur cap calculations, and long explanations about why their team obviously had the best package.

Then someone posted the obvious thought.

@HockeyHotTakes

Imagine Hollander and Rozanov on the same line.

The internet immediately lost its mind.

Clips from the Ottawa/Montreal game began circulating again — Rozanov's four goals, the hit in the second period, the empty-net dagger that had sent the arena into hysterics. Fans edited the highlights together with old footage of Hollander's best goals like they were building a trailer for something that hadn't happened yet.

Somewhere in Ottawa, people had quietly started saying the same thing.

What if?

Later that evening Shane posted on Instagram. The photo was simple: A couch, a blanket pulled over his legs, and the TV on the wall showing the Ottawa game paused mid-celebration. Rozanov stood near the crease with both arms raised while teammates mobbed him after another goal.

The caption read:

Guess I'll be watching him score from the couch for now.
The doctor says the concussion and broken ribs mean no flying, to go with the no hockey.

Worth it.

The post spread instantly.

Fans shared it. Players reposted it. Someone clipped the goal from the broadcast and dropped it into the replies with the caption *"He did that because you were watching."*

Shane muted the notifications after about fifteen minutes, already regretting posting but knowing it would make Ilya really happy. There were only so many variations of the same comment a man could read.

Ottawa played at home again two nights later, this time against New York – which meant Scott Hunter was in the house.

The building buzzed before the puck even dropped. Rozanov had been on an insane run of form, the Centaurs were climbing the standings, and the entire hockey world seemed to be watching to see how this strange, messy situation around Shane Hollander was going to unfold.

Hunter skated past Ilya during warmups and tapped his stick against his shin pads. "Nice week you're having," he said.

Ilya glanced at him with a smirk. "Nice haircut. Getting ready for retirement?"

Hunter snorted. "You look like you haven't slept in a week."

"I am very motivated."

"Yeah," Hunter said dryly. "We noticed."

The puck dropped a few minutes later.

New York pushed the pace early. Hunter's line spent the first few shifts grinding along the boards and forcing Ottawa to defend deep in their own zone while Hayes handled a couple of early shots cleanly.

The first real conversation between the two centers came during a faceoff.

The linesman stepped in with the puck, both players crouched low across from each other.

Hunter leaned in just slightly.

"So," he said quietly, "Hollander watching tonight?"

Ilya didn't look up.

“He said he’d be here.”

Hunter grinned.

“Thought so. Should we give him a show?”

The puck hit the ice.

The next shift Ottawa broke out clean.

Barrett carried the puck through center and slid it wide to Haas along the boards. Haas cut toward the corner, drawing two defenders with him before sending the puck back toward the blue line.

Rozanov stepped into it without slowing, and the shot snapped off his stick so fast the goalie barely reacted before the puck hit the back of the net.

The arena exploded.

“ROZANOV OPENS THE SCORING!”

Ilya glided past the net while teammates moved in to celebrate. For a moment, he lifted his head toward the lower bowl, scanning the tunnel entrance.

He spotted Shane immediately. Then he raised his stick and pointed toward him.

The broadcast replay caught it perfectly.

“Oh, would you look at that,” the colour commentator said with a laugh. “I think Rozanov might have just dedicated that one.”

The camera cut briefly to the tunnel where Shane stood watching.

Hunter noticed too, and when the teams lined up for the next faceoff, he leaned in again. “You are such a romantic,” he said with a laugh.

Ilya shrugged and grinned. “I know.”

Hunter shook his head. “Trying to get a kiss or something?”

“That is the plan. Would be better than yours.”

“In your dreams, Rozy.”

New York tied the game early in the second, but Ottawa answered quickly. Ilya added an assist and spent most of the third period skating like someone had given him a personal challenge – which, he supposed, Hunter had.

By the final horn Ottawa had won again, 2-1. Hunter bumped shoulders with him during the handshake line. “Tell Hollander I said hi,” he said. “Kip says bring him to New York if you can next time, he wants to grab dinner with you guys.”

“I will. Say hi to Kip and tell him it’s on. As soon as he’s cleared to travel.”

“And tell him we’ll take him in New York if Ottawa screws this up.”

Ilya snorted. “Over my dead body.”

Hunter grinned. “Worth mentioning.”

Shane waited near the player exit after the game, with all the fans clustered along the railing, hoping for autographs, the usual mix of jerseys, phones, and excited noise that followed a good night at the arena.

As soon as they clocked it was him, phones came out immediately. Shane leaned carefully against the wall, ribs still aching if he moved too quickly, and watched the locker room door.

A few minutes later it opened, and the Centaurs streamed out.

“Hollander!” Bood said, fist-bumping him. “Nice to see ya, man. How’s the head?”

Shane laughed. “Better, but the ribs are a bitch. Good game, dude.”

Barrett joined them, adding his own fist-bump. “Hope all this observing is because you want to play with us and not just about Rozy’s ass. Or taking your ridiculous hockey IQ elsewhere.” He said with a laugh. “We’d love to have you.”

“Stop harassing the man, boys,” Hayes said, slinging an arm around both their shoulders. “Nice to see you, dude. Rozy is a beast when he’s showing off for you.”

Shane just shook his head and laughed. “You guys played a hell of a game. It’s always fun to watch.”

Ilya stepped into the hallway with his gear bag slung over one shoulder, hair still damp from the shower, suit jacket hanging open over an open dress shirt. He stopped when he saw Shane.

“Hello, Hollander,” Ilya said, smirking. “Here for an autograph?”

Shane grinned. “You are such a smug asshole.”

Ilya tilted his head slightly. “Because I scored?”

“Because you pointed at me. Show off.”

Ilya considered that. “Fair.”

Then Shane grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him into a kiss.

The hallway exploded. Fans cheered. Someone laughed. Phones lifted everywhere.

Ilya blinked once in mild surprise when they pulled apart. Then he smiled.

“Well,” he said softly, “Hunter will be pissed that it worked.”

“Shut up” Shane answered, and kissed him again.

Across the city, Colin Mercer watched the video of the hallway kiss spread across the internet.

The clip had already been reposted by three national broadcasters, half a dozen hockey podcasts, and more player accounts than he could keep track of.

The comments were overwhelmingly supportive. It actually made him feel sick. Fans celebrating. Players joking in the replies. Analysts calling it “good for the game.”

Mercer didn’t see any of that. All he could see was the photograph.

His photograph.

The one he had taken in the hospital corridor. The one that was supposed to explode across the internet and make his career. The kind of image reporters waited years for — the moment that cracked open a story and made your name impossible to ignore.

He had already written the follow-up pieces in his head when he took it. It was going to be his big ticket, the thing that secured him bylines and fame.

Instead, Rozanov had posted it himself.

One Instagram caption and suddenly the picture didn’t belong to Mercer anymore.

It belonged to *them*.

And the internet, being the internet, didn’t immediately see a scandal. They saw a love story, a modern day star-crossed lovers. Like a romance novel come to life. God, that was so frustrating.

Mercer refreshed the page again. Another repost of the hallway kiss. Another analyst calling it “a defining moment for the sport.”

His phone buzzed on the desk. He glanced at the caller ID.

It was his editor.

Mercer answered. “What.”

The editor didn’t bother pretending to be polite. ““You need a follow-up, and you need it fast.”

Mercer leaned back in his chair. “I’m working on it.”

“You better be,” the editor said. “Because right now we’re getting buried under all this bullshit.”

Mercer glanced back at the laptop screen. “That picture was supposed to break the internet,” Mercer muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

The editor exhaled sharply. “Look. The lawsuit is bad. The defenseman thing was worse – I should have caught that, to be fair, but you should have known better. If you’ve got sources inside that room you need to use them now.”

Mercer didn’t answer right away, because he had just been alerted to a new email from the Metros.

Subject: **Re: Hollander**

Inside were more quotes. Stuff from anonymous teammates, both against and for Hollander. A former player weighing in on how politics needs to stay out of hockey. Someone from the hospital staff with opinions about the chaos around the trauma ward that night.

None of it was especially thoughtful. Plenty of it was rude, and some of it was openly homophobic. Mercer could already see the article forming. Nothing subtle or careful, but just bitter enough to drag the conversation somewhere uglier and drive up the online interactions.

“Yeah,” he said finally, something slimy creeping into his voice. “I’ve got sources.”

“Good,” the editor replied. “Then write it.”

The line went dead.

Mercer stared at the blank document on his screen for a moment, mentally forming the way this would be laid out, and then he started typing.

New Questions Emerge About Hollander’s Role Inside the Metros Locker Room

Below it, the quotes began to shape the story into something colder. He knew exactly what he was doing.

If the internet wanted to treat the situation like a fairy tale, he would remind them that hockey locker rooms weren’t fairy tales and not everyone believed this should count as one.

He read the article once.

Didn’t edit much.

Then he hit send.

The story went live five minutes later.

Across the city, Harris and Troy were curled together on the couch, a replay of the Centaurs game playing quietly on the television while the last of the evening's adrenaline wore off.

Troy was half stretched across him, one arm slung lazily around Harris's waist, their legs tangled under a blanket.

The replay showed Rozanov's first goal again.

Troy grinned sleepily. "God, that shot was ridiculous."

Harris's phone buzzed in his hand. He glanced down, and his happy smile faded.

"Oh," he said quietly.

Troy tilted his head up. "That tone sounds sad."

Harris turned the phone toward him.

Troy read the headline, then let out a low whistle.

"Well," he said slowly. "That escalated."

Harris was already scrolling through the article.

He sighed and reached for his work phone. "I should call Yuna."

Troy nodded, shifting slightly but not letting go of him. "Yeah. That seems like a Yuna problem."

Harris dialed. She answered on the second ring.

"You've seen it?" he asked.

"Yes," Yuna replied calmly. "I'm reading it now."

"What's your take?"

A brief pause.

"Messy," she said. "But useful."

Harris raised an eyebrow. "Useful?"

"He's overplaying his hand," she replied. "Anonymous quotes, vague sources, and now hospital staff commentary. Catherine will have a field day with this. NorthLine will have to face the music – not just Mercer. Hell, we might be able to go after him solo now as well."

Harris leaned back against the couch, absently petting Troy's hair. "Think the hospital cooperates?"

"They will if they value their privacy policies," Yuna said dryly. "And if Mercer obtained information through his cousin again, the discovery process will be... enlightening."

Harris nodded slowly, even though he knew she couldn't see it. "So this doesn't worry you."

"Oh, it worries me," she said. "But not for the reasons Mercer thinks."

He smiled faintly. "That sounds ominous."

"It's strategic," Yuna corrected. "This article confirms what we suspected. Montreal is trying to push Shane out quietly before the deadline – at least the players are. This helps us."

Harris glanced toward the television, where Rozanov was celebrating another goal on the replay. "You think they'll move him early."

"I think they already decided to."

Silence settled for a moment.

Then Harris said, "You want me to talk to Desjardins."

"Yes." Yuna didn't hesitate. "The sooner Ottawa signals interest, the better our leverage becomes. If Montreal believes there are multiple bidders, they'll hold out for the best return. If Ottawa offers quickly, and cleanly, before that market really builds..."

Harris nodded again. "I'll set up a check-in with him tomorrow."

"Good," she said. "And Harris?"

"Yeah?"

"Make it clear we're serious. The offer needs to be good enough Montreal won't hesitate to meet the terms."

The line went quiet for a moment.

Then Yuna added calmly, "Shane Hollander belongs in Ottawa. So make him believe it."

The call ended, and Harris lowered the phone slowly. Troy shifted slightly beside him, still half draped across his chest.

"So," Troy said.

Harris looked down at him. "What do you think about Shane Hollander playing for Ottawa?"

Troy's smile spread slowly.

"I think," he said, "this city would absolutely lose its mind."

Chapter End Notes

The back half of the chapter shifts from chaos to something a little more personal. Plus, I really just wanted a sweet moment at home for Troy and Harris, okay?

Ilya playing out of his mind against New York is partly about momentum and partly about him being exactly the kind of dramatic bastard who would absolutely dedicate a goal to his injured boyfriend in the stands. We love him for it. It's fine.

The hallway kiss is the first moment where Shane and Ilya's relationship becomes publicly visible in a way that feels natural instead of scandalous. They're not making a statement. They're just...acting like themselves. I also thought that was important.

Of course, the internet immediately loses it.

Mercer reacts to all of this exactly the way a man who thought he was about to become famous and instead became a meme would react: badly and spiteful. And yes, his downfall will be spectacular. Especially when he tries to come for people supporting Shane and Ilya. I mean...spoilers? Maybe?

Obviously, Yuna is calmly recognizing that Mercer has just made things worse for himself, and Ottawa is quietly beginning to consider something that would absolutely break the league if it happened.

Shane Hollander.

Ilya Rozanov.

Same team.

This is probably going to go very normally. Right?

Until next time!

Chapter 14: Pressure Points

Chapter Summary

Things escalate. Professionally. Publicly. Emotionally.

Catherine sharpens the legal knives. Ottawa starts making moves. Montreal decides the best way to handle a problem is to quietly ship it somewhere else and call it “support.”

The locker room fractures.

Someone starts talking.

Mercer decides if he’s going down, he’s taking everyone with him.

Ilya gets asked about “fairness” and absolutely does not take that well.

Shane watches.

And finally, for the first time since everything broke—
he makes a choice.

Chapter Notes

Hi friends, loons, random passers-by...and welcome.

This one just grabbed me by the throat and said, “We’re doing this now,” and who am I to argue?

This chapter is where everything starts to tilt. The pieces are in motion. The chaos is official.

Legal pressure. Front office maneuvering. Locker room tension that is one bad comment away from exploding. Mercer continues his descent into “absolutely not a redeemable human being.” Hate him, please. I do, and I invented him - based on how I perceive the paparazzi, but still.

And Ilya... being Ilya. (Ignores media training. No restraint. Just vibes and righteous anger.)

As always — thank you for being here 

Morning came quietly.

It always did after a storm.

Not because anything had settled — nothing had — but because the world, stubborn and indifferent, kept moving anyway.

Outside Catherine Bouchard's office, the city was already in motion. Tires hissed through grey slush. A delivery truck idled too long in a no-parking zone. Somewhere below, someone shouted, someone laughed, someone carried on like nothing had detonated overnight.

Catherine didn't believe in quiet mornings.

She believed in pressure.

"You read it?" she asked, not looking up. Her voice was level, stripped of anything unnecessary. Her fingers moved in small, precise motions across her tablet.

Yuna stepped inside, closing the door softly behind her. The click sounded louder than it should have.

"Yes."

"Good."

A flick. Scroll. Pause.

Catherine didn't react — not visibly — but something in her stillness tightened, her focus narrowing to a fine, dangerous point.

"He's unravelling," she said. "That's when people start making gifts of themselves."

Yuna crossed the room, set her bag down, and took the seat opposite her. She crossed one leg over the other, settling with deliberate calm, even as something low and restless coiled under her ribs.

"More 'anonymous' sources," she said. "And commentary from inside the hospital."

"Yes," Catherine replied, almost pleasantly. "Which means he's no longer reporting. He's constructing."

She turned the tablet toward Yuna, angling it to avoid the overhead glare.

"Initially, we had a contained publication. Now we have republication, embellishment, and escalation." A manicured nail tapped once against the glass. "And here — he either accessed confidential medical information, or he wants his readers to believe he did."

Yuna leaned forward slightly. The paragraph in question sat there, deceptively clean. Clinical language. Carefully chosen phrasing. But underneath it was clear implication, or at least suggestion. The kind that didn't need proof to do damage, since he'd clearly left the truth behind him at this point.

For a split second, something sharper cut through her composure — anger, clean and bright.

Not for herself, but for her boys. For the violation of everything, and the reach. She exhaled slowly through her nose and let it settle back into control.

“He’s pushing past the line,” she said. “It’s beginning to feel personal.”

Catherine’s mouth curved, faint and approving. “Yes. And once someone crosses it, they rarely stop.”

She set the tablet down with quiet finality.

“I’m filing this afternoon,” she continued. “Interlocutory injunction — immediate relief, pending review. We’ll argue ongoing harm, amplified by repetition.” A beat. “And I’m putting the hospital on notice. Administration, legal, and privacy. Apparently, serving them with the initial lawsuit wasn’t enough to rein in anyone. Yet.”

“For Mercer?” Yuna asked.

“For anyone who opened a door that should have stayed closed,” Catherine said smoothly. “If protected health information has been disclosed — or positioned as if it has — this stops being reputational.”

Her gaze lifted, sharp now. “It becomes regulatory. And that should scare them.”

Yuna nodded once.

“Good.”

Catherine leaned back slightly, studying her with that same precise, dissecting attention.

“You’re not rattled.”

Yuna held her gaze. “I am.”

A pause.

“Just not by him. There are always people like Mercer. He’s predictable in his anger and stupidity.”

Catherine nodded. “Good,” she said, quieter now. Colder.

She leaned forward again, all softness gone, voice honed to something exacting.

“Because we’re past response,” she said.

A beat. Measured. Intentional.

“We’re identifying exposure.”

Another beat — just long enough to let the weight of it land.

“And deciding who owns it.”

Across the city, the Ottawa Centaurs’ front office was already in motion. Not reactive. Not scrambling. Deliberate. The kind of movement that suggested decisions had been forming long before the phone ever rang.

Desjardins didn’t bother with small talk. He rarely did, but today the omission felt sharper, more intentional.

“You’re still serious,” he said as Harris took the seat across from him. The GM leaned back in his chair, arms loose, posture deceptively casual for a man who’d already run through every possible implication.

“Yes,” Harris replied. No hesitation. No softening. Just the clean, unvarnished truth of it.

For a moment, Desjardins simply watched him, weighing the conviction behind the word. Then his attention shifted—not away, but outward—to the roster board mounted on the wall. Magnets tracked everything: lines, contracts, movement, leverage. The top line sat untouched, Rozanov’s name fixed at center with the captain’s C beside it. The letter didn’t just mark leadership; it anchored the room, the franchise, the identity they’d built around him.

Desjardins reached out and tapped the board once with two fingers, a gesture that carried more gravity than any raised voice.

“If I do this,” he said, his voice quieter now, “I’m not just making a hockey trade.”

Harris didn’t interrupt. He didn’t rush to fill the silence or soften the edges. He let the weight of the statement settle.

“I’m making a statement,” Desjardins finished.

“Yes,” Harris said. Simple. Certain. The only answer that made sense.

Desjardins exhaled slowly through his nose, gaze still fixed on the board. “Eight-point-two cap hit. Full no-move clause. Franchise captain.” He shook his head slightly, as if acknowledging the magnitude aloud made it more real. “That’s not a tweak. That’s a fault line.”

“No,” Harris agreed. “It isn’t.”

The GM’s eyes flicked back to him, sharper now. “And you still want it.”

Harris leaned forward, elbows resting lightly on his knees. The posture read as relaxed, but the control beneath it was unmistakable.

“Look at the numbers,” he said. “Zone entries. Possession metrics. Power-play efficiency with the right flank adjusted.” He let the data speak for itself before adding, “You don’t get incremental improvement. You get separation.”

Desjardins didn’t respond immediately, and Harris could see him running the scenarios—on-ice, off-ice, locker room, media, league office. So he gave him the other half.

“And beyond that,” he said, quieter now, “you get ahead of it.”

That landed. The shift was subtle, but unmistakable. Desjardins’ expression didn’t change much, but something behind it sharpened, like a blade being tested.

“Assuming he agrees to come,” he said.

There it was. Not cap. Not return. Control. The only variable that mattered.

Harris let the silence stretch, letting the GM feel the weight of the question before he answered.

“Did Hollander really waive the no-trade?” Desjardins pressed. “Would he actually come here?”

Harris’s mouth curved, just barely. “I think,” he said carefully, “if the situation is what we believe it is—” He paused, letting the implication breathe. “—he won’t need much convincing.”

Not a promise. Not quite. But close enough to matter.

Desjardins studied him longer this time, searching for any crack in the certainty. “You’re very sure of that.”

“I’m sure the variables have changed,” Harris said. Which wasn’t the same thing. But it was enough.

The GM nodded once, slow and thoughtful, finally dragging his attention away from the board. “And what am I giving up in exchange?”

There it was. The part that made this real.

Harris reached forward and slid a tablet across the desk. “Depends how committed Montreal is to controlling the narrative.”

Desjardins glanced down. Picks. Prospects. Conditional structures. Retention scenarios. Multiple paths, cleanly laid out: if Montreal retools; if they pivot to damage control; if they decide this is a problem they need gone quickly. Each one balanced. Each one dangerous in its own way.

A low breath left him. “You’ve mapped every exit.”

“Yes.”

Desjardins looked back up, something heavier settling into place—not hesitation, not doubt. Decision. The kind that would ripple through the league before the ink even dried.

“This blows back,” he said. “Media, league office, agents—everyone’s going to have an opinion.”

Harris met his gaze evenly. “They already do.” A beat. “This just decides who moves first.”

Silence stretched between them, not empty but charged, the kind that precedes a shift in trajectory.

Then Desjardins gave a small, decisive nod.

“Alright,” he said.

Another beat. Final.

“I’ll make the call.”

In Montreal, the call had just ended.

No one spoke right away. The line had gone dead with a polite, professional *we’ll be in touch*, but the room hadn’t moved past it yet. The offer still sat there—fresh, intact, almost unreal in how clean it had sounded when spoken out loud. The GM lowered his phone slowly, setting it on the table like it might shift if he didn’t anchor it.

“Well,” he said.

Not surprise. Something closer to confirmation.

“They’re serious,” one of the assistants murmured, leaning forward as if proximity might change the meaning.

“They’re very serious.”

The numbers replayed themselves in the room without anyone needing to say them. Picks—high ones. A roster player who could step in immediately. Conditional pieces layered in depending on performance, usage, playoff progression. Enough structure to justify it. Enough value to defend it. And just enough urgency to make it clear Ottawa wanted this done *now*.

The GM leaned back, eyes drifting—not to the details, but to the shape of the thing. “What are we missing?”

It wasn't doubt. It was habit. The reflex of a man who'd learned that the obvious answer was rarely the whole one.

"Nothing obvious," the assistant said. "Cap works with retention. They've already run compliance."

A quiet shift moved through the room, subtle but unmistakable. Because this wasn't a negotiation yet. This was an exit. Offered.

Another voice, careful: "The lawsuit's gaining traction. Second piece dropped this morning."

No one asked for more. They'd all read it. Seen the tone shift—less reporting, more narrative. The kind that stuck.

"And the hospital angle—if that's real—" someone began.

The GM lifted a hand, cutting it off before it could take shape. "We're not litigating that in here."

A beat.

"But we are managing it."

Silence settled again, cleaner now, focused. The GM looked down at the tablet, at the structure Ottawa had laid out with almost surgical precision.

"We move him now," he said, "this stays a hockey decision."

No one disagreed.

"We wait—" a small pause "—and it becomes something else."

That line held. Everyone knew what *something else* meant.

"We can control the messaging," an assistant offered.

The GM's eyes flicked up. "How?"

"Hometown return," the assistant said. "Stability. Support system. Put him closer to his partner. Frame it as giving him space to handle everything off the ice."

Not the problem. Never the problem. Everything around it.

"We emphasize care," another added. "Privacy. Support. Long-term success."

The GM considered that, slow. Ottawa. Familiar. Close enough to sell as intentional, not reactive. Close enough to make it look like they were doing the right thing.

"We're not moving him because of this," he said.

"No," the assistant agreed smoothly. "We're putting him in a better position."

A beat.

“And improving the team.”

There it was. Clean. Defensible. Useful.

The GM nodded once, decision settling into place like a weight finding its center. “Get ahead of it. If this leaks before we frame it, we lose control of the narrative.”

“PR’s drafting already.”

“Good.”

He picked up his phone again, thumb hovering for only a moment.

“Call Yuna Hollander,” he said.

That changed the air.

Not dramatically—no one flinched—but the shift was unmistakable. A subtle tightening. A shared awareness. Yuna Hollander wasn’t just an agent; she was a force. Smart, surgical, relentless when she needed to be. The kind of person who didn’t just negotiate terms—she controlled terrain.

“Alright,” one assistant said quietly, already reaching for his phone, “I’ll... I’ll get her.”

No one envied him.

The GM didn’t soften. “We do this properly,” he said. Then, after a beat, quieter: “But we do it quickly.”

No one pushed back. No one said the word *captain*. No one said his name.

“Let’s solve this,” the GM said.

Across the hall, the locker room didn’t feel like a team anymore.

It felt like a waiting room.

No one said that out loud. They didn’t have to. The air was wrong—too quiet in some places, too loud in others. Phones sat in stalls where players pretended not to check them. Screens lit, dimmed, lit again. Conversations started, stalled, shifted into something safer. Someone laughed too hard. Someone else snapped their tape with sharp, irritated pulls. A stick hit the floor harder than it needed to.

At the far end, a stall door sat half-open. Inside, the goalie leaned back, pads undone, blocker resting loosely beside him. His phone was tilted low in his hand, screen brightness turned down just enough to avoid attention. Scrolling. Reading. Not reacting. Just watching.

Goalies saw everything.

“Alright,” the coach said as he stepped into the room. “Let’s keep it focused today.”

A few heads nodded. No one asked what that meant. Focus on what? The game? The noise? The thing sitting in the middle of the room that no one was supposed to touch?

At the far end, two players leaned in, voices low.

“You see Pike’s post?”

“Yeah.”

A pause.

“Not wrong.”

“No.”

Another pause.

“Still shouldn’t have said it.”

Across the room, someone muttered too loud to be accidental, “Better than pretending nothing’s happening.”

That sparked it.

“Yeah? And blowing it up helps how?”

“It’s already blown up.”

“Not like that.”

“Not like what—honest?”

A chair scraped. “Knock it off,” someone snapped.

“Why? Everyone’s thinking it.”

“Not everyone.”

A scoff. “Sure.”

The coach’s voice cut through, sharper now. “We’re not doing this today.”

Silence followed, but it wasn’t real. It was the kind that held its breath, waiting for the next crack.

Because of course they were doing this. It was already everywhere—online, in the halls, in the way no one quite met anyone else’s eyes for too long. Because it had moved past *incident*

and into *judgment*.

At the far end, the goalie's thumb hovered over his screen. A message thread open. Not team. Not family. Something else. He read the last few lines again—mentions, speculation, a name almost said but not quite.

And now, layered on top of it, something new:
screenshots of Pike's post,
a clipped video of the locker room argument someone had recorded on their phone,
a caption that read *Montreal's room is cooked*.

It wasn't viral yet.
But it was moving.

His gaze flicked up briefly, tracking the room. Who was talking. Who wasn't. Who was loud.
Who was careful. Who looked like they had something to lose.

His thumb moved. Paused.

Then—tap.

A message sent. Short. Casual. Easy to ignore. Easy to follow up on.

He locked his phone and set it face down on the bench, like it didn't matter. Like none of it did.

"Eyes up," the coach said. "We're not talking about it."

Which, of course, meant everyone was.

And now so was someone else.

Colin Mercer's phone hadn't stopped ringing.

At first it had been noise — notifications, mentions, the low, constant buzz of attention he'd learned to tune out years ago. But now it was something else. Calls. Direct. Repeated. Unavoidable. The kind of calls that didn't wait for convenience or courtesy.

His screen lit again.
Same number.

He stared at it for a long second before answering.

"What."

"We've had legal contact again," his editor said.

No preamble. No softening. Just the words, dropped like a weight.

A beat.

“And it’s worse.”

Something in Mercer’s chest tightened. Not fear — he didn’t do fear — but pressure. A familiar, rising compression behind the ribs.

“What does that mean.”

“It means they’re not warning us anymore,” the editor said. “They’re documenting.”

That landed harder than the first call. Mercer sat up slightly, jaw tightening, the shift in posture automatic.

“They don’t have anything.”

“Stop,” the editor snapped. “Just—stop saying that like it makes it true.”

Mercer’s grip shifted on the phone, irritation sparking. “You told me to write it.”

“I told you to stabilize it,” the editor shot back. “I told you to get ahead of the narrative. What you’ve done is escalate it into something we can’t contain.”

A sharp, humorless laugh broke out of Mercer. “Oh, I’m sorry,” he said. “Is this getting uncomfortable for you now?”

“Do not do that,” the editor said, voice dropping into something colder. “I am not the problem here.”

A pause. Then, more controlled:

“You used hospital sources. You implied access to restricted information. Do you have documentation for that — yes or no.”

Mercer didn’t answer.

Because that wasn’t how this worked.

Because implication was the story.

Because it had been enough — until they decided it wasn’t.

“That’s what I thought,” the editor said quietly.

Silence stretched, thin and dangerous.

“This isn’t journalism anymore,” he continued.

A beat.

“It’s liability.”

That hit differently. Not dramatic — clinical. Institutional. The kind of word that didn’t care about intent or truth, only consequence.

“For me?” Mercer repeated, something sharp cutting through now. “I’m the one who broke this.”

“And you’re about to be the one they make an example of.”

That hit. Clean. Precise. A scalpel, not a hammer.

Mercer’s jaw locked. “They don’t get to decide that.”

“They already have.”

Another pause. Then—

“And for what it’s worth,” the editor added, voice tightening, “you’re not the only one getting calls.”

Mercer stilled. “What.”

“Your cousin,” the editor said. “Daniel.”

A flicker — quick, unwelcome — crossed Mercer’s expression.

“He’s being asked questions. Internally. About access. About who he spoke to.”

Mercer’s grip tightened, knuckles whitening. “He didn’t give me anything.”

“That’s not the point,” the editor said. “The point is his name is now attached to this, and he is not happy about it.”

As if summoned, another notification lit up across Mercer’s screen.

DANIEL MERCER

Three missed calls.

A message preview:

What the hell did you do.

Mercer’s expression didn’t change. But something in him shifted — hardening, closing, sealing off the part of him that might have cared.

“He’ll be fine,” Mercer said flatly.

“That’s not what I’m hearing.”

Another beat.

“He says he’s done talking to you.”

That should have landed.

It didn’t.

Or it did — and Mercer shoved it somewhere it couldn’t reach anything important.

“This isn’t about clicks anymore,” the editor said finally. “This is exposure. For the paper. For you.”

Mercer let out a slow breath. “They don’t get to decide that,” he said.

“They already did.”

The line went dead.

Mercer didn’t move for a moment. The silence that followed felt different — heavier, like something had shifted just out of sight. His phone buzzed again in his hand.

Daniel.
Calling.
Again.

Mercer looked at it. Let it ring. Watched the name sit there — insistent, accusing. Then he turned the phone face down on the desk. Ignored it. Deliberately.

Because this?
This was bigger than Daniel.
Bigger than the editor.
Bigger than any of them.

He turned back to his laptop.

The article sat open. His byline. His work. But it didn’t feel like his anymore — not the way it had when it broke. Now it was buried. Under commentary. Under sympathy. Under people deciding this wasn’t scandal — it was something softer. Something acceptable.

Clips of the hallway moment looped endlessly. Slowed down. Reframed. Turned into something careful. Something palatable. Like it wasn’t what it was. Like it hadn’t been exactly what he’d caught.

His photograph sat there, detached from him. Shared. Credited. Controlled by everyone except the person who took it.

His jaw flexed.

This was what they did. Closed ranks. Protected their own. Turned it into a story about courage. About privacy. About support. Like none of the rest of it mattered. Like he was the problem. Like he was supposed to just—what. Back off? Let it go? Watch them walk away from something that should have blown them apart?

His hand curled into a fist.

They had taken this from him.
The story.
The control.
The career he’d built on being the one who didn’t look away.

And now?
Now they were going to bury it.
Bury him with it.

A slow, sharp smile pulled at the corner of his mouth.

Fine.

If that was how they wanted to play it—

He could play too.

He didn't need confirmation.
Didn't need sources.
Didn't need permission.

Not anymore.

They wanted careful?
They wanted controlled?
They wanted this to go away quietly?

Mercer leaned forward, fingers hovering over the keyboard. The cursor blinked. Waiting.
Hungry.

"If they want a story," he muttered under his breath as his fingers dropped to the keys. "I'll give them one."

And this time he didn't care who it burned.

The arena lights were still too bright when Ilya stepped off the ice.

Practice had run long. Or maybe he had stayed out there longer than necessary, skating until his legs burned and his lungs scraped raw, until there was nothing left in his head but ice and movement and the clean certainty of something he could control. Because out there, things made sense.

Out here—

They didn't.

Media was waiting. Of course they were. A cluster near the boards, already shifting, already ready, already circling.

"Rozanov," someone called. "Quick word?"

Ilya slowed. Stopped. Turned.

“What would you like.”

Neutral. Contained.

“Your performance lately,” a reporter began. “It’s been... elevated.”

“I like to win.”

A few small laughs. Pens moved.

“And the attention around you and Hollander—has that affected your play at all?”

There it was. Always.

“No.”

“You don’t think it’s a distraction?”

Something flickered behind his eyes, sharp as a skate blade catching light.

“I think people enjoy deciding what should matter to other people.”

The tone shifted. Subtle, but unmistakable.

“And the kiss after the game?”

“He seemed to enjoy it.”

Laughter again—quicker, thinner, less sure.

Another voice pushed in. “There’s been a lot of discussion about what happens next—about league involvement, about fairness in how this is being handled. Do you feel like you’re being treated fairly?”

Fair.

The word hit wrong, like a bruise pressed too hard. Ilya went still, not dramatically, just enough that the air around him tightened.

He drew in a slow breath and lifted his head. When he spoke, his voice was measured, deliberate, and sharp enough to cut through the boards.

“Fair,” he said. “My partner was on a plane that could have killed his entire team. There was an incident. People could have died. He didn’t, because he chose to help someone else first. He chose to save a teammate instead of thinking about himself. And somehow that is not the story. Somehow the story is me going to the hospital. As if that is unusual. As if that is remarkable. As if anyone in this room would not do the same thing for the person they love. So no—I do not think about fairness. I think about the fact that the league almost lost an entire team. I think about the fact that he almost died. And I think about how quickly all of you decided something else was more interesting.”

Silence followed—heavy, uncomfortable, absolute. No pens. No questions. Just the echo of what he'd finally said out loud.

Ilya's chest rose once, fell once. He could feel it—the line he'd crossed, the place where control thinned.

“Я не буду извиняться за это,” he said quietly.
I will not apologize for that.

A beat.

“Никогда.”
Never.

The silence stretched, brittle as glass.

Then, carefully—like approaching something dangerous—someone asked, “And Hollander? How is he doing?”

That snapped something back into place. Fast. Clean. Controlled.

“He is recovering,” Ilya said, voice steady again. “He is getting the care he needs.” A softer note entered, but only barely. “He is strong.”

Not everything he wanted to say. Not even close. But enough.

He gave a short nod. “Thank you.”

Final.

He turned and walked, shoulders tight, jaw set, not waiting for follow-ups, not looking back. He could still feel everything he hadn't said pressing at the edges, everything he couldn't say.

His grip tightened on his stick as he disappeared down the tunnel.

“Я заберу его домой,” he muttered under his breath, low and unshakable.
I will bring him home.

And this time—

it wasn't just a promise.

It was a plan.

At Ilya's house, Shane sat on the couch with an ice pack balanced carefully against his ribs. It had melted enough to be more water than cold, but he hadn't moved it. He didn't feel like moving much at all.

The TV was on.
Not muted this time.

A replay looped across the screen — practice footage cut with the media scrum that had followed. Ilya stood under the lights, still in his gear, hair damp, eyes sharp and tired and burning with something Shane knew better than anyone.

He hadn't meant to watch it twice.
Or three times.
But he had.

His phone buzzed in his hand again — messages stacking, names blurring together — but he barely glanced at them.

On the screen, someone asked about fairness.

Shane stilled.

Ilya went quiet for a second.
Then—

You want to talk about fair?

Shane's chest tightened, feeling it—how fiercely this man loved him, and how completely he loved him back. He watched it all — the way Ilya's control slipped just enough, the way his voice changed, the way he said *my partner* like it meant something immovable. Like it meant everything.

Shane swallowed hard, eyes fixed on the screen.

He almost died.

The words hit again, even the third time. Even knowing they were coming. He shifted slightly, breath catching as pain flared under his ribs — sharp, grounding.

Alive.
Still here.

On the screen, Ilya's voice dropped.

That is all that matters.

Shane exhaled slowly, something in his chest loosening and tightening all at once.

God.

The TV cut to analysis — voices talking over each other, speculation layered on speculation, narrative piled on narrative. Shane reached for the remote and muted it again. Silence rushed back in, cleaner, easier to breathe in.

A moment later, his phone buzzed again. A call this time, from his mom. He stared at the call display for a beat, then answered.

“Hey, Mom.”

“I’m going to get right to it, Shane. Ottawa’s offering.”

No preamble. Of course not.

Shane let his head fall back against the couch, eyes drifting to the screen again — to Ilya, frozen mid-sentence now.

“...Okay.”

“They’re serious,” Yuna said. “And Montreal’s listening.”

“Yeah,” Shane murmured. “I figured.”

A pause.

“You want me to go over the details with you?”

This was her agent voice, steady but softer underneath — the softness she reserved for him, for moments like this.

Shane didn’t answer right away. His gaze stayed on the screen. On Ilya. On the way he’d looked standing there — like he was holding the line by sheer force of will. Like he’d fight anyone who tried to take this out of his hands.

Out of *theirs*.

“...If I stay in Montreal,” Shane said slowly, “this doesn’t stop. Ever. There are too many guys who don’t look at me the same anymore.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“And if I go—”

“It doesn’t stop either. But you’d have a team that supports you. And you’ll have Ilya. Freely.”

Shane swallowed. “I don’t want it to look like I’m running.”

“You won’t be,” Yuna said. Immediate. Certain. “You’ll be choosing.”

A pause.

“Those are not the same thing, sweetheart.”

Shane let that sit, the truth of it settling somewhere deep.

“...He meant it,” he said, almost to himself.

Yuna didn’t ask what he meant. She didn’t need to.

“I know,” she said softly.

Shane’s throat tightened. He looked at the screen again — at Ilya, at the way he’d said it, like there was no version of this where he let go. Like there was no version where Shane did this alone.

“...He wants me there,” Shane said.

“Yeah,” Yuna replied. “And the rest of them want you there too.”

Shane huffed a quiet breath. “Yeah. I noticed.”

A soft laugh. Then, more grounded now, sliding back into manager mode, “They’re going to move fast. They want control of how this news is going to break and how they will look.”

“Yeah.”

Of course they did. Everyone did. No one bothered to ask him.

Shane looked back at the screen one last time. At Ilya. Not moving now. Frozen in a frame that didn’t quite capture what Shane had seen in motion. Didn’t quite capture the way it had felt.

But close enough.

Close enough to know.

Close enough to trust.

Shane closed his eyes for a brief second.

Then “...Okay.”

He sounded steadier now. More settled.

“Yeah. Let’s talk to them.”

A pause.

Then, quieter, but more certain, “Let’s see what it looks like.”

Yuna exhaled softly. “I’ll start the conversation.”

“Okay.”

The call ended a moment later.

Shane lowered the phone slowly, letting it rest against his chest before setting it aside. The room settled around him again — quiet, but no longer hollow. The kind of quiet that held possibility instead of dread.

He leaned back into the couch, the cushions dipping under his weight, the melted ice pack sliding a little against his ribs. He didn't fix it. Didn't need to. The ache there felt different now — less like a warning, more like a reminder.

His gaze drifted to the door.

For the first time since the plane, since the hospital, since the noise had swallowed everything else, he let himself imagine it: a future that wasn't running or hiding or bracing. A future that wasn't decided for him. A future where he wasn't alone in the fallout.

A future with Ilya.

Shane exhaled, slow and quiet, the breath easing something deep in his chest he hadn't realized he'd been holding tight.

He let his eyes close for a moment — just long enough to feel the shape of that future, the weight of it, the truth of it — then opened them again, softer now, as the front door clicked.

Shane's eyes lifted as Ilya stepped inside, shoulders heavy, posture tight, eyes finding him instantly — like he'd been looking for him since the arena.

Shane didn't wait.

He pushed himself up from the couch, ignoring the pain in his ribs and the ice pack that hit the floor, crossed the room, and reached for him — one hand sliding to Ilya's jaw, guiding him down into a kiss that was soft and careful and grounding. Not urgent. Not desperate. Just real.

Ilya inhaled sharply against his mouth, the tension in him breaking all at once. His gear bag slipped from his hand and hit the floor with a dull thud as he pulled Shane in, arms wrapping around him with a kind of relief that felt like gravity.

Shane pressed his forehead to Ilya's, breath warm, ribs aching in a way that didn't matter anymore.

"Hi," he whispered.

Ilya closed his eyes, exhaling shakily. "Hi."

They stood there in the doorway, holding each other like the world outside could wait — like it *would* wait — because this moment was the only thing that mattered. Ilya's hands slid up Shane's back, careful around the bruises, steady in a way that made Shane's chest tighten all over again.

Shane leaned into him, letting the warmth, the solidity, the certainty of Ilya settle around him like a promise he could finally touch.

He didn't need to say anything else.
Neither did Ilya.

They just held each other — in the doorway, in the quiet, in the first moment all day that felt like safety — and neither of them let go.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so.

Deep breath.

Catherine is playing chess.

Ottawa is making moves.

Montreal is trying to save their asses.

The locker room is cracking.

Mercer is... well. Mercer is setting things on fire and calling it journalism.

And Ilya?

Ilya is done pretending this is anything other than what it is.

But the part that matters most to me is the end.

Because after all of that noise, all of that pressure, all of that *everything* — it comes down to two people choosing each other anyway.

No cameras.

No narrative.

No spin.

Just... them.

(also yes the goalie did a thing. we will be revisiting that. I love chaos.)

Next chapter: consequences. Probably loud ones. Hopefully loud ones? Listen I don't make the rules, these characters are BOSSY and are kinda dragging me along for the ride. Hope you're still happy to be on it with me!

Thanks for reading, as always — you guys are the absolute best 🧡

Chapter 15: The Story Breaks Back

Chapter Summary

The league starts talking.

After Julien Fournier leaks what's really happening inside Montreal's locker room, a group of the NHL's biggest names quietly coordinate a response—and turn Mercer's narrative on its head.

As the Metros release a polished, carefully crafted statement about Shane's "future," the truth begins to surface in a way they can't control.

Ilya says the quiet part out loud.

The players follow.

And suddenly, this isn't just a story anymore—it's a line.

Meanwhile, Mercer thinks he's getting everything he wanted.

He's wrong.

Chapter Notes

Hi friends, loons, and new fans who have stumbled into this world - and welcome back to me absolutely choosing violence against fictional institutions. Also surprise - this came together sooner than planned. Sometimes I also surprise me.

This chapter is very much a "what happens when you push too far and the wrong people notice" situation.

Couple things going in:

Homophobia is present in the locker room scenes (because, unfortunately, realism)

The media spin is... intentional. Read it with side-eye.

This is the start of the league pushing back, not the end of it

If there are typos, my youngest still isn't letting me sleep much, so...there are no typos.

Also yes—this is a group chat chapter 😊

I regret nothing.

The group chat didn't exist five minutes ago. A wave of notifications swept through the league as Julien Fournier, goalie for the Metros reached out.

Fournier added: Hayes, Boodram, Barrett, Crosby, Hunter, Marleau, Marchand, Price, MacKinnon, McDavid.

Fournier:

This stays here.

Fournier:

Room's gone.

Three dots flickered immediately.

MacKinnon:

Define gone.

Fournier leaned back against his stall, phone low in his hand. Down the row, someone laughed — too loud, too sharp, the kind of sound meant to carry. The kind meant to hurt. Conversations flowed around him like they were completely normal.

He sighed and looked back down at his phone.

Fournier:

Split.

Guys talking in corners.

Others pretending nothing's happening.

Fournier:

Some don't want him back.

Hayes:

Because of the article?

Fournier:

Because he's with Rozanov.

Marchand:

Say it properly. There's no room for pussyfooting around this.

Fournier didn't hesitate.

Fournier:

Because he's gay.

Because he didn't keep it quiet.

MacKinnon:

Jesus.

Price:

What's actually being said. Anything we can use?

Fournier's jaw tightened. Across the room, a stick hit the floor. No one picked it up.

Fournier:

"Distraction."

"Not what we signed up for."

"Keep that shit out of the room."

"Captain should've known better."

Hunter:

Anyone push back.

Fournier:

Dagenais.

Says it doesn't matter.

Mad he didn't know, not that it exists.

Fournier:

Pike would've.

He's not here.

Barrett:

Staff?

Fournier:

Trying to shut it down.

Doesn't stick because they believe the same. Or worse. They're old school.

There's a pause.

Fournier:

Mercer's been in the room.

Crosby:

How many talked?

Fournier:

Enough. Some on record.

Some not.

McDavid:

About what.

Fournier:

Everything. Mostly ridiculously homophobic shit. Like they felt unsafe showering with him now, like

Fournier:

Also, Coach didn't know I heard him, but they're trading him to Ottawa. They just want to be rid of him and the "distraction"

MacKinnon:

They're actually doing it? Are they insane? Sorry to everyone playing in the Eastern, but lets just put the two best guys in the league on the same team...no offense Sid.

Crosby:

None taken.

Fournier:

Feels done already.

Marchand:

No way. We're not letting that happen. Not the trade, obviously we don't have that much pull. But the other bullshit around it.

Crosby:

Agreed. So we change what happens next.

Hayes:

Okay. How.

Crosby:

Mercer wants sources.

We give him sources.

MacKinnon:

Yeah.

Hayes:

Oh I like that. I could definitely hit him again too, if that's an option...

Marchand:

We don't give him what he wants though. We give him the exact opposite of what he's hoping for.

Price:

On record.

McDavid:

All of us.

Hunter:

Same message.

Marleau:

No gaps.

Fournier watched it come together in real time — cleaner than anything happening in his own room.

Barrett:

What's the message?

Crosby:

Support. Respect. No ambiguity around it either. Just simple: they didn't do anything wrong, and he's clearly got it out for Hollander. And Rozy, but seems to really have a bone to pick with Hollander.

The plan started taking shape, piece by piece.

Hayes:

We stagger it or drop all at once?

McDavid:

All at once.

Price:

Forces coverage.

Hunter:

No time to spin.

Marleau:

Pick outlets. Different markets.

MacKinnon:

National, local, everything in between. Online as well. Obviously.

Barrett:

What about tone?

Crosby:

Consistent.

No one goes off script.

Marchand:

*I'm going a *little* off script.*

MacKinnon:

*Of course you are. *facepalm emoji**

Marchand:

Nothing they can't print.

A pause.

Marchand:

Plenty they won't like.

Hayes:

We should write/say it to them specifically.

Barrett:

Privately?

Hayes:

No. Publicly.

McDavid:

Open letter style. I like it.

Price:

To both of them.

Hunter:

That makes it personal.

Marleau:

And visible.

MacKinnon:

Good.

Marchand:

And we don't just say it, we show it. Photo shoot. We get rainbow jerseys. Really lean into it.

Hayes:

Yeah.

Barrett:

Yeah.

MacKinnon:

Oh yeah.

Price:

If we're doing this, we do it properly.

McDavid:

Visible support.

Hunter:

No room for interpretation.

Marleau:

Set it up, Marchy.

Marchand:

I know people.

Hayes:

You would.

Marchand:

Give me twenty-four hours.

Fournier stared at the screen for a second, then added:

Fournier:

They're going to announce the trade today. So if you're gonna move on any part of this it needs to be quick.

A pause.

Then Crosby, steady as ever:

Crosby:

We're still ahead of it. Get your open letters to your PR guys or whatever.

Fournier took a deep breath. This was risky for him, but what they were planning was going to be very, very hard to ignore.

The statement dropped at 9:02am.

The Montreal Metros Organization Announces Trade of Captain Shane Hollander

The Montreal Metros have agreed to trade Captain Shane Hollander to the Ottawa Centaurs, effective immediately.

This decision follows ongoing internal discussions regarding the long-term direction of the organization, as well as Shane's continued health, well-being, and future success both on and off the ice.

Given recent events, we believe this move provides Shane with the opportunity to continue his recovery within a familiar support system, while also allowing him to focus fully on his return to play in an environment that prioritizes both his personal and professional needs.

Shane Hollander has been an integral part of the Montreal Metros organization for over a decade. As captain, he led this team to three Stanley Cup championships and helped define a culture of accountability, resilience, and excellence.

His leadership extended beyond the ice, setting a standard for professionalism and dedication that will continue to shape this organization for years to come.

We thank Shane for his unwavering commitment to this team, this city, and our fans.

We wish him nothing but success as he begins this next chapter with the Ottawa Centaurs.

— Montreal Metros Hockey Club

It read perfectly.

That was the problem.

Every sentence in the Metros' statement had been sanded smooth, polished to a shine, scrubbed of anything human. It was the kind of release that had been drafted weeks ago, long before anyone admitted it out loud. The kind that had been waiting in a folder labeled contingency.

It was respectful.

Measured.

Unimpeachable.

And completely bloodless.

The kind of thing that made it clear the decision had been made long before anyone bothered to tell the man at the center of it.

Shane's name appeared six times.

His humanity appeared nowhere.

The moment it hit the feed, the replies filled with blue hearts and broken ones, with thank yous and condolences, with fans trying to convince themselves this was mutual, amicable, inevitable.

It read perfectly.

That was the problem.

Then, less than three minutes later — too fast to be spontaneous, too polished to be anything but preloaded — a tribute video dropped.

Soft piano.

Black screen.

Then—

Shane.

Rookie year footage, grainy and bright, the kind that made him look impossibly young. His smile was wide, unguarded, untouched by the weight of captaincy or expectation. He skated like the ice belonged to him.

Cut to highlights.

Goals that made crowds rise in a single breath.
Assists threaded through impossible lanes.
Playoff shifts where he looked carved from something harder than bone.

The first Cup.
The second.
The third.

The C stitched onto his jersey — the moment it was handed to him, the way he blinked like he wasn't sure he deserved it yet.

A handshake line.
A speech swallowed by crowd noise.

Holl-an-der.
Holl-an-der.
Holl-an-der.

Clips of him laughing with teammates, chirping refs, dragging the team into overtime on sheer will.

Clips of him bleeding for the crest, jaw set, eyes bright with that stubborn, impossible fire.

The final frame lingered—

Shane at center ice, helmet off, chest heaving, sweat dripping down his neck, looking out over a crowd that had once been entirely his. The camera held on him just long enough to feel like a goodbye he hadn't agreed to.

Cut to black.

Thank you, Shane.

Logo.
Fade out.

For a moment, it almost felt like the Metros had done right by him. Scripted and pandering, but a fitting tribute to their long-time captain.

Almost.

The first wave hit like it always does — fast, shallow, and painfully predictable.

“Classy move.”
“Best for both sides.”
“Wishing him the best.”

Little platitudes tossed into the void, each one polished to the same dull shine. People reposted the tribute video with soft emojis and captions about “end of an era” like they were

signing a yearbook instead of watching a man get pushed out of his own team.

Sports panels filled airtime within minutes.

Four faces in boxes, all nodding in that synchronized, thoughtful way that meant none of them were actually thinking.

They talked about *support systems* like they knew anything about his.

They talked about *recovery* like it was a storyline, not a body.

They talked about *fresh starts* and *next chapters* like they were reading from the same cue card.

Every phrase sounded like it had been workshopped.

Every take sounded like it had been cleared by someone higher up.

It was all so... neat.

So tidy.

So perfectly aligned.

It sounded right.

Too right.

Like the kind of right that only exists when everyone agrees not to look too closely.

Like the kind of right that cracks the second something real touches it.

Then a different clip resurfaced. Not as a headline, or a polished segment, or anything official.

Just... appearing. Quietly at first, and then everywhere at once.

A shaky recording from someone in the arena.

A cleaner rip from a broadcast feed.

A captioned version on TikTok.

A subtitled one on Twitter.

A slowed-down one on Instagram.

And suddenly, the PR gloss didn't matter anymore.

Because there he was — Ilya. Under the harsh arena lights, still in his gear, tape peeling at the edges, hair damp and curling at his temples. He looked like he'd come straight off the ice and straight into a fight he hadn't planned on having.

His voice was steady. "*My partner was on a plane that could have killed his entire team.*"

"There was an incident. People could have died."

“He didn’t, because he chose to help someone else first.”

The clip jumped — the way viral clips do — trimmed down to the parts that hit hardest. Looped. Shared. Reposted with tags like *holy shit, listen to him, this changes everything*.

Then the next part rolled through the feeds:

“And somehow that is not the story. Somehow, the story is me going to the hospital. As if that is unusual. As if anyone in this room would not do the same thing for the person they love.”

That line — *the person they love* — hit like a dropped puck in a silent rink.

No music.

No commentary.

Just the truth landing exactly where it needed to.

And then came the part that stuck. The part no one could spin.

“I do not think about fairness. I think about how quickly all of you decided something else was more interesting.”

That spread. Faster than the statement or the tribute. Faster than the league could even begin to react.

Because it didn’t sound like PR, or messaging, or something crafted in a boardroom of media-trained people. It sounded like someone finally saying the quiet part out loud.

And truth — real truth — doesn’t trend.

It detonates.

They didn’t drop all at once. They came like aftershocks — one voice, then another, then another — each one steadying the ground a little more. And it wasn’t just about Shane anymore - they talked about Ilya too.

Because you couldn’t separate them after what happened. And certainly not after what everyone had seen.

Connor McDavid:

What happened this week should never have become a story about anything other than a team surviving a serious incident.

*Shane Hollander was in that incident. He was hurt.
He helped a teammate.*

*And Ilya Rozanov was there too. He saw it. He lived it.
He reacted like anyone would if someone they cared about was in danger.*

Somehow the focus shifted away from all of that.

That's the part worth questioning.

Sidney Crosby:

Let's be clear about what actually happened here.

A player was injured in a serious incident.

He helped a teammate.

And the fallout is because he's in a relationship with a man. Another hockey player, specifically.

Ilya Rozanov went to the hospital because he was scared for someone he loves. That shouldn't be controversial.

There is no version of this where Shane Hollander did anything wrong.

There is no version of this where Ilya Rozanov did anything wrong.

There is no version of this where support should be conditional.

Hockey is built on trust. They didn't fail that.

We shouldn't either.

Scott Hunter:

I've played against Shane Hollander for a long time.

You don't mistake what kind of player he is.

He was in a serious incident. He was hurt.

And from everything that's come out, he still put a teammate first.

Ilya Rozanov reacted like anyone would if someone they care about was in danger.

That shouldn't be twisted into anything else.

That should be the story.

The fact that it isn't says everything about how this has been handled.

If this league is serious about what it claims to stand for, then this shouldn't even be a question.

Wyatt Hayes, Troy Barrett, Zane Boodram:

We're proud to welcome Shane Hollander to Ottawa. Not just because of what he's accomplished, but because of who he is.

Shane was in that incident. He was hurt. And even then, he chose to put a teammate's life ahead of his own safety.

Ilya Rozanov spoke up because he cares about him. That shouldn't be used against either of them. That matters. That's what this game is built on.

We stand by our captain and friend, and we're looking forward to standing beside his partner as well.

Brad Marchand

If the issue here is that he's gay, just say that. At least be honest.

Don't dress it up like it's about hockey. Don't pretend it's about anything Rozanov did either.

Nathan MacKinnon

Shane Hollander, along with his team, was in a serious incident. He was hurt.

And instead of that being the story, it became something else. Something about his relationship with Ilya Rozanov.

That's the problem.

Carey Price

Leadership isn't just what you do on the ice. It's how you show up when things go wrong.

Hollander did that. Rozanov did too.

That should be enough.

Cliff Marleau

Respect shouldn't change depending on the situation.

It shouldn't change depending on who someone is.

It definitely shouldn't change because of who someone loves.

Good luck in Ottawa, Hollander. And good luck to everyone in the Eastern Conference having to face Hollander and Rozanov on the same team.

By the time the last statement landed, the narrative wasn't just slipping — it was gone. Not bent out of shape, not strained at the seams, but cleanly, unmistakably broken. Whatever

version of events the team had tried to package — the tidy trade, the polite transition, the storyline they thought they could massage into place — it couldn't hold anymore. Not against this. Not against the truth spoken plainly, publicly, repeatedly.

This wasn't a roster move.
It wasn't a PR cycle.
It was a line.

And people were choosing which side of it they stood on.

Colin Mercer's phone wouldn't stop buzzing.

At first it had been background noise — notifications, mentions, the steady churn of attention he'd learned to ignore years ago. But this was different.

Intentional.

Requests.
Interviews.
Statements.

Players offering access.
Offering quotes.
Offering themselves.

It came in waves, stacking faster than he could clear them, names piling over one another in a way that should have felt... off.

It almost did.

For a split second, something in his chest tightened. Not fear—he didn't do fear—but recognition. The faintest flicker of something not quite lining up. Too many. Too fast. Too willing.

His thumb hovered over the screen.

Paused.

Then—

he pushed it away.

Because this was what he'd wanted.

Attention. Access. *Control.*

He stared at the names again, something sharper settling into place behind his eyes as the hesitation burned off into something cleaner. Harder.

This was still his story. Still his platform. Still his control. They were, after all, just hockey players. They weren't smarter than he was.

He opened a new document, the blank page lighting up as another wave of notifications rolled in.

Crosby — available.

Marchand — ready today.

MacKinnon — confirmed.

They were coming to him.

Of course they were.

Where else would they go?

Mercer leaned back slowly, exhaling through his nose as a thin, crooked smile pulled at his mouth. There it was. The correction. The shift back toward where this belonged.

With him.

“Alright,” he muttered, voice low, almost pleased, fingers hovering over the keyboard. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

He didn't question it again. Didn't look too closely at the pattern, question why it felt coordinated – like a trap was closing in around him. He didn't need to, he knew how this worked. He knew how to control the outcome. He always had.

Chapter End Notes

We've officially crossed the point where this isn't just about a trade, or an article, or even a scandal. This is about control—of the narrative, of the story, of who gets to define what actually happened.

And it's not Mercer. Just think - he still hasn't faced Catherine, Yuna and Harris. He really should be more afraid.

Shane and Ilya aren't alone in this. Not even a little. And that really matters to me.

Next we get to watch Mercer walk directly into what he thinks is an opportunity and is very much not. (I'm so excited for you to see that unfold.) There will be violence. Of what kind I won't promise.

Also, more hockey. Shane gets welcomed to the team in the best way, even if he can't play yet.

As always—comments, screams, kudos, and emotional damage welcome 

Until next time!

Chapter 16: Stand In the Way

Chapter Summary

Rozanov and Crosby go head-to-head in a game that feels bigger than hockey, even while still being very much about hockey. Ilya plays controlled, precise, and just a little bit relentless, ultimately putting Ottawa ahead and sealing the game with a block that says everything the statement did — without needing words.

From there, we shift into something quieter, but no less important. Crosby and Hayes meet Mercer at a 24-hour diner, keeping it public, keeping it clean. The goal isn't intimidation, it's accountability.

Mercer, predictably, doesn't take it well.

Chapter Notes

Hi friends, loons, both new and old!

First—thank you. Seriously. The support on this story has been wild in the best way, and I appreciate every comment, every message, every unhinged reaction, and every defence. It means everything, and also means we get to stay on this adventure together. I hope you have as much fun reading this one as I did writing it, because I had SO MUCH FUN.

This chapter is doing a couple of things at once (because apparently I don't believe in taking it easy ever): we've got the group response, we've got a full game that matters on and off the ice, and then we pivot into something a lot quieter but just as sharp.

Also yes, I absolutely wrote a whole hockey game because I wanted Rozanov vs Crosby on record and no one can stop me. Cue manical laughter.

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

The Ottawa Centaurs media room felt different as Shane settled onto a soft, overstuffed couch. It was neutral, sure, but felt welcoming, warm, and cozy. That was probably a credit to the man sitting across from him, flipping through a stack of cue cards, looking thoroughly unimpressed.

“These are terrible,” he said.

A producer off to the side made a small noise. “They’re standard.”

“They’re boring,” Harris corrected, dropping them onto the table. Then, glancing up at Shane: “Do you want boring?”

Shane huffed a quiet laugh. “I think I’m plenty boring. You don’t have to be.”

“Good,” Harris said. “Then we’re not doing that.”

There was a brief pause where Shane looked at him—really looked—like he was trying to figure out if this was real.

“...Okay.”

Harris leaned back in his chair, one ankle crossed over his knee like this was happening in someone’s living room instead of under lights.

“Let’s play a version of twenty questions,” he said.

Shane raised an eyebrow. “Twenty questions?”

“Why not? Everyone knows Shane Hollander, hockey star. Lets get to know Shane Hollander, guy from Ottawa”

“That doesn’t seem more interesting to me.”

“It should.”

That made Shane laugh. The room loosened—just a fraction, but enough that you could feel the atmosphere settle.

“Alright,” Harris said. “First one. You ready?”

“Sure.”

“What’s the first thing you noticed walking into the locker room?”

Shane didn’t hesitate. “It’s louder.”

Harris nodded. “That’s because half the team doesn’t know how to shut up.”

“Yeah, I figured that out pretty quickly.”

“Second—who talks the most.”

Shane glanced toward the door. “Feels like a trap.”

“It is.”

Another laugh, this one more open. “...Hayes.”

“Correct.”

“Wow.”

“No follow-up required.”

That got a real smile out of him that stayed.

The questions kept coming, quick and easy. Favourite road city. (Used to be Ottawa. Now it's Tampa. No explanation as to why, other than a slight smirk. Worst chirp he'd heard (He refused to repeat it.) Best one he'd delivered (a grin as he fondly remembers calling Hunter a dinosaur.) Music before games. (He doesn't really listen to music.)

At some point, Shane stopped bracing for the next question and just answered. It didn't feel like an interview, more like getting to know a new friend.

Harris let that happen, of course.

Then, without making a big thing of it, he shifted.

“What's something you're looking forward to here,” he asked, tone quieter, “that has nothing to do with hockey.”

Shane stilled. Not dramatically, but enough to be noticed.

“...Quiet,” he said after a moment.

No joke this time.

“Just... quiet.”

Harris nodded once. “Fair.”

Shane exhaled slowly, something in his shoulders easing.

“And,” he added, a little lighter, tilting the corner of his mouth up, “maybe not having to explain myself every five minutes.”

“That seems easy enough. You're good at hockey, what else is there to explain?”

Shane raised his eyebrow. “Well, how I'm going to beat the captain in points this season of course.”

“Rozanov might disagree on that one!”

Laughter rippled around the room again.

There was a beat. The kind that wouldn't make the final cut, but mattered anyway as Harris winked at Shane before clapping his hands once and shifting the room back.

“Alright,” he said. “Last one.”

Shane straightened slightly. “Okay.”

Harris tilted his head. “Ready to be a problem for the rest of the Eastern Conference?”

That got him.

A real laugh—sharp, surprised, a little breathless.

“...Yeah,” Shane said. “Yeah. I think I am.”

“Welcome to the Centaurs, Hollander. We’re thrilled to have you!”

The next morning, every paper ran the same full-page ad. A photo set against a bright, paint-splattered backdrop—colour everywhere, chaotic and intentional all at once. Ten players stood shoulder to shoulder. Some serious, some mid-laugh with paint streaked across their gloves, all of them marked in it—across cheekbones, temples, jawlines. And every one of them wore a rainbow-striped jersey.

Half wearing the number 24 and the other half 81.

Crosby stood near the center, expression steady—unreadable in the way that always meant something mattered. MacKinnon beside him, jaw tight. McDavid quieter, but no less present. Price calm. Marleau composed.

Hunter—arms crossed, like he’d been waiting for this.

Hayes was grinning. Barrett wasn’t even pretending not to laugh.

Marchand had one eyebrow raised like he dared someone to say something about it, a streak of pink dragged sharp under his left eye.

It hit socials next. Then broadcast. Then every major sports site within minutes.

It took less than thirty seconds for the image to be everywhere.

And with it came an open letter, signed by every last one of them.

Shane and Ilya,

We’re not going to pretend the past couple of weeks have been normal. Between the plane and the fact that you were forced out, we can’t even imagine what it’s been like for you.

But we can show up.

When the chips were down, you showed us the men you are, and we are proud to share the ice with players and people of your calibre.

Hockey is built on trust.

On showing up for the person beside you.

On knowing that when things go wrong, you don't face it alone.

That doesn't change based on who someone is, and it shouldn't change based on who someone loves.

It also doesn't change when it becomes inconvenient.

Everyone belongs in this game.

Shane — we're glad you're still here. We're excited to see you back on the ice when you're recovered, and we're looking forward to watching you humble us all again.

Ilya — we heard you. We agree with you. And you're not standing on that line alone.

Love is love.

And lastly, to all our friends in the rest of the Eastern Conference—

Good luck.

— Crosby, Hunter, Hayes, Barrett, Boodram, Marchand, MacKinnon, Marleau, Price, McDavid

The arena was loud before the puck even dropped.

That part was expected. A 50/50 draw organized by Ilya to raise money for the pilot and his family had packed the building early. He and Shane had already quietly covered the medical expenses that insurance wouldn't touch — but Ilya had wanted to do more. So the building filled, and the energy built with it.

But it wasn't just noise. It was anticipation — the kind that sat under your skin. The kind that hummed through the boards, through the glass, through the players themselves as they took their warmup laps.

Ottawa vs Pittsburgh. Rozanov vs Crosby. A matchup people never got tired of watching.

The cameras lingered a little longer when Ilya stepped onto the ice, tracking him through his first lap, waiting for something — anything — he might give them. He didn't. Across the ice, Crosby watched him anyway. Not for show. Just... taking measure. Reading the edges of him. Figuring out what kind of night this was going to be.

"Welcome back, everyone," the play-by-play voice cut in, smooth and steady as the teams lined up. "If you're just joining us, this building has had a buzz since the doors opened, and it hasn't let up."

"And it's not just about the hockey tonight," the colour commentator added, a little rougher, a little more candid. "There's been a lot around this game in the last twenty-four hours. That statement from players across the league — this room, this ice, it feels different."

“It does,” the play-by-play agreed. “But once the puck drops—”

“—it’s still Crosby and Rozanov,” the colour cut in. “And that’s appointment viewing every time.”

At center ice, they leaned in, two captains with two entirely different styles of control, both locked in. The linesman dropped the puck.

Ottawa came out fast. Not just quick — intentional. Heavy on the forecheck, closing gaps early, forcing Pittsburgh into rushed decisions before they could settle. Clean exits through the neutral zone, short support passes, bodies moving in sync.

Barrett nearly buried one three minutes in, catching a pass in stride and snapping it low blocker. The puck rang hard off the post with a sharp ping that echoed through the arena, dragging a collective groan out of the crowd.

“Oh, off the iron!” the play-by-play snapped, energy lifting. “Barrett beats the goaltender clean — just not the post.”

“And that’s exactly what Ottawa wants,” the colour added. “They’re not easing into this. They’re coming downhill, making Pittsburgh defend early, and you can feel the bench feeding off it.”

Ilya’s first shift wasn’t flashy. It didn’t need to be. He played controlled and precise, the kind of hockey that didn’t stand out unless you knew exactly what you were watching. He cut inside a defender like the lane had always been his, pulled coverage with him, then dropped the puck blind to Boodram in the slot.

Shot — just high.

Rebound kicked out.

Ilya was already there, and he easily buried it.

“And there it is—Rozanov opens the scoring for Ottawa,” the play-by-play called.

“And look at that,” the colour said, quieter now. “No celebration. Straight to reset. That’s a player who’s locked in.”

A beat, then, almost thoughtful:

“And maybe a player who knows he’s not out there alone tonight.”

Midway through the first, Crosby answered. A turnover at the blue line flipped the play instantly the other way.

“Oh, that’s dangerous—”

One touch to the wing. Crosby cutting through the middle, pulling both defenders before slipping the puck across the crease.

Tap-in. Goal.

“And Pittsburgh answers right back,” the play-by-play said, settling the moment. “1–1.”

“Vintage Crosby,” the colour added. “He doesn’t rush it. He draws coverage, waits for the lane, and then it’s over. You give him that space, he’ll make you pay every time.”

The arena dipped, just slightly.

At the next faceoff, Ilya leaned in, voice low. “You don’t get tired, Mr. Canada?”

Crosby huffed a quiet laugh, something bright flickering behind his eyes. “Not yet.”

The second tilted Ottawa’s way, the game tightening and getting heavier, more direct. Hits finished. Battles stretched longer along the boards. Every inch of ice earned.

“Game’s changed here,” the colour noted. “There’s a little more bite to it now.”

“And Ottawa seems comfortable in that,” the play-by-play added. “They’re winning those small-area battles, extending possession.”

Hayes came up big in net — pad save, sliding post to post, robbing a clean look from the slot.

“Oh, what a stop!”

“That’s a bench-lifter right there,” the colour said. “That’s how you hold momentum.”

The Centaurs fed off it. Passes connected clean through the neutral zone. Speed built. Pressure mounted.

And Ilya — well, he was everywhere.

“Rozanov again—he’s been involved in everything tonight—”

Then he picked up the puck deep in his own zone.

One stride. Two.

“And here he goes—”

Acceleration hit like a switch flipping. He blew past the first forechecker, slipped the second, and hit center ice with space opening in front of him.

“Crosby trying to match—”

Too late.

Ilya split the defence clean, the crowd rising before the play even fully formed.

“Rozanov in alone—”

Short side.

Goal.

“And Ottawa takes the lead!” the play-by-play called, voice lifting with the moment.

“And listen to this building,” the colour said, almost laughing now. “That’s not just a goal — that’s a response.”

A beat.

“And if hockey’s about showing up for the person beside you—well... that’s exactly what that looked like.”

By the third, the game had sharpened into something tight and relentless. Crosby lined up across from him again.

Ilya smirked now, easier and more comfortable. “You’re getting old, captain.”

Crosby laughed, caught off guard. “Careful, kid. I can still keep up.”

“Maybe for one period.”

A beat. Crosby’s eyes narrowed, but the smile lingered. “Let’s test that.”

They absolutely did.

The third was fast, disciplined, unforgiving. Every pass contested, every lane closed, every mistake dangerous.

“No room out there right now,” the play-by-play said. “Every inch contested.”

“Yeah, this is trade deadline hockey,” the colour replied. “No one’s giving anything away, and everyone is trying to prove their value.”

Hayes came up big again—pad save, rebound, kicking loose.

Right to Crosby.

“Oh, Crosby — he’s got a chance to tie it up here—”

Pittsburgh pulled their goalie. The extra attacker surged in, pressure collapsing toward the net.

“Six on five — this is the push—”

Crosby stepped into it. Clean look. Clean release. And for a second, it looked like overtime.

Then Ilya stepped straight into it, the puck ricocheting off his shin and spinning out of the zone.

“Blocked!”

“Cleared down the ice—five seconds—”

The horn sounded, and the building exploded.

“And Ottawa holds on,” the play-by-play called over the noise.

“And fitting,” the colour added, voice quieter now, almost reflective. “You talk about trust. About not facing things alone.”

A small pause.

“That’s what that looked like.”

At center ice, the lines formed for handshakes. Crosby met Ilya’s eyes as they reached each other.

“You alright?”

Ilya shrugged. “It’s a bruise. I’ve had worse.”

A beat.

Then, quieter: “Thank you.”

Crosby glanced back. “For what.”

“You know.”

A pause. Crosby’s expression softened, just slightly. “Didn’t do anything,” he said.

“Yes, you did.”

Another beat.

Then Crosby smirked. “You still chirp too much.”

Ilya’s mouth twitched. “You’re getting slow.”

Crosby laughed again. “See you next time.”

“Yeah,” Ilya said. “You will.”

The air outside the arena hit different. It was colder and quieter, and had a heaviness to it. The noise stayed inside, sealed behind concrete and glass, but the energy didn’t—not completely. It followed them out into the night, low and steady, like something that hadn’t decided to settle yet.

Wyatt was already there, leaning against the barrier, jacket open despite the cold, phone loose in his hand. He looked up when the doors pushed open behind him.

Crosby stepped out a second later, bag slung over his shoulder, that post-game focus still sitting just under the surface. Not wound tight anymore, but not gone either. He glanced around, spotted Wyatt, and walked over.

“Good game,” Wyatt said.

Sid nodded once. “You too. You’re getting better every season. Thought I had that look at the end.”

Wyatt shrugged with a smile and a laugh. “You usually do.”

“Yeah,” Sid said. “Usually. Fucking Rozy.”

They both laughed at that.

“You good to go?” Wyatt asked.

“Yeah. I’m almost looking forward to this.”

They didn’t move right away. Wyatt rolled his shoulders, resetting, like he was stepping into something else now. Something off-ice, but not really separate.

“You sure you want to be the one to do it?” he asked, glancing at Sid’s face. “Catherine said she could pay a service to get it done.”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

“Alright.” Wyatt watched him for a second. No hesitation. Not even a hint. “We do this clean,” he said.

“We will.”

“And if he—”

“He will,” Sid said, calm, certain.

Wyatt huffed under his breath. “Yeah. Fair.”

“That’s kind of the point, isn’t it?”

Wyatt nodded once. “Yeah.”

They started walking, boots echoing lightly across the mostly empty lot. Engines faded in the distance, the last of the crowd filtering out into the night.

“You see the statement?” Wyatt asked.

“Yeah.”

“Timing worked.”

“It did.”

“And the photo?”

Crosby glanced sideways. “Marchand really does know people,” he said wryly. “It was almost therapeutic to throw paint at his face.”

“Obviously.”

A small shake of his head. “Rozy thanked me. I hope he and Shane are hanging in there.”

“Rozy is almost laser-focused, but Shane was at the arena today to get his new gear and seems to be healing up. Harris cornered him for the introduction video for the socials today. Troy said he did 20 questions with him.”

“Of course he did. Your social media manager is a force of nature.”

Silence again—but not empty. Focused. Intentional.

Wyatt slowed at his truck, keys already in hand. “This doesn’t fix everything.”

“No.”

“But it helps, right?”

“Yeah. At least that’s the hope.”

Another beat.

“You saw what’s coming out of that fucking organization.” Wyatt said.

“I saw enough. Pittsburgh is shopping for a goalie – I put Fornier’s name in the GM’s ear. Maybe we can get him out of there. I wish there was a place for Pike to go, but with him out for the season, we have to wait for the offseason moves and see what happens. I don’t think he’ll be safe there though.”

“Yeah. Maybe we can get him here.”

Sid nodded. “Maybe.”

They got into the truck and headed out to Sunshine Diner. Wyatt glanced over. “You want me to start it, or you going straight in?”

Sid leaned back slightly, eyes forward. “I’ll start it. And I’ll finish it.”

Wyatt let out a quiet breath. “Alright. I’m there if you need muscle.”

Sid nodded. “I know. Let’s go.”

Sunshine Diner was exactly what it was advertised to be. Fluorescent lights hummed overhead, casting everything in that flat, late-night glow that made time feel suspended. The booths were worn but clean, the coffee endless, the kind of place where no one asked questions as long as you kept your voice down and your bill paid.

A handful of people were scattered through the space — truckers, students, a couple sitting too close and not speaking. A server moved behind the counter with practiced efficiency, refilling mugs without looking. It smelled of stale coffee and greasy eggs. It was perfect.

Public enough to matter.

Neutral enough to ease suspicion.

Wyatt was already seated when Mercer walked in, one arm slung along the back of the booth, posture loose, like he owned the place. His coffee sat untouched in front of him.

Like this was normal.

Mercer hesitated just inside the door — just long enough to clock the room, the exits, the people —before spotting Wyatt and crossing toward him.

He slid into the booth across from him. “Didn’t think you’d agree to this.”

Wyatt shrugged. “Figured you wanted to hear what I had to say.”

“I do.”

“Good.”

A voice came from behind him.

“How about what I have to say?”

Mercer turned.

Sid stood there, calm, composed, an envelope in his hand. He seemed oblivious to the murmurs around the room that his presence caused.

“What is this?” Mercer asked.

Crosby stepped forward, stopping at the edge of the table.

“Colin Mercer?”

“... Yeah?”

Crosby held out the envelope, a smile flickering at the corner of his mouth. “You’ve been served.”

Simple. Clean. Final.

Mercer stared at it, then at Crosby, then back again. “This is a joke.”

“No,” Crosby said pleasantly. “It isn’t.”

“You think this scares me?”

“No,” Wyatt said, quieter now, sharper for it. “But we do think you’ve gone far enough.”

That did it. Mercer moved fast — too fast to be controlled, too angry to think. He surged up from the booth and swung.

The crack of it cut through the diner, sharp and sudden, snapping Sid’s head just enough to the side to mark the impact. For half a second, everything stopped. Conversations dropped. Movement stalled. The whole room held its breath.

Crosby’s body reacted before his mind did. His weight shifted forward, shoulders tightening, hand coming up — not just to his jaw, but halfway out, like it might turn into something else. Like he might answer it.

The instinct was there. Immediate.

Then gone.

He exhaled slowly through his nose and let it pass. His hand dropped back to his side instead of following through, jaw setting — not from the hit, but from the restraint it took not to retaliate.

Mercer barely had time to process what was happening, though, because Wyatt was already moving. His chair hadn’t even finished scraping back before he crossed the space, catching Mercer hard through the middle and driving him backward into the booth. Arms locked, controlled, immovable.

“Hey—HEY—”

“Get off me—”

“Sit down,” Wyatt said calmly, not loud, but cold enough to cut through everything else.

Mercer fought anyway, twisting against him, anger still burning hotter than sense. “You don’t get to—”

“Yes,” Wyatt said, rising now, measured, deliberate. “I do. And he does. Sit. Down.”

Crosby straightened, fingers brushing once along his jaw, testing. No blood. Just the start of a bruise forming under the skin. His expression hadn’t changed.

Across the diner, the impact rippled outwards.

“Did he just—”

“Oh my God—”

“Is that—?”

A chair scraped back hard. Someone was already reaching for their phone.

“Yeah, I’m calling — someone just hit Sidney Crosby — no, I’m serious—”

The words carried.

So did the reality of them.

Mercer suddenly stilled — not because he wanted to, but because it finally caught up to him. The room. The witnesses. The fact that this wasn’t something he could talk his way out of. *Fuck.*

“You don’t get to decide this,” he said, breath rough now, the edge slipping.

Crosby stepped forward, steady, unshaken and far too calm for the moment. “I didn’t. I’m just the messenger. And it is my pleasure to deliver this message – come for one of us, and you come for all of us. I look forward to seeing you in court.”

Wyatt tightened his grip just enough to keep Mercer exactly where he was. Sidney sat down and didn’t move. Just watched, calm and certain, like this had always been how it was going to end.

Outside, somewhere down the street, a siren cut through the night. The sound carried through the glass, filling the space that Mercer’s anger had just vacated.

And this time there was nowhere left for it to go.

Chapter End Notes

Okay but LISTEN.

That’s consequence, baby. We’re not letting this sit in a vacuum; this has weight, and Mercer is officially out of room to maneuver.

The statement → the game → the block → the diner → the sirens was very intentional. This whole chapter is about what it means to show up when it matters—and what happens when you don’t.

Next up, we're dealing with fallout (legal, media, locker room, all of it), so buckle up. We're also getting a little bit of time with just our boys, because the support has been something that means everything for them. Plus, I miss the sarcastic Russian menace.

And as always, thank you for reading, screaming, and enabling this absolute chaos of a story. Know I read every single comment, and every social media message. Thanks for sticking with me!

Chapter 17: Morning After Group Chat (Bonus Chapter!)

Chapter Summary

This is just a special thank you, fun bonus for all of you.

The group chat reacting to the news of Mercer being arrested.

Chapter Notes

With all the discourse, the mean comments (not from you guys, seriously 99.9% of you are spectacular) and just general discomfort for the fic writers in the HR community right now, I wanted to do something special for you, the readers who are here for the love and the stories. So this chat was born.

I hope you have as much fun reading it as I did writing it!

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

Group Chat

Hunter:

Morning. Anything you want to tell us, Sid? Hazy?

Hayes:

define morning

Barrett:

it's 8:32 am???

Marchand:

good morning to everyone except mercer

MacKinnon:

been up since 6

Barrett:

of course you have. some of us played a game last night you know.

Price:

Morning.

McDavid:

Morning.

Marleau:

Morning, gentlemen.

Hunter:

You all see it?

Hayes:

you could say that

Barrett:

yep

Marchand:

oh i SAW it

Marchand:

hard to miss “man assaults sidney crosby in diner” at 8am

McDavid:

Yeah I saw. You okay, Sid?

Crosby:

Good morning. I’m fine.

Marchand:

blink twice if you need me to fight him

Crosby:

Please don’t.

Marchand:

coward

MacKinnon:

you’re not helping

Marchand:

i’m always helping

Hayes:

he’s fine guys

Barrett:

you were there Hazy??

Hayes:

yeah, of course I was.

Marchand:
EXCUSE ME???

Marchand:
you were THERE and you didn't text???

Hayes:
was a little busy

Marchand:
rude

Hunter:
What happened?

Hayes:
Sid served him with the new court papers from Catherine. it was glorious.

Hayes:
until the moron swung at him anyway

Barrett:
...at sidney crosby

Hayes:
yep

Marchand:
imagine that being your life choice

Marchand:
“yeah i punched sidney crosby in a diner”

McDavid:
Hayes.

Hayes:
yeah

McDavid:
Did he connect?

Hayes:
yeah, but he's a little bitch and it barely even turned Sid's head

Barrett:
oh my god

MacKinnon:
you're serious?

Hayes:

yep

Marchand:

i'm fighting him

Crosby:

No, you're not Brad.

Marchand:

you got punched and didn't hit him back???

Marchand:

sidney.

Marchand:

SIDNEY.

Crosby:

Brad.

Crosby:

Stop.

Marchand:

no

Price:

You made the right call. We can't have you also getting arrested.

Marleau:

Agreed.

Hunter:

Yeah.

MacKinnon:

still though

Barrett:

yeah i would've at least thought about it

Crosby:

I did.

Marchand:

OH???

Marchand:

HE THOUGHT ABOUT IT???

Marchand:

this is huge

Hayes:

he almost did actually

Marchand:

HE ALMOST DID???

Marchand:

i need a minute

McDavid:

...you almost did?

Crosby:

I thought about it briefly.

Marchand:

i'm framing that

MacKinnon:

i'd pay to see that, actually.

Crosby:

You're all very funny.

Barrett:

no seriously you good?

Crosby:

I'm fine.

Hunter:

Good.

Crosby:

Can we be done with this now?

Marchand:

no we're not

MacKinnon:

he's right

Crosby:

We're not escalating this. It's not about me, remember.

Marchand:

i'm not escalating

Marchand:
i'm enhancing

Crosby:
Brad.

Marchand:
i'm doing it

Hayes:
don't, come on Marchy they have enough going on

MacKinnon:
brad don't

Crosby:
Brad—

Marchand added Ilya Rozanov

Marchand added Shane Hollander

Marchand renamed the chat Hollandov Bodyguards

Marchand:
WELCOME

Barrett:
oh my god

MacKinnon:
brad

Hayes:
you did not you rat faced fucker

Crosby:
Brad.

Marchand:
i absolutely did

Rozanov:
what is this

Hollander:
Why am I here

Marchand:
because i care about your personal growth?

Hollander:
That's bullshit

Marchand:
it is a little

Barrett:
i'm crying

MacKinnon:
this was a mistake

Marchand:
wrong

Rozanov:
Marchy what chaos are you making now?

Marchand:
please tell me you saw the news

Hollander:
I was having a quiet morning

Marchand:
no you weren't. you're with Rozy right now.

Rozanov:
he was definitely not having a quiet morning

Hollander:
unbelievable

Crosby:
Hi guys. This isn't what this chat is for.

Barrett:
what IS this chat for again?

MacKinnon:
not this

Marchand:
it is now

Crosby:
Everyone.

Crosby:

Stop.

Marchand:

no

Hayes:

this is off the rails. hey Holzy. hey Roz.

Marchand:

FOCUS

Marchand:

ask your questions. i know you fuckers saw the news.

Hollander:

Yes we did, actually. What happened, Sid?

Marchand:

thank you

Rozanov:

yes

Hayes:

we served him court papers

Hayes:

he swung

Hollander:

WHAT

Barrett:

yep

Marchand:

like an idiot

Rozanov:

and you did not end him, Hazy?

Hayes:

considered it

MacKinnon:

you always do

Hayes:

correct

Hollander:

Sid, you good? I don't want you getting hurt because of our shit.

Barrett:

god you are so Canadian

Crosby:

I'm fine, Shane.

Rozanov:

he says this like nothing happened

Marchand:

RIGHT???

Crosby:

I'm still here, guys.

Marchand:

barely

Crosby:

Brad.

Rozanov:

did you hit him back, Crosby?

Marchand:

Rozy with the important question!

Crosby:

No.

Marchand:

unacceptable

Hayes:

he almost did

Marchand:

stop saying that. i'm jealous.

Barrett:

i would pay money

MacKinnon:

same

Hollander:

I'm glad you didn't.

Rozanov:

i am not

Hollander:

of course you aren't

Rozanov:

i would have

Hayes:

we know

Marchand:

we ALL know (i would have helped)

Barrett:

violence is your love language

Rozanov:

only when appropriate. Or my boyfriend asks nicely.

Hollander:

ILYA

MacKinnon:

that's worse

Hollander:

Sorry guys. Thank you for everything, though.

Crosby:

You don't need to thank us.

Hayes:

yeah you'd do the same

Marchand:

if any one of us could land someone of hollander's level

Marchand:

no offense Hunter. Kip's cute too.

Barrett:
obviously

MacKinnon:
yeah

Hunter:
Fuck off Marchy.
No thanks needed Hollander, Rozanov.

McDavid:
We've got you.

Price:
Always.

Marleau:
Every time.

Rozanov:
we saw the photo and the letter. Was very sweet.

Hollander:
We were going to text you guys. It's been insane the past little bit.

Marchand:
you liked it? cuz it was my idea

Hollander:
I'd be surprised...but yes, it meant a lot

Rozanov:
more than you think

Hunter:
We meant it.

McDavid:
Every word.

Price:
Always.

Marleau:
No question.

Marchand:
what they said, mushy bastards. so how are we avenging Sid?

Crosby:

We're not doing this.

Marchand:

we are absolutely doing this

Barrett:

he's right

MacKinnon:

unfortunately I agree with Brad here

Hollander:

You're all ridiculous. How can we help.

Marchand:

and yet

Marchand:

we're your fan club. Sid is a good bodyguard.

Rozanov:

unfortunate but true.

Barrett:

okay, enough of that. you guys psyched to play together?? the whole team is excited to have you, Hollander

MacKinnon:

yeah, you guys are gonna be deadly. Kinda glad I'm not in the east, not gonna lie

Hayes:

finally gonna have scoring support. Barrett needs the help.

Barrett:

fuck you Hazy. But also, yeah that's fair

McDavid:

It'll be fun to watch

Price:

Looking forward to it. At least until I have to face you assholes.

Marleau:

About time it happened too.

Marchand:

this is going to be so annoying for everyone else

Hollander:

We're going to have fun I think

Rozanov:

we already are, Shane

Hollander:

ILYA. Behave.

Rozanov:

no

Marchand:

also next time someone punches sid i'm fighting them. no more field trips without me.

Hayes:

get in line, ratboy

MacKinnon:

no one's punching him again

Marchand:

good

Hollander:

I'm slightly afraid of your level of insanity, Brad. Explain how you and Nate and Sid all come from Nova Scotia, but you're batshit crazy and they're...not?

Marchand:

you should be

Rozanov:

i am not

Marchand:

you should be especially afraid of me, Rozy. i'll steal your boy.

Rozanov:

no

Hollander:

no

Barrett:

this is incredible

Hayes:

this chat was a mistake before coffee

Crosby:

Yes.

Marchand:

wow

Marchand:

look at that

Marchand:

agreement

Crosby:

I'm glad we could all come together on something productive. Assholes.

Barrett:

...did sid just make a joke

MacKinnon:

i don't like it

Marchand:

I LOVE IT

Hayes:

i am here for this

Hollander:

i'm concerned

Rozanov:

he is evolving

Marchand:

this is my influence

Crosby:

It isn't.

Marchand:

it is

Crosby:

I regret everything.

Back to our regularly scheduled programming after this.

BUT

I needed you to know how much I value every single one of you. I read every comment. I try to interact as much as I can on the socials. I giggle at the bookmark notes. You have my permission to share the link for this story (and any of my others) and tag me when you do (if you're being kind - seriously don't need negative shit messing with my mojo). I never expected this story to be popular in any way, and I'm so grateful, even through the struggles.

Those will pass. The cottage is forever a happy place full of love and hope. Thanks for staying in it with me.

-SD

Chapter 18: Terms and Conditions

Chapter Summary

This chapter is a study in contrast.

In private, Shane and Ilya finally get something that was never supposed to be theirs — space, safety, and the freedom to exist without hiding. It's quiet, it's soft, and it's real in a way neither of them is entirely used to yet.

In public though? Everything moves.

Mercer is arrested. Charges are filed. Lines are drawn.

And Yuna walks into a boardroom and reminds an entire organization that actions have consequences.

Chapter Notes

Hi friends 🧡

First of all — thank you. The response to the last chapter absolutely blew me away and I'm still kind of sitting here like ??? how did this become a thing??? I'm glad you all got a kick out of the little bonus.

I hope you have as much fun reading this one as I did writing it, because this chapter was deeply satisfying to put together.

We've got:

soft domestic moments (finally 😭)
a little bit of legal maneuvering
some very controlled chaos
and Yuna being... well. Yuna MF Hollander.

To quote Shane... let's go!

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

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Colin Mercer Arrested and Charged Following Assault Incident

Ottawa, ON — Colin Mercer was taken into custody late last night following an altercation at a local establishment involving multiple witnesses.

Mercer has been formally charged with assault under the Criminal Code of Canada. He was released on conditions pending a scheduled court appearance later this month.

The incident follows the filing of a civil lawsuit naming Mercer, the Montreal Metros organization, and Northline Hockey. The suit alleges defamation, discrimination, and conduct resulting in reputational and professional harm.

Representatives for the plaintiffs declined to comment further at this time. Legal counsel for Mercer and the named organizations have acknowledged receipt of the claim but have not issued formal responses.

Further updates will be provided as they become available.

The house was quiet again by the time the group chat finally slowed.

Not silent, but softer. That peaceful kind of quiet that settled into the walls after too much noise, too many voices, too much adrenaline all at once.

Shane was still settled in bed, propped slightly against the headboard, one arm tucked behind his head. Morning light filtered in through the curtains in pale, steady lines, catching on the edges of a space that still felt... new. Not unfamiliar. Just unfinished. Like it was waiting for them to decide what it would become. The ugly bruises along his ribs were starting to fade, and he was feeling more comfortable physically as well as emotionally. It was a new sense of comfort he hadn't expected to get to.

He looked up when Ilya came in from the kitchen, two mugs in his hands.

"Peace offering?" Shane asked wryly, unable to help the smile that crossed his face.

Ilya handed one over without comment. "You started it."

"I absolutely did not," Shane said, taking a careful sip. "That was Marchand."

"That is fair."

A small smile tugged at Shane's mouth again as he shifted, making space without thinking. Ilya set his mug down on the nightstand and slid back under the covers beside him, the mattress dipping as he settled in close.

The space between them disappeared easily, like it had always known how.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. They didn't need to. Ilya leaned in first — he always did — folding himself carefully along Shane's side, mindful of the healing ribs, one arm resting light but certain across him. Shane adjusted instinctively, fitting into the shape of it,

like this was something his body already understood even if everything else was still catching up.

“Hey,” Shane murmured.

“Hey.”

The word lingered between them, soft and easy.

Shane turned his head, brushing a slow, gentle kiss against Ilya’s mouth. Nothing demanding, just warm, steady contact that lingered a second longer than necessary, like they were both still learning what it felt like to do this without hesitation.

Ilya followed it without thinking, holding there just a fraction longer before pulling back, his forehead coming to rest lightly against Shane’s.

“You’re okay?” Shane asked, quieter now.

Ilya nodded.

Then stopped.

“...Yes,” he said, but it came out uneven, like the word didn’t quite hold everything it needed to.

Shane didn’t push. He just stayed there, close and steady, his hand coming up to rest at the side of Ilya’s neck, thumb brushing lightly along his jaw.

Ilya exhaled slowly, like he was trying to settle something inside himself that refused to settle on its own.

“I keep thinking,” he said after a moment, voice low, “that I am going to wake up and this will be... different.”

Shane’s brow softened. “Different how?”

“That you will not be here.”

The words didn’t fall so much as settle, quiet but immovable. Shane shifted closer, careful without making a point of it, his hand still warm at Ilya’s neck. “I’m here,” he said softly.

“I know,” Ilya said quickly. “I know that. It is just—”

He broke off, swallowing hard, frustration flickering through the edges of it.

Shane waited.

Ilya’s fingers tightened slightly around Shane’s shoulder.

“I thought I lost you,” he said finally, voice rougher now, stripped of the control he usually kept so carefully in place. “On that plane, I—”

His breath caught, just once, and he stopped again.

Shane's thumb brushed gently along his jaw. "Hey."

Ilya shook his head, a small, irritated motion. "I do not like this part."

"What part?"

"This," he said quietly. "The part where I am—"

He didn't finish it.

Shane's mouth softened. "Human?"

Ilya let out something that might have been a laugh. "Unfortunately."

"Yeah," Shane said gently. "Happens."

Ilya closed his eyes briefly, leaning into the touch like it grounded him.

"I am happy," he said after a moment. "I need you to understand that."

"I do."

"No," Ilya said, opening his eyes again, more insistent now. "I am—"

He stopped, breath catching again, and this time he didn't try to push past it.

"I get to love you," he said, and his voice broke just slightly on the word. "Openly. In my own home. In front of people. In public. I am allowed to love you."

The words hung there, heavier than they should have been and steadier than they had any right to feel.

"I get to come back here," he continued, softer now, "and you are here. Not hidden. Not leaving. Just—here."

Shane didn't answer right away. He just pulled him closer and pressed a soft kiss to his temple, then his cheek, then his mouth — gentle, grounding, unhurried.

"You have it," he said quietly. "You have me. Here. In public. Wherever. I'm yours – and you're mine, and we never have to hide this again."

Ilya exhaled against him, something in his shoulders loosening at last.

"I know," he said. "I am just... catching up."

Shane smiled faintly. "Take your time."

They stayed like that for a while, close and quiet, their breathing settling into the same rhythm. Around them, the house seemed to exhale too, the space softening into something

that felt less like a place Ilya lived and more like something they were beginning to build together.

After a while, Shane shifted slightly, still careful of his ribs, his gaze drifting around the room like he was seeing it differently now.

“...We’re really doing this, huh?”

Ilya followed his line of sight. The room. The house. The future quietly waiting in it. The closet space he had set aside for Shane ages ago. Shane's clothes were folded neatly on the chair in the corner.

“Yes,” he said simply.

Shane let out a quiet breath, something almost like a laugh. “Your house.”

“Our house,” Ilya corrected, without hesitation.

Shane looked at him properly then, something soft and certain settling into place.

“...Yeah,” he said. “Our house. In Ottawa.”

Ilya’s mouth curved faintly. “Ottawa.”

“Same house, same team.”

“You are excited.”

“I am,” Shane admitted. “I don’t have to outplay you anymore, I get to play with you.”

“That was never successful. You outplaying me.”

“Rude. It was usually successful.”

“Accurate. And no.”

Shane smiled again, the expression lingering before something more thoughtful took its place. “Media’s going to be a nightmare.”

“Yes.”

“The lawsuit—”

“Yes.”

They both stilled again, the weight of it settling in, quieter but no less real.

“That part’s not going to be fun,” Shane said.

“No,” Ilya agreed.

“But we’re not doing it alone.”

Ilya looked at him, something steady returning.

“No,” he said. “We are not. Apparently, you have bewitched Sidney Crosby. If he wasn’t so old, I’d feel threatened.”

A laugh burst out of Shane before a pause stretched between them, softer now.

“I am not afraid of that part,” Ilya added. “The lawsuit.”

Shane raised an eyebrow slightly. “No?”

“I am very good at holding lines,” Ilya said. “You have noticed.”

Shane huffed another quiet laugh. “Yeah. I’ve noticed.”

Ilya’s expression softened again. “I am more concerned about you.”

“Me?”

“Yes. This will follow you. The questions. The attention.”

Shane shrugged lightly. “Let them ask.”

“And you will not answer?”

“I’ll answer what I want to,” Shane said. “And I won’t answer what I don’t.”

Ilya studied him for a moment, something like relief passing quietly through.

“Okay.”

Shane nudged him gently with his shoulder. “Hey.”

“Hey.”

“We’ve got a team now,” Shane said. “On the ice and off it.”

Ilya’s mouth curved again, softer this time. “Yes.”

“Which means,” Shane added, “you don’t get to carry everything by yourself anymore.”

Ilya tilted his head slightly. “I did not agree to that.”

“Too bad.”

Ilya leaned in again, slower this time, pressing a careful, lingering kiss to Shane’s mouth.

“Okay,” he said quietly.

Shane smiled against it. “Yeah.”

“Now, you need to heal faster. You are mostly naked in our bed, and I cannot take advantage. It is most distressing.”

Shane hit him with a pillow.

Morning light stretched across polished surfaces in cool, controlled reflections in Catherine’s office, the city beyond the windows sprawling in every direction—distant and immediate all at once.

Sidney Crosby sat across from her desk, one ankle resting over his opposite knee, posture easy in a way that wasn’t easy at all. His hands were loosely clasped, his jaw set just enough to hint at the bruise forming beneath the surface. He looked exactly the way he always did after a game — focused, contained, every edge of him under control.

Of course, this time the game had nothing to do with hockey.

Catherine studied him for a moment before speaking. “I assume you’ve seen the release.”

“Yes.”

“And the coverage?”

“Yes.”

A brief pause settled between them.

“Are you alright?”

Crosby nodded once. “I’m fine.”

She held his gaze a fraction longer, measuring, then let it pass. “Alright,” she said, shifting slightly. “Let’s talk about what happens next.”

He leaned forward just enough to signal his attention, the shift subtle but immediate.

“The charge itself is straightforward,” she continued. “Assault. Multiple witnesses. Public setting. The Crown will proceed regardless of your involvement.”

“Okay.”

“What we need to decide,” she said, “is how you want to engage with it — and whether you intend to support further action on the civil side.”

Crosby was quiet for a moment, considering.

“I’ll cooperate,” he said. “Whatever they need.”

“I expected as much,” she responded.

Another pause, quieter this time. “And beyond that?”

His gaze dropped briefly to the desk before returning to hers. “I’m not interested in making this bigger than it already is,” he said. “But I’m not letting it go.”

Something in Catherine’s expression sharpened then – approval, brief and contained.

“Good,” she said. “Because it’s not something that disappears.”

He let out a quiet breath. “Yeah.”

“This wasn’t isolated,” she continued. “And it’s now tied — whether we like it or not — to everything else already in motion.”

“I know.”

“So we proceed,” she said. “You provide a statement. You support the charge. You make it clear this isn’t acceptable.”

Crosby leaned back slightly, absorbing that. “Okay.”

The pause that followed felt more settled than uncertain.

“I don’t want this turning into a spectacle,” he said after a moment.

“It already is,” Catherine replied evenly. “The difference is whether you control your part in it.”

He considered that, then nodded once. “Then I control it.”

Catherine slid a document across the desk toward him. “I’ll need a formal statement,” she said. “Factual. Direct. Lucky for me, that is something you excel at.”

A faint flicker passed through his expression — something close to wry, maybe a hit of humour. “Yeah.”

He glanced down at the page, scanning.

Catherine watched him for a moment, then added, quieter now, “You handled it well.”

He looked up.

“The situation,” she clarified.

“It wasn’t about me,” he said. “But someone needs to take a stand over stupid bullshit like this.”

“No, it’s not about you,” she agreed. “But given who you are, and your standing in this country, it still mattered. And it won’t be forgotten.”

He didn't respond immediately. When he did, it was quieter.

"He wanted a reaction," Crosby said. "I wasn't going to give him one."

"You didn't."

A small pause with that hint of humour reappearing. "He almost got one. That man really wants to get punched."

Her eyebrow lifted, just slightly.

"Almost," Crosby repeated, letting the smile flicker into life for a moment.

The corner of Catherine's mouth curved faintly in reply. "Well," she said, tapping the edge of the file, "let's make sure the rest of this stays just as controlled."

Crosby picked up the pen.

"Yeah," he said. "Let's."

The Metros' boardroom was designed to impress. Dark wood stretched the length of the table, polished to a mirror sheen that caught the morning light spilling in through the frosted glass walls. The space was all clean lines and quiet authority, the kind of room built to make decisions feel heavier than they already were.

Today, it didn't need the help.

Yuna didn't rush when she stepped inside. She never did.

She moved through the space with the ease of someone who already understood how this would end, a slim portfolio tucked neatly under her arm. Her expression gave nothing away — calm, composed, entirely unreadable in a way that made people fill in the blanks themselves.

Three members of the front office were already seated. Legal. Operations. Communications.

All of them stood when she entered.

Respect, or nerves, it didn't matter which.

"Mrs. Hollander," the GM said. "Thank you for coming in."

"Of course," Yuna replied, taking her seat without waiting to be offered one. She set the portfolio on the table and glanced between them, unhurried. "Shall we finalize this?"

There was a brief shuffle of papers, a look exchanged across the table — silent, quick.

Then—

“Yes,” the GM said. “Let’s.”

Yuna opened the portfolio and drew out the documents, sliding them across the table with a practiced, almost casual precision.

“Final trade agreement,” she said. “Executed pending league approval.”

The GM pulled the stack toward him, scanning the first page even though it was obvious he’d already memorized the contents.

“Shane Hollander to Ottawa,” he said.

“In exchange for a conditional second-round pick,” Yuna replied smoothly, “which upgrades to a first if Ottawa reaches the Conference Final.”

He nodded once, flipping to the next page.

“And salary retention?”

“Fifty percent,” Yuna said. “For the remainder of the current season only. No carryover, no extension implications.”

Legal leaned in slightly, tracking the details. “And Ottawa absorbs the remainder immediately?”

“Yes.”

Another page turned.

“And in exchange,” the GM said slowly, “we retain narrative control of this trade.”

Yuna’s gaze flicked toward Communications. “You do.”

A flicker of something — relief, maybe — crossed their face.

Yuna tilted her head just slightly. “But really, we all know it’s just spin,” she said, almost mildly. “Let’s not pretend otherwise.”

A faint flush crept up the back of the Communications rep’s neck.

“Of course.”

“You framed it as a strategic roster decision,” Yuna continued, her tone even, almost conversational. “Cap flexibility. Asset management. Mutual benefit. We let you, even though you and I are all aware that is not the case.”

“And the... other matter?” Legal asked, careful with the phrasing.

Yuna didn’t react. Not even a flicker. “It isn’t relevant to this transaction,” she said.

The words settled cleanly into the room. It was staying separate.

For now.

The GM cleared his throat, shifting slightly in his chair. “Right.”

He flipped to the final page, pen already in hand.

“This is contingent on league approval,” he said.

“It always is. However, the league will approve it. Optics, you know.”

A brief pause followed — thin, stretched.

Then he signed.

One by one, the others followed suit, the quiet scratch of pen on paper louder than it should have been in the stillness of the room.

Yuna waited until the last signature was in place before reaching forward, drawing the documents back toward her. She checked each page quickly, efficiently, eyes moving with practiced certainty.

“Thank you,” she said.

Polite. Professional.

She closed the portfolio and stood, gathering her things in one smooth motion. For a moment, it looked like that was it — clean, contained, exactly as expected.

She made it as far as the door, then paused.

Not abruptly. Not enough to draw attention if you weren’t already watching her.

But they were. Of course they were. You always watch a predator.

Yuna turned back, a slightly colder version of her professional smile in place. The shift in the room was immediate—subtle, but unmistakable. Something tightening, something waiting.

She opened the portfolio again, this time drawing out a second set of documents. Thinner. Separate. Untouched.

She walked back to the table, and calmly set them down in front of the GM.

Deliberate.

Measured.

“You’ve been served,” she said, coolly.

Legal reached for the papers — of course they did — flipping the first page, scanning quickly. Their expression changed almost immediately, something tightening at the edges.

“This—” they started, then stopped.

Yuna met their gaze evenly.

“As of this morning,” she said, “the organization is formally named in the civil action.”

Communications went visibly pale.

“This is related to—”

“Yes.”

The GM finally looked down at the documents.

Then back up at her.

“You’re doing this now?”

Yuna held his gaze without blinking.

“I’m ensuring you’re informed,” she said.

Another beat passed.

Then she inclined her head slightly, polite in a way that felt almost like courtesy.

“Our business here is complete.”

This time, she left the room, ignoring the sound of panic that she left in her wake.

NATIONAL HOCKEY LEAGUE — OFFICIAL RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

NHL Approves Trade Between Montreal Metros and Ottawa Centaurs

New York, NY — The National Hockey League announced today that it has approved a trade between the Montreal Metros and the Ottawa Centaurs.

Under the terms of the agreement, center Shane Hollander has been traded to Ottawa in exchange for a conditional second-round draft pick in the upcoming NHL Entry Draft. The selection will convert to a first-round pick should the Centaurs advance to the Conference Final this season.

As part of the transaction, Montreal will retain 50 percent of Hollander’s remaining salary for the current season.

The trade is effective immediately.

OTTAWA CENTAURS — OFFICIAL RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Centaurs Acquire Shane Hollander

Ottawa, ON — The Ottawa Centaurs are proud to announce the acquisition of center Shane Hollander from the Montreal Metros.

Hollander, a proven top-line talent, brings elite skill, leadership, and competitive drive to the Centaurs roster. Known for his ability to perform in high-pressure situations, Hollander adds immediate impact to both ends of the ice.

“We’re thrilled to welcome Shane to Ottawa,” said President of Operations Evan Delaney. “He’s a player who elevates the people around him, and we’re excited to see what this group can accomplish together.”

“As an organization, it’s especially meaningful to welcome Shane home. Having the opportunity to play for his hometown team is something special, and we know how much this city will rally behind him.”

The organization is working closely with Hollander to support his continued recovery and will provide updates as appropriate.

Ottawa looks forward to integrating Hollander into the lineup in the coming weeks.

STATEMENT FROM COUNSEL

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Ottawa, ON — Counsel for the plaintiffs confirms that the Montreal Metros organization has been formally added as a named defendant in the ongoing civil action concerning allegations of discrimination, defamation, and related conduct.

This addition reflects emerging evidence and testimony indicating organizational awareness of, and failure to appropriately address, conduct that contributed to a harmful and discriminatory environment.

The claim continues to name Colin Mercer and Northline Hockey as co-defendants.

“Our clients have been clear in their position,” said Catherine Bouchard, lead counsel. “This is not an isolated incident. It is part of a broader pattern that warrants accountability.”

The plaintiffs remain focused on pursuing a resolution through the appropriate legal channels.

No further comment will be provided at this time.

MONTREAL METROS — OFFICIAL STATEMENT

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Montreal, QC — The Montreal Metros organization acknowledges that it has been named in a recently amended civil filing.

The organization strongly denies any allegations of discrimination, misconduct, or failure to act appropriately.

“The Montreal Metros are committed to fostering a respectful and inclusive environment for all players, staff, and members of our community,” the organization said in a statement. “We take these matters seriously and will respond through the proper legal process.”

The Metros will not be providing further comment while legal proceedings are ongoing.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so. A few things:

Yes, Yuna absolutely planned that.

No, the Metros are not having a good day.

Sidney Crosby almost throwing a punch is now canon in this universe and I will not be taking questions.

Also — welcome to Ottawa officially, Shane 😊

Next chapter we're getting into:

media fallout 🙄

team dynamics (HELLO same locker room?? How many ways can I get Ilya to make Shane blush?)

and probably more emotional damage because I can't help myself. I'm not sorry.

As always — comments, chaos, theories, all of it welcome. Comments are basically my crack.

And seriously — thank you for being here.

Until next time! ❤️

Chapter 19: Receipts

Chapter Summary

The lawsuit expands, the Montreal Metros are named, and the narrative shifts from a single incident to something much bigger—something systemic. The media runs with it, especially once it becomes clear there's an internal source. Suddenly, this isn't contained anymore.

Moves start happening. Fournier is traded. Rumours swirl. The league issues a statement that says very little but means a lot. Pressure builds behind the scenes.

At the same time, Shane's arrival in Ottawa brings a rare moment of warmth. The team welcomes him, fans rally, and for a second, things feel... steady. Ilya makes it very clear they're not hiding anymore, and Shane follows in his own quieter way. The internet reacts accordingly.

But consequences are still unfolding. The hospital cuts ties with Daniel Mercer. And Colin Mercer? He's still exactly who we thought he was — convinced he's in control while everything closes in.

The chapter ends on something small. A quiet dinner. A normal night.

Until it isn't.

Because photos hit the internet and a new storm starts building — one they don't even see coming yet.

Chapter Notes

Hi friends, loons, and passers by!

Surprise! I didn't expect to get this done today. I didn't plan to have another chapter for you until Wednesday at the earliest. Then I spent about 7 hours writing 4000 +/- words because god damn those story gremlins are demanding. And I didn't have anything major for school today. so wins all around I guess? This likely won't happen again, though lol. And I totally didn't edit this at all so what you see is what you get. Maybe I'll fix it later.

This chapter is a bit of a beast — in the best way. It's doing a lot of heavy lifting in terms of plot and worldbuilding, so we're leaning into mixed media again to show how fast everything is moving and how little control anyone actually has over the narrative once it gets out there.

Content-wise, we're dealing with legal fallout, media escalation, and institutional pressure, alongside some softer domestic moments that I refused to skip because these two have suffered enough.

I mean, they're going to suffer a little but more, but it's gonna be sweet. I promise.

Enjoy!

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

By ten-thirty that morning, every major sports desk in Canada had already moved past the initial headlines. The arrest, the charge, the surface-level scandal — that part had come and gone almost as quickly as it had arrived. What mattered now was what came next.

The lawsuit had expanded. The Montreal Metros had been formally added. And, according to multiple outlets that were suddenly very careful about how they phrased things, the amended filing was supported by information from an anonymous source inside the locker room.

That was the shift. The moment everything changed.

Up until then, it had been easy — relatively speaking — to treat the situation as isolated. A player. An incident. A problem that could be managed, contained, and eventually moved past with the right statements and the right amount of time.

But this wasn't that.

This was something that suggested a pattern. Awareness. Silence. And most surprisingly, proof.

And once that idea took hold — once the possibility of receipts entered the conversation — there was no slowing it down.

It didn't unfold gradually. It hit all at once.

TSN — BREAKING

Metros Named in Expanded Civil Suit; Reports Indicate Internal Source

SPORTSNET ALERT

Anonymous Locker Room Source Linked to New Allegations Against Montreal Organization

THE ATHLETIC — FEATURE

How Deep Does It Go? Lawsuit Against Mercer, Northline, and the Metros Expands

CBC SPORTS

One of Hockey's Oldest Franchises Faces Growing Scrutiny

Across television panels, radio segments, and livestreams, the tone shifted in real time. You could hear it in the way people spoke — less cautious, more direct. You could see it in the

way they leaned forward, in the pauses that stretched just a second longer than they used to. The framing had changed. The questions had changed.

This wasn't a simple player scandal anymore; it was something larger. Structural. The kind of situation leagues didn't like to name until they absolutely had to.

"This is the part the league can't ignore," one analyst said, leaning forward, hands braced against the desk as if that might make the point land harder. "You can manage a player issue. You can suspend someone, fine them, or even make a statement. You cannot quietly manage an organization being named in a civil suit backed by internal testimony."

Across from him, a veteran reporter — someone who had been around long enough to see how these things usually played out — didn't soften it. "No," she said. "What matters here is that someone inside that room was willing to speak."

She didn't raise her voice. She didn't need to. "That means this isn't speculation. This isn't a rumour. Someone saw enough, or heard enough, or experienced enough to decide it was worth putting their name — or in this case not their name, but their story — behind it."

The clip was pulled and reposted before the segment had even ended. By noon, it was everywhere — shared, quoted, argued over, picked apart. And still, it kept building.

Because once that idea settled in — *that this came from inside* — it changed the shape of the story. It stopped being about what had happened and started being about how long it had been happening, and who had known.

NATIONAL HOCKEY LEAGUE — OFFICIAL STATEMENT

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

New York, NY — The National Hockey League is aware of the recently amended civil filing naming the Montreal Metros organization.

These allegations are serious and will be reviewed in accordance with League policy. The NHL will continue to monitor developments closely and cooperate with any appropriate investigative processes.

No further comment will be provided at this time.

Maybe the statement should have slowed things down, but instead, it clarified them. Because everyone understood what that statement actually meant. Not the words themselves, but what sat behind them — legal teams being looped in, ownership groups being briefed, conversations happening in private that would never be acknowledged publicly.

Pressure, building quietly at first.

Then less quietly.

By that same afternoon, the conversation had shifted again. Not away from the scandal, but deeper into it. The focus moved from what had happened to what would happen next, and what the league would be willing — or forced — to do about it.

THE GLOBE AND MAIL — SPORTS BUSINESS

League Pressure Expected to Mount on Montreal Ownership

SPORTSNET PANEL

Could the Metros Be Facing Forced Organizational Overhaul?

THE HOCKEY NEWS

Internal Source, Expanded Lawsuit, and a Franchise in Crisis

No one said it outright at first, of course. They didn't need to. The language stayed careful, measured, wrapped in hypotheticals and professional distance. But the implication was there, threaded through every discussion.

If this wasn't contained — if it wasn't one player, or one incident, or one failure — if it was systemic — then Montreal wouldn't just be dealing with bad press.

They'd be dealing with something much harder to survive, and the odds were definitely not in their favour.

PITTSBURGH PENGUINS — OFFICIAL RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Pittsburgh, PA — The Pittsburgh Penguins have acquired goaltender Julien Fournier from the Montreal Metros in exchange for cash considerations and a third-round draft pick.

Fournier will report to the organization immediately.

No further comment will be made.

This statement dropped in the middle of an already busy news day. Probably to keep it under the radar. It didn't stay there. It couldn't. Not with everything else already in motion. Not with the way the morning had unfolded, one headline stacking on top of another until the whole thing felt less like news and more like momentum.

Because the timing wasn't subtle.

And hockey, for all its talk about tradition and respect and “handling things the right way,” had never been particularly good at subtlety when there was a pattern to be found.

People noticed.

Julien Fournier hadn’t been named publicly. There had been no official confirmation, no statement tying him to anything beyond his role on the roster. On paper, this was just a trade — a goaltender moved for a pick and cash considerations, the kind of transaction that usually slid across the ticker without much more than a passing comment.

But context had a way of changing things. And the context, right now, was impossible to ignore.

Within hours of reports that the amended lawsuit was supported by someone inside the Montreal locker room, Fournier was gone. Not scratched. Not benched. Not made temporarily unavailable. Moved cleanly out of the organization and into another one that, at least on the surface, had no reason to be involved in any of this.

No one said it outright, but the dots were close enough together that people started connecting them almost instinctively, filling in the space between what was known and what was just shy of being confirmed.

On television, the phrasing stayed careful.

“Interesting timing.”

“Notable development.”

“Worth keeping an eye on.”

On social media, it was less restrained.

X / TWITTER

@KaraSteeleSports

The timing on Fournier to Pittsburgh is... something.

@HockeyNightLive

Officially: routine trade. Unofficially: come on.

@PensInsider

Penguins pick up Fournier same day reports surface about internal source in Montreal. Just a coincidence, I’m sure.

@MetroWatch

You don’t move a goalie like that today unless you’re trying to get ahead of something.

@CensDiehard84

WAIT so the locker room source “anonymous” and then Fournier just... disappears?? yeah okay 👍

@MetrosForeverMTL

or maybe it's just a trade?? you people are insane

@PuckPolitics

This is what organizational damage control looks like in real time.

@GoalieUnion

Man just got traded into the most stressful situation imaginable 😭

It wasn't confirmation or proof, but it didn't feel random either.

And in a story that had already started to revolve around what people knew — and what they were finally willing to say — that was enough to push it forward again.

Because now it wasn't just that someone inside the room had spoken. It was that the room itself might already be shifting around that fact. How badly were the Metros sinking if major players were jumping ship?

RUMOUR WATCH

Multiple sources indicate Ottawa may have interest in Hayden Pike pending medical clearance next season. The Centaurs declined comment.

INSTAGRAM

The Ottawa Centaurs posted just after lunch. A picture of Shane in his new jersey, standing in the tunnel in front of the logo, laughing and shaking the hand of the mascot. The caption was simple too:

@ottawacentaur

Welcome home, Shane.

The comments filled almost instantly.

@CensDiehard84

HE LOOKS SO HAPPY 😭

@OttawaBornAndRaised

hometown kid in our jersey I'm actually emotional about this

@PuckMom613

that smile?? yeah we're keeping him

@HockeyGirlJess

the way he's laughing with the mascot like he hasn't just had the worst month of his life???

@CentaursFaithful

build the statue now idc idc

@GoalHornChaos

oh he fits here. like immediately fits.

@MetroFanBurner

still hurts seeing him in those colours not gonna lie

@NeutralZoneTalk

wild that this is happening at the same time as everything else

@IlyaStanAccount

someone tell me why he looks like he belongs there already??

@OttawaLoud

THAT'S OUR GUY

Then Harris dropped the interview as well.

@HarrisCentaursMedia

figured we could all use something *not* completely unhinged today

sat down with the newest Centaur for a quick 20 questions — he's exactly what you think he is



(video attached)

The replies filled in before most people had even watched the clip.

@CentaursDaily

HARRIS YOU DROPPED THIS AT THE PERFECT TIME

@OttawaLoud

oh he's SMILING smiling 😂😂😂

@HockeyWivesClub

“what's your pregame ritual?” “apparently survive a plane incident and a lawsuit” I'm OBSESSED

@IlyaStanAccount

the way he says “yeah, I'm happy” like it surprised even him???

@CensDiehard84

THIS IS OUR GUY. THIS IS OUR GUY.

@MetroBurner

cool interview. still want answers about the lawsuit.

@NeutralZoneTalk

wild that two completely different stories are happening at the same time and both feel huge

For a few minutes, the tone shifted. Not completely, of course, not enough to erase everything else that was happening — but just enough to cheer things up a little. The sharp edges softened slightly, the speculation giving way to something lighter, something people could actually hold onto without feeling like they needed to brace for impact.

Clips from the interview started circulating. Shane laughing at one of Harris's questions, deflecting another with that awkward charm that had always come naturally to him. There was something different about it now, though — something looser. Less guarded. He looked relaxed in a way that didn't quite match the chaos surrounding him.

And people noticed.

Ilya made it worse. Or better, perhaps. He took to his Instagram with a photo that was unmistakably domestic. Soft kitchen light, the kind that made everything feel warmer than it actually was. Shane was standing there in his new Ottawa jersey, hair still damp from a shower and falling across his forehead, smiling helplessly at the man standing next to him with his arm around his waist. It was visible and deliberate, and everyone could see just how much they loved each other.

@ilyarozanov81

He looks better in our kitchen than he ever did in Montreal. Lucky for him, he also looks very good in Ottawa colours. Welcome home, solnyshko.

The internet didn't so much react as it did briefly lose all structural integrity.

@OttawaLoud

OUR KITCHEN????? HELLO??????

@HockeyWivesClub

not him hard launching DOMESTIC BLISS in the middle of a legal scandal 🤔

@bradmarchand63

this is disgusting. I hate it. invite me over.

@SensDiehard84

I AM SCREAMING CRYING THROWING UP THIS IS EVERYTHING

@PuckMom613

the way he's holding him 🤔 yeah that's real love right there

@wyatt_hayes

yeah okay this tracks

@MetroBurner

oh so we're just... doing this publicly now

@NeutralZoneTalk

this might be the softest thing I've ever seen in professional hockey

@GoalHornChaos

man said "our kitchen" and just ended the conversation

@sidneycrosby87



@HarrisCentaursMedia

I give it 24 hours before someone writes a think piece about your countertops

@drew.stafford

kitchen looks nice at least

Shane's post followed about ten minutes later.

Same jersey. Same house. A slightly different angle — living room instead of kitchen, the light cooler, the moment quieter. He stood with one hand at the back of his neck, expression soft and a little sheepish, like he was still catching up to everything happening around him. Ilya was reflected in the window behind him, taking the picture, shirtless with low-slung grey trackpants and his curls messy.

@shanehollander

Pretty grateful for the welcome. Good to be home. Can't wait to get back on the ice.

@CensDiehard84

THE REFLECTION????? SIR?????

@IlyaStanAccount

not even hiding it I'm losing my mind

@OttawaBornAndRaised

he looks so much lighter here. like actually lighter.

@HockeyGirlJess

"pretty grateful" meanwhile his boyfriend just broke instagram by taking the photo

@MetroFanBurner

yeah okay this one hurt a little

@NeutralZoneTalk

the contrast between these two posts is insane and should be studied

@HarrisCentaursMedia

I asked ONE (1) normal question in that interview and this is what happens. I was told you were well behaved, Shane.

@bradmarchand63

blink twice if he made you post this

@sidneycrosby87

Looking good, Hollander.

@wyatt_hayes

get back on the ice so I don't have to hear about this every five minutes. Your boyfriend swoons about you. It's gross.

@ilyarozanov81

Hazy, are you looking at my boyfriend? You swoon too. It's okay, I understand.

OTTAWA GENERAL HOSPITAL — OFFICIAL STATEMENT

Ottawa General announces that their Head of Security, Mr. Daniel Mercer, has been terminated following an internal investigation.

The hospital confirmed it was previously unaware of any familial relationship between Mercer and Colin Mercer of NorthLine Hockey, or the methods in which the former assisted the latter in acquiring access to a secure wing.

They extend their well wishes to Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov and wish Shane a speedy recovery.

The room was smaller than he expected. That was the first thing Colin Mercer noticed—not the bench bolted to the wall, not the dull grey paint, not the officer stationed just outside the door.

The size of it.

It was too small. Too contained. Like the walls were closer than they should be.

His lawyer didn't sit. He'd been pacing since he got there, one hand dragging through his hair every few steps, tie already loosened like he'd given up pretending this was under control.

"This is not good," he said, stopping long enough to look at Mercer properly. "The assault charge alone would have been manageable. It's not ideal, but it's contained. You plead out, take the hit, maybe a fine, maybe probation, depending on how the Crown wants to handle it. You keep your head down and eventually it fades."

Mercer didn't respond. He sat with his elbows resting loosely on his knees, hands clasped, expression unreadable in a way that suggested he simply wasn't interested.

"The problem," the lawyer continued, already turning and pacing again, "is the civil side. That's where the exposure is. That's where the money is. And now the organization is named,

which means—”

“Which means they’re panicking,” Mercer cut in.

The lawyer stopped.

“Yes,” he said carefully. “It means they’re protecting themselves. And if they decide you’re the easiest way to do that—”

“They already have,” Mercer said. “Of course, the organization is going to throw me under the bus. NorthLine too. It’s just because they know my case can handle the pressure.”

This was said with such certainty, like he was stating something obvious.

The lawyer exhaled, slow and controlled, the way you do when you’re trying very hard not to lose patience with someone who is making it difficult. “Okay,” he said. “Then you need to listen to me. We deal with the criminal charge first. You plead guilty. There are too many witnesses. This is not a fight you win.”

Mercer’s mouth twitched faintly, not quite a smile.

“I’ll get a slap on the wrist. No problem. And the civil?” he asked.

“That,” the lawyer said, “we try to contain. We push for a settlement. Quietly. Early. Before this gets any bigger than it already is.”

Mercer leaned back slightly, finally looking at him with something approaching interest.

“Settlement,” he repeated, like he was testing the word and finding it lacking. “You want me to settle.”

“I want you to limit your exposure,” the lawyer snapped, the edge finally breaking through. “Because right now, you’re not just looking at reputational damage. You’re looking at liability. Real liability. Financial, professional—”

“They don’t have a case,” Mercer interrupted.

The lawyer blinked at him.

“They don’t,” Mercer said again, more firmly this time. “I reported what I had. I didn’t make anything up. I didn’t fabricate anything. If they don’t like how it landed, that’s not my problem.”

“That is absolutely your problem,” the lawyer shot back. “And you need to stop thinking about this like it’s a media dispute. This isn’t about what you believe is true. This is about what can be proven, what caused harm, and how the court interprets that harm.”

Mercer gave a quiet, dismissive huff.

“Freedom of the press,” he said. “Freedom of speech. That still counts for something.”

The lawyer just stared at him for a second.

Then he laughed—but there was nothing amused about it.

“This isn’t the United States, Colin,” he said flatly. “You don’t get broad constitutional protection for saying whatever you want and calling it journalism. That’s not how defamation works here. If they can show that what you published caused measurable harm, and that you didn’t meet the standard of responsible reporting, you are exposed.”

“They can’t prove that,” Mercer said.

“They don’t have to prove intent,” the lawyer snapped. “They have to prove impact. And right now, they have a lawsuit, an organization backing them, and apparently”—he gestured sharply, like the word annoyed him—“someone inside that room willing to support it.”

Mercer’s jaw tightened slightly, eyes narrowing.

“Anonymous,” he said. “Which means nothing.”

“It means enough,” the lawyer said, “that this is not going away, and you are not coming out of this the hero you think you are.”

Silence stretched between them.

“You plead to the assault,” the lawyer continued, more controlled now but no less firm. “You settle the civil case. You stop talking. You stop posting. You stop trying to manage this like it’s a narrative you can spin.”

Mercer smiled.

Small. Sharp. Wrong.

“You’re thinking too small,” he said.

The lawyer went still.

“This is what they do,” Mercer went on, almost conversational now. “They build themselves up on visibility, on attention, on public image. And the second that image doesn’t go their way, suddenly it’s a problem? Suddenly I’m the issue?”

“This is not about them liking the coverage,” the lawyer said. “This is about you crossing a legal line.”

“It’s about control,” Mercer replied. “And they lost it.”

“That is not—”

“They needed me,” Mercer cut in, the words quiet but absolute. “They always have. They just don’t like it when I stop being useful.”

The lawyer closed his eyes for a second.

Then he let out a breath and stepped back, hands coming up in a gesture that was half frustration, half surrender.

“Alright,” he said. “You want to ignore advice, that’s your call. But understand something very clearly—this is not a story you’re writing anymore. This is a case. And right now, you are losing it.”

Mercer didn’t answer.

He just leaned back against the wall, expression settling into something calm and unreadable.

Like he still thought he was in control.

By the time Shane stepped into the Ottawa locker room, the noise had already found him.

“Holy shit, he lives!”

“Look who finally showed up!”

“Get in here, Hollander!”

The door hadn’t even fully closed behind him before something soft hit his shoulder — a towel, thrown with enough accuracy to be intentional and just enough force to make a point. Shane stopped in the doorway and laughed, the sound breaking out of him before he could think better of it.

“Oh my god.”

Troy was already on his feet, grinning like he’d been waiting all day for this exact moment.

“Everyone relax,” he said, holding up a hand like he was about to restore order and very obviously not doing that at all. “He’s fragile. He’s still healing.”

“I am not fragile,” Shane shot back. “I got hit by a plane.”

“Debatable,” someone called from the back.

A stick tapped sharply against the floor. Someone else whistled. A couple of players surged forward at once — hands on his shoulders, quick pulls into half-hugs, the kind that were more about contact than anything sentimental.

“How’re the ribs?”

“You skating yet?”

“You see your boyfriend break the internet?”

“That was not—” Shane started, then stopped and laughed, because it absolutely had been.

Laughter is contagious, and it rolled through the room.

“None of you have any shame,” he said wryly.

“Zero,” Wyatt confirmed with a grin.

The trainer appeared like he’d been summoned by the word *ribs*, pointing two fingers at Shane’s chest. “You get five minutes, no contact, and if one of you idiots knocks him over, I’m filing paperwork.”

“Against who?” Shane asked.

“All of you,” the trainer said without hesitation.

That earned another round of noise. Shane grinned. “Okay, guys – don’t you have a practice or something? Get out of here.”

Ilya finally piped up at that. “And who is the captain here, Hollander? You don’t give the orders.” He paused, smirked and looked at the team. “You heard my boyfriend. Get out of here.”

Dinner was supposed to be quiet.

That had been the plan, anyway.

Somewhere small. Not flashy. The kind of place that didn’t usually attract attention, tucked just far enough off the main streets to feel like it might stay that way.

It almost worked.

They had a back table. Low lighting. Music just loud enough to blur conversations into something indistinct. Scott was halfway through telling a story that had clearly gotten better every time he told it, one hand wrapped loosely around his glass, the other gesturing in wide, animated arcs.

“I’m telling you,” he said, leaning in, “the guy thought he could chirp his way out of it. Full confidence. No plan.”

Kip snorted into his drink. “That sounds familiar.”

“Watch it,” Scott shot back, not missing a beat.

Across from them, Shane laughed, shoulders loose, posture easy in a way it hadn’t been in weeks. The edge was gone, or at least dulled enough that it didn’t sit in everything he did. Ilya watched him more than he listened, one arm draped across the back of Shane’s chair,

fingers occasionally brushing his shoulder like he needed the contact just to be sure he was still there.

They'd had a couple drinks.

Not enough to be sloppy, just enough to soften the edges.

Scott reached over at one point, hand landing briefly against Shane's forearm as he laughed at something Kip said — casual, fleeting, the kind of contact that barely registered in the moment.

Shane didn't even look at it.

Why would he?

There was nothing to look at.

Nothing that meant anything beyond comfort and familiarity and the easy physical language of people who trusted each other.

It should have just been a double date, dinner between friends and something that happened all the time.

Of course, it didn't stay that way.

The photos hit just after midnight. They were grainy and clearly taken from across the street through the window. Scott Hunter was leaning over, hand resting on Shane's arm, while Ilya turned slightly away in one frame, mid-conversation, looking disconnected if you didn't know what came before or after.

It looked intimate.

The internet took them and ran.

Hollander and Hunter? Is Shane cheating on Ilya?

Questions Raised After Late-Night Outing in Ottawa

New Team, New City — And New Company?

@PuckLeaks

interesting timing for this kind of night out 🧐

@HockeyInsiderTalk

hard to ignore the optics here given everything else going on

@CensDiehard84

oh come ON they're literally just at dinner???

@MetroTruths

so now we're pretending this isn't messy

@IlyaStanAccount

you guys will do anything except let them be happy huh

@NeutralZoneTalk

the difference between what actually happened and how this is being framed is wild

@GoalHornChaos

that man had his hand on his arm for like two seconds be serious

None of them had any idea about the new storm already gathering around them.

Somewhere outside that quiet, someone was pulling at new threads — testing, shaping, looking for a way to force them back into something smaller.

Either back out of the spotlight – or back into the closet.

Chapter End Notes

We got a little bit of everything this chapter—receipts, consequences, soft domestic chaos, locker room energy, and just enough normalcy to make it hurt when it gets taken away again.

Because of course it does.

The paparazzi beat at the end is intentional — this isn't about what actually happened, it's about how easily it can be twisted into something else. And more importantly, the fact that it doesn't feel random. Someone is angry they're coming out on top here, and wants them to hurt. How will that shake down? Well, I know, and Ilya and Shane have told me a few things, but obviously you guys don't know yet.

Next chapter we're getting into what that looks like — both public and private — so if you enjoy tension, questionable decision-making, and probably someone (Ilya) being just a little bit unhinged, you're in the right place. AND maybe...just maybe...we finally get a little smut?

As always, thank you for reading, commenting, yelling in the tags, and generally making this way more fun than it should be 🧡 I appreciate you all so much.

Chapter 20: Setups

Chapter Summary

What started as a stupid gossip story spirals into something a lot more deliberate. Between the media narrative shifting, the team closing ranks around them, and one small detail tying everything back to NorthLine, it becomes clear the photos weren't random — they were planned. By the end of the day, Shane and Ilya aren't dealing with rumors anymore. They're dealing with someone actively trying to control the story around them.

Chapter Notes

Hi.

Thanks to recent events in the fandom, today's flavour: what if the media was even worse than usual?

This chapter is a bit quieter on the surface, but there's a lot happening underneath it. We're shifting from "wow this is messy" into "oh this is intentional," which is honestly one of my favourite kinds of narrative turns to play with. And just seems...fitting somehow? And really, Shane and Ilya decided how this chapter was going to go, and have you ever tried arguing with them? I just hope they let me stick to my planned chapter count!

As always: thank you for reading, screaming, and enabling me 🧡

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

The alarm went off at the same time it always did.

Shane reached for it before the second vibration, silencing it with a practiced movement. His hand lingered on the nightstand for a moment after, fingers resting lightly against the wood as he let the quiet settle back into place.

The room was still dim, early morning light pressing faintly through the curtains, not quite strong enough to take hold yet. The house around them was quiet in that familiar way — pipes, distant hum, the soft, lived-in sounds of a place that had settled around them.

For a second, everything felt right. Until he realized Ilya wasn't pressed up against his back with an arm curled over his waist and mumbling something about it being too early.

He rolled over and saw that Ilya was awake. And not just awake — still. Flat on his back, staring at the ceiling like he'd been there for a while, jaw set tight enough that Shane could see it even in the low light. There was tension in his shoulders, in the line of his throat, something held too rigid for this early in the morning.

He also didn't look like he'd slept.

Shane frowned, the shift immediate and instinctive. "You're up."

"Yes."

That was enough.

Shane was (almost) always awake first. It wasn't something he thought about anymore, not consciously. It was just how things worked. The order of it. Wake up. Alarm off. Bathroom. Coffee. Check in with pain levels. Start the day.

Ilya being awake first meant something had already gone wrong. He reached out and gently touched Ilya's face. "You didn't sleep."

It wasn't a question.

Ilya turned his head then, looking at him properly. There was something tight behind his eyes, something controlled in a way that never meant calm. He did sigh and lean into Shane's touch though, which was a better sign.

"Do not open your phone."

Shane stilled. "*Again? What now?*" he thought to himself as he sighed and reached for his phone anyway.

"Shane—"

"Yeah yeah," he muttered, already unlocking the screen. "Too late."

The notifications hit all at once.

Texts. Missed calls. Tags. Names stacking faster than he could read them — Harris. Wyatt. Yuna. Catherine.

His stomach dropped, slow and certain, and he opened the first article before his brain could talk him out of it. It was a typical gossip piece, so in itself, mostly frustrating that they still had to deal with it. But then he saw the photos.

They were both exactly what you'd expect, and instantly infuriating. Grainy and taken from far enough away that everything flattened into something else. The kind of images that felt invasive even before you understood what they were trying to do.

Scott leaning forward across the table, with his hand on Shane's arm. Ilya in the background of another frame, half-turned away, caught mid-conversation from an angle that made him

look distant if you didn't know any better. Cropped and positioned in such a way that it looked far more intimate than it was.

Shane stared at them for a long second.

"It was dinner," he said finally, voice flat with disbelief. "It was literally just dinner with another couple. Another public couple, for that matter."

"I am aware." Ilya's tone didn't shift.

Which meant he was furious.

Shane scrolled. He shouldn't have, but curiosity got the better of him. The headlines got worse the further he went.

Late-Night Outing Raises Questions in Ottawa
Hollander Spotted in Intimate Dinner Amid Ongoing Legal Chaos
Distraction Brewing for Centaurs
Trouble Already for Ottawa's Newest Star

He felt the irritation building under his skin, sharp and immediate.

"It doesn't even—" Shane stopped, exhaling sharply, trying to find the shape of what he meant. "Why would this—"

He didn't finish the thought because the answer was already there, sitting just under the surface.

It didn't need to make sense. It just needed to look like it might.

Ilya had already moved. The blankets shifted as he pushed them back, crossing the room once before stopping at the foot of the bed. His phone was clenched tight in his hand, tension running through him in a way that had nothing to do with the morning and everything to do with what he was holding back.

"This is not random," he said.

Shane looked up. "It's paparazzi, Ilya. We knew this would be a problem."

"Yes," Ilya said. "And regular paparazzi do not sit outside quiet restaurants in Ottawa at midnight on a Thursday hoping something interesting happens."

Shane blinked as he considered that. That was... fair.

More than fair.

He looked back down at the photos, but differently this time. Not at the people. At the edges of them. The framing. The angle. The deliberate crop. The way the image had been chosen, not captured. His chest tightened, something colder settling in underneath the irritation.

“Okay,” he said slowly. “Yeah. No, that’s — yeah.”

Ilya let out a short breath, something that might have been a laugh if there had been anything remotely funny about it.

“Exactly.”

Shane dragged a hand over his face, forcing himself to stop scrolling, to break the loop before it settled in deeper. He hated this. The wrongness of it. The way it had already gotten into his head before he’d even gotten out of bed.

His phone buzzed again in his hand.

HARRIS:

before you panic, everyone here knows it’s bullshit

HARRIS:

but maybe don’t look at x

HARRIS:

actually too late probably, Iyla probably already did

Shane let out a quiet breath that turned into something like a laugh despite himself.

HAYES:

if it helps i am prepared to fight at least six people today

That one did make him smile, brief and reluctant. He handed his phone to Ilya without comment and pushed himself out of bed, the floor cool under his feet, grounding in a way the rest of this wasn’t.

“I need coffee,” he said.

“You need me to commit a crime,” Ilya replied.

Shane paused at the doorway, glancing back at him with a wry smile. “Later,” he said.

“Coffee first.”

The corner of Ilya’s mouth twitched. “Coffee first.” He agreed, following Shane out of the room.

The kitchen was quieter than usual.

Not silent of course — nothing in their house ever really was. There was always something: the low hum of the fridge, the pipes shifting, the soft creak of a place that had lived a whole life before either of them got there.

But this was different. It was quieter in the way mornings sometimes were when both of them were trying not to say the thing that was actually on their minds, like the mornings they had to go their separate ways and stay hidden.

Shane moved through the motions automatically. Grind the beans, fill the coffee maker, brew the coffee, and make sure both their medications were laid out and ready to go. Grab the mugs, and sugar and cream for Ilya. The rhythm of it settled in quickly, familiar and steady, something he could hold onto. He didn't look up, but he could feel Ilya across the room anyway — a steady, restless presence that didn't quite match the space they were in.

He needed the routine. Needed things to happen the way they were supposed to, at least here, if nowhere else. The coffee maker beeped and he grabbed the carafe, pouring it a little too fast. It hit the edge of the mug and threatened to spill before he stopped himself, adjusting and finishing it more carefully for the second mug.

It shouldn't have mattered.

“Shane.”

“I'm fine.”

“I did not ask a question.”

Shane exhaled quietly and set things down with more care than he had the first time. “I know.”

He carefully mixed Ilya's coffee exactly as he liked it and set it on the island for him, then leaned back against the counter. His own mug was warm between his hands, and he relished the feeling for a minute as he let the heat settle into his palms. For a second, he didn't look at anything in particular. Just—stood there.

“It's stupid,” he said after a moment. “Not the article. The article is stupid. I mean—”

He stopped, searching for the right way to say it. Or maybe just the simplest one.

“I hate that someone got there first.”

Ilya's expression shifted, his eyes softening as he studied Shane's face. “To your morning.”

“Yes.”

Shane glanced down into his coffee, watching the surface settle.

“To my morning. To—” He made a small, frustrated motion with one hand, like he could smooth it out if he tried hard enough. “To how it starts. To what it feels like. It was already wrong before I even got out of bed.”

Ilya didn't answer right away, but he set his mug down and stepped closer and cupped Shane's cheeks in his hands. “That makes sense,” he said gently, pressing a soft kiss to his forehead.

Shane let out a slow breath. “It doesn’t matter,” he said, quieter now. “I know it doesn’t matter. It’s just dinner. People know it’s just dinner.”

“Most do.”

Shane looked up.

Ilya’s mouth had gone flat again; whatever softness had been there a second ago was already gone.

“The problem is not whether they know,” he said. “The problem is that someone wants it to be something else.”

There it was.

Shane felt it settle into place, the shape of it clearer now that he was looking at it from the right angle. A harmless dinner. A perfectly timed article. A framing that leaned just far enough to turn nothing into something.

He hated how easily it all connected.

His phone buzzed on the counter.

MOM:
do not respond publicly until we talk

MOM:
also, good morning

MOM:
sorry about that part

Shane huffed out a quiet laugh into his mug.

“What?” Ilya asked.

“Mom says good morning,” Shane said. “But in a threatening way.”

That got a real laugh out of Ilya. “Very on brand for Yuna.”

His phone vibrated again in his hand.

MOM:
also tell Ilya if he posts anything unhinged before I call, I will know

Shane laughed and turned the phone to show Ilya. Ilya looked genuinely offended. “This could apply to anything.”

“That is definitely the point.”

For a moment, the tension in the room eased enough to allow some space to breathe. They quietly leaned into each other and tried to savor it.

The arena felt different when they got there. Not in any obvious way. No one stopped talking when Shane and Ilya walked in. No one stared. But it was there anyway.

Something sharper around the edges. Something just slightly off.

That was the thing about hockey. News moved fast in a locker room. Gossip moved faster. And bullshit moved fastest of all.

Shane felt it the second he stepped through the locker room door.

Harris was already halfway off the bench where he'd been sitting with Troy, pushing up like he'd been waiting for him, expression set somewhere between annoyed and personally offended on Shane's behalf.

"Oh, good," he said. "You've both seen it."

"Unfortunately."

"Excellent. Then I don't have to do the weird careful lead-in."

Shane dropped his bag beside his stall, the familiar weight of it grounding in a way the rest of the morning hadn't been. He sat, elbows braced briefly against his knees before straightening again.

"Appreciate that."

Harris angled his phone toward him without handing it over. Shane didn't take it. Just leaned enough to see.

A stream of thought straight from Harris' brain into his notes app. Long. Messy. Divided in ridiculous ways. Some dismantled the photos, some made fun of them, and the rest were just openly furious. Every section had the word "Half" in the title.

"That's three halves," Shane said with a slight smile.

"I'm emotional," Harris replied. "It's valid."

Shane huffed a quiet laugh and shook his head. "How bad has he been, Troy?"

"You're probably just getting the cliff's notes, Hollander," Troy answered with an easy grin.

Across the room, Wyatt was in the middle of something that had already escalated beyond casual conversation. He, Zane, and Luca Haas were hunched over a phone, bodies angled in like they were reviewing game footage instead of paparazzi shots.

“I’m serious,” Wyatt was saying. “Look at the angle. They knew exactly what they wanted from this.”

“You cannot call it a photo trap like it’s a penalty kill setup,” Troy shot back.

“I can, and I am.”

That pulled a ripple of laughter through the room.

It helped. A little.

Underneath it, there was something else there too. Something quieter. Sharper. The kind of feeling that settled in when everyone understood — without needing it said — that one of theirs had been targeted and no one was okay with it.

A couple of guys came over, quick hands on Shane’s shoulder, brief contact as they passed. Nothing dramatic. Nothing performative. Just there.

“You good?”

“How’re the ribs?”

“You skating this week?”

Normal questions. Grounding.

One of the trainers stepped in behind them, already in work mode, eyes flicking over Shane like he was assessing more than just recovery.

“How’s the ribs?” he asked.

“Better.”

“And the head?”

“Seems mostly back to normal. Nothing is standing out to me, anyway.”

“Good,” the trainer said, then added, completely serious, “if any reporter comes within twenty feet of the rehab room, they will be removed.”

“By who?” Shane asked.

The trainer didn’t blink. “Me.”

“Comforting.”

“Thank you.”

Harris bumped his shoulder lightly.

“You good, superstar?”

Shane considered it. He could have said yes. It would have been easier to deflect or lie.

“Annoyed,” he said instead.

“Fair.”

They sat with that for a second. Then Harris leaned in just slightly, voice dropping without drawing attention.

“For what it’s worth,” he said, “nobody in here is okay with this and they all want to go to war for you guys. This is bullshit and just screams personal vendetta.”

Shane nodded. He had no reason to doubt that, had even hoped for it. But still, he felt something in his chest loosen anyway.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “I know.”

As if his eyes were drawn to him, he looked for Ilya in the room and saw him with Wyatt and Troy, arms crossed, saying very little but listening very hard to what Wyatt was saying.

That, more than anything, told Shane how angry he was. Ilya not talking was always worse than Ilya yelling.

A minute later, Wiebe came in. He stopped just inside the door, took one look around the room, and sighed like a man who had seen every possible version of this situation and disliked all of them.

“If this turns into a fistfight with the press before practice,” he said, “whoever starts it sits.”

“Even if they deserve it?” Wyatt asked.

“Especially if they deserve it.”

That got another round of laughter.

“Good to see you, Hollander,” he added. “Head on into the rehab room. They want to start assessing you. I’m looking forward to seeing you get back on the ice again.”

Shane nodded. “On my way, Coach.”

“And Rozanov – go put that temper to work on the ice. You aren’t helping anything by glaring a hole into people.”

“Fine.”

Crosby was in a hotel suite three blocks from the arena when Hayes walked in after practice with coffee and a look on his face that suggested he was already halfway through six different bad ideas.

“I brought caffeine,” Hayes said. “And the internet remains the worst place on earth.”

Crosby took the coffee. “That’s not new.”

“No, but today it’s particularly committed to the bit.”

Hayes dropped into the armchair by the window, phone still in hand. “You seen the latest?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

Crosby didn’t answer right away. He was sitting at the small table by the window, reading the same three articles for a second time, not because he needed to but because he liked to make sure he hadn’t missed anything the first round. He was trying to figure out what wasn’t sitting right with the wording.

It wasn’t just gossip. It was shaping. Nudging this convoluted narrative along. Distraction. Optics. Tension. Questions. All words designed to do the same thing: make something harmless sound unstable.

“This isn’t random,” he said at last.

Hayes nodded once. “Yeah. Exactly what I figured. Yuna and Catherine also agree.”

Crosby set his phone down on the table. “It’s too clean.”

“The timing?”

“The framing.”

Hayes leaned back, thinking. “Dinner photo by itself is gross but normal gross,” he said. “The way it got pushed after? That’s different.”

“Yeah.”

Another beat passed.

Hayes tapped his thumb once against his phone case. “You thinking Mercer is still trying to pull strings?”

Crosby’s jaw shifted. “I’m thinking someone benefits for sure. Not sure it’s him, but someone.”

Hayes let out a slow breath. “That’s almost worse.”

Crosby looked back down at the article in front of him. “Not yet,” he said. “Worse is if it works.”

Hayes was quiet after that.

“Okay,” he said. “Then we watch what happens.”

Crosby glanced up.

“For now,” Hayes amended.

The corner of Crosby’s mouth moved just enough to count as a smile.

“For now. Let’s go check in with Catherine and Yuna. I have some things to go over with them anyway for the assault trial.”

By mid-afternoon, the language online had shifted again.

That was the thing with stories like this. They didn’t stay where they started. Someone nudged them, someone else made them louder, and by the time they reached the middle of the internet they barely resembled the original shape. It was so typical.

Now it wasn’t just dinner. It was chemistry between Shane and Scott. It was a distraction in the locker room. It was a question of whether the Centaurs had made a mistake, bringing drama into a team that had finally started to stabilize.

It was also questions on if Ilya and Shane’s now very public relationship had become too much, too fast, too visible, too difficult to manage and now was bad for the league as a whole.

It was, in other words, exactly the conversation someone had wanted.

Shane sat on the bike in the rehab room, scrolling aimlessly while he pedalled. The movement was automatic, steady, something his body could do without thinking while his attention stayed fixed on the screen. Across the room, one of the physios adjusted something on a chart, deliberately not looking at him.

Shane shouldn’t have been reading it.

He knew that.

But there was something grimly compelling about watching it unfold. About seeing how quickly something small turned into something else once enough people decided they were entitled to your life.

*Could Off-Ice Chaos Hurt Ottawa’s Momentum?
A Love Story, A Lawsuit, and Now This
Too Much Too Fast for the Centaurs?*

He nearly threw his phone across the room at that one. Instead, he took a breath, locked it and set it face down beside him.

The physio glanced over. “Everything okay?”

“No,” Shane said bluntly.

Then, after a beat, because the guy hadn’t asked for that much honesty—

“But not in a rehab way.”

The physio nodded, smothering the slight smile. “Important distinction.”

That almost made him laugh.

Almost.

A knock sounded against the open doorframe, and Harris leaned in, already halfway into the room.

“You busy?”

“Yes,” Shane said dryly, still pedalling.

“Cool. Ignore that. We might have something.”

Shane didn’t stop, but he met Harris’ eyes. “What do you mean, you might have something?”

Harris stepped inside, holding up his phone. “Nothing huge. Maybe nothing at all,” he said. “But one of the repost accounts credited the photo source.”

Something cold shifted under Shane’s ribs. “Okay,” he said carefully. “And?”

“And it hadn’t been mentioned before.”

Shane swung off the bike too fast, the motion pulling slightly at his side. He ignored it, already moving toward Harris.

“What does that mean?”

“It means,” Harris said, “last night those photos were floating without attribution. This morning, one of the smaller outlets used an image credit.”

He turned the phone around. There, in the corner of the most “incriminating” one, was a watermark he knew all too well. Small. Grey. Easy to miss.

Photo: NorthLine Media

His focus narrowed, everything else in the room falling away until there was just the line of text and the shape of the name.

NorthLine.

His stomach dropped. “Harris.”

“I know.”

“Wasn’t—”

“I know.”

Shane was already moving, phone in his hand, fingers working faster than his thoughts, sending a text message to Ilya, Catherine, and Yuna:

NorthLine Media.

That was all he sent.

It was enough.

ILYA:

I’m coming to you.

SHANE:

Heading to the showers now. Catherine wants to see us.

Shane looked up as he grabbed his warm-up jacket.

Harris had gone pale.

Not dramatically. Not enough to draw attention from across the room. Just enough that Shane felt it immediately, that quiet shift in colour that meant something had gone from bad to worse.

“What now?” he asked.

Harris swallowed, glancing down at his phone before looking back up. “There’s more.”

Something cold dropped lower under Shane’s ribs.

“What more?”

Harris hesitated for a second, like he was deciding how to say it—or whether to.

“The metadata,” he said finally. “On one of the reposts.”

Shane frowned. “What about it?”

Harris exhaled slowly. “It shows the upload time.”

A beat.

“They uploaded it before your dinner was over.”

The words settled in, heavy and wrong.

“They were already there,” Harris added, quieter now. “They didn’t catch it. They were waiting for it.”

Shane’s phone started vibrating in his hand.

Catherine’s name flashed across the screen at the same time Ilya appeared in the doorway.

“What happened? Shane?”

Shane didn’t answer right away.

He looked at Harris. At the phone still held between them. At the line of text he could still see in his head.

NorthLine Media.

Uploaded before dinner was over, intentionally planned out.

The pieces didn’t move slowly. They locked. All at once.

A trap. Someone had found out their plans and brought NorthLine in.

Ilya saw it happen, the minute when everything snapped into place for him. Something in Shane’s expression must have given it away, because he went still for half a second before stepping forward and holding out his hand. Harris handed over the phone without a word.

Ilya read for maybe two seconds. That was all it took.

When he looked back up, his voice was low and controlled in a way that made the room feel smaller, his accent thicker than usual and cold in a way that screamed danger. “This was arranged.”

No one argued.

Because now—

now it made sense.

Not the dinner.

Not the photos.

Shane looked down at his phone one more time before answering.

Catherine’s name still on the screen as she called back again. He hit accept.

“Tell me you saw it,” she said, all business.

Shane looked at Ilya.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice sounding steadier than he felt. “We saw it.”

There was a pause on the other end. Then Catherine, quieter: “Good. Because this wasn’t gossip. Now we know Mercer still has someone watching you. Or at least someone does.”

Shane’s fingers tightened slightly around the phone. “Yeah,” he said.

Across from him, Ilya’s jaw locked hard enough to show.

“Now we know,” Shane repeated, the truth of it settling cold and final into place. “It was a setup.”

“I want you both to ignore it – for now. We’re watching. Shane, you’ve got your rehab to complete, and if that goes well, possibly a game soon, as well as preparing for court. Trust me to do my job. Trust your mom and your team to do their jobs.”

Shane nodded as if she could see him, before managing a flat “Okay.”

They talked a little longer about strategy before Shane hung up.

When he looked up, Ilya was still there, watching him — tense, protective, barely holding the line.

Shane didn’t think about where they were.

He just crossed the room and pulled him in, kissing him like he needed it to breathe. Like the ground had shifted under his feet and this was the only thing still holding him up.

Chapter End Notes

We’ve officially moved out of “internet being the internet” territory and into “someone is actively pulling strings” territory, which is always a fun place to be as a writer and a terrible place to be as a human.

Shane and Ilya are trying to keep their footing, the team is very much in “we ride at dawn” mode, and meanwhile there’s someone out there who clearly has way too much time, access, and bad intentions.

Next chapter is where things start to get a little more... pointed. And Shane does something unexpected. (He tried to fit it into this chapter, but it didn't work, so...I actually won that argument, I guess!)

As always — comments, kudos, and (respectful) yelling at me are welcomed. Also, this is where you can spin your theories if you have any. There's a return to the ice for Shane and court still to come, so...

Chapter 21: Interference

Chapter Summary

The fallout from the paparazzi photos escalates, revealing something far more deliberate than gossip. As Shane and Ilya uncover ties between the current narrative and an earlier, contained leak, it becomes clear they are being watched — and manipulated. Refusing to be controlled, they make a decisive move: going public with their engagement and reclaiming their story. Meanwhile, elsewhere, someone with influence watches the situation unfold, determined to restore the game to what they believe it should be.

Chapter Notes

Hi friends, old and new, first-time readers...

This chapter is doing a LOT. We've got:

morning-after chaos from the paparazzi nonsense

Shane being very Shane (love that for him)

Ilya being quietly terrifying when he's angry (also love that for him)

and then the slow realization that this isn't random

We're officially shifting from messy public drama into something much more intentional and controlled, and the boys are... not interested in playing along.

Also yes, I made a choice at the end. No, I'm not sorry.

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

Harris quietly directed the staff out of the room and pulled the door closed behind him, but neither of them noticed. When they broke apart, Shane didn't move far. He rested his forehead briefly against Ilya's shoulder, breath uneven, hands still gripping the fabric of his shirt like he hadn't quite decided to let go yet.

"I was afraid of this," he said.

"I know," Ilya said softly. "I am sorry."

Shane pulled back just enough to look at him, the movement sharp and immediate. "No," he said. "I'm not."

Ilya stilled. Shane swallowed once, like he was trying to get everything in the right order before it came out.

“I love you, Ilya,” he said, quieter now, but no less certain. “And I would have been a wreck if it had been you on that plane. I am barely holding it together as it is.” His voice caught slightly, but he pushed through it. “Just the thought of losing you—”

He shook his head once, small and frustrated. “It’s enough to take me to my knees.”

Something in Ilya’s expression softened, the edge of his anger shifting into something else entirely. A shadow of his usual smile crossed his face. “I like you on your knees,” he said, automatically. It wasn’t enough to break the moment, just enough to remind Shane who he was standing in front of.

Shane huffed out a quiet breath that might have been a laugh, eyes still locked on his. “Yeah,” he said softly, in a voice that made Ilya weak in the knees himself. “I know you do.”

Then, before he could think better of it — before he could let the moment pass or second-guess himself — he moved. Slowly. Deliberately. He sank down in front of him.

Ilya went completely still. “...You’re not serious,” he said, something like disbelief threading through his voice. “Who are you and what have you done with my boyfriend?”

“Shut up,” Shane muttered, but there was no real bite to it. He reached out, steadying himself with one hand against Ilya’s side, then leaned in and pressed a brief, soft kiss on his stomach. Then he looked up.

“Ilya Rozanov,” he said, voice quiet but steady in a way that didn’t leave room for doubt. “Will you marry me?”

Ilya didn’t answer right away. For a second, he just stood there, looking down at Shane like the words hadn’t quite settled yet. Like they were still moving through him, trying to find somewhere to land. “You—” he started, then stopped.

That, more than anything, told Shane how hard it had hit. Ilya didn’t get lost for words. Not like this. Shane held his gaze, steady, even as something tight twisted under his ribs. He didn’t rush it. Didn’t fill the silence. Just stayed there, waiting.

“Ilya,” he said quietly and with certainty. “I mean it.”

“I know,” Ilya said. The words came out rougher than usual, like something had caught on the way out. His hand came up without thinking, resting against the side of Shane’s face, thumb brushing along his cheek like he needed to confirm he was actually there. “I know you do.”

A pause. Then— “This is a terrible time,” Ilya added wryly

. Shane huffed out a breath that was half a laugh. “Yeah. I’m aware.”

“We are in the middle of—” Ilya gestured vaguely toward the door, toward everything outside it. “—this.”

“Also aware.”

Another beat. Then something shifted in Ilya’s expression. Not the anger — that was still there, sitting just under the surface — but something deeper. Something steadier. “Ask me again,” he said softly.

Shane blinked. “What?”

“Ask me again,” Ilya repeated, a hint of a smile in the words. Something about the way he said it made Shane’s chest tighten. He didn’t question it. He just nodded once, took a breath, and asked again.

“Ilya Rozanov,” he said, voice steadier this time. “Will you marry me?”

Ilya’s breath left him in a quiet exhale. “Yes.” No hesitation. “Yes, Shane, I will marry you.”

Shane didn’t move right away. For a second, neither of them did. Then Ilya’s hand slid into his hair, pulling him to his feet and kissed him again. Different this time. Less panic. More decision. Shane’s hands came up automatically, cupping Ilya’s face and anchoring himself in something solid while everything else still felt like it was shifting. When they broke apart, Ilya rested his forehead briefly against his.

“We are not telling anyone yet,” he said.

Shane blinked. “Okay?”

“Because if Wyatt finds out before he has more coffee, he will make it everyone’s problem.”

“That’s... extremely fair.”

A knock sounded against the door.

Neither of them moved.

Another knock, louder this time.

“Hey,” Harris called through, voice carefully neutral. “I gave you a respectful amount of time, but Catherine is here and she looks like she’s about to start dismantling something legally.”

Shane let out a slow breath.

“Of course she is.”

Ilya’s hand lingered at the back of his neck for a second longer before dropping, the softness of the moment settling back under something sharper, more controlled.

“Come in,” he said.

The door opened immediately.

Catherine stepped in first, composed and already focused. Yuna followed just behind her, quieter but no less present, her gaze moving through the room in one quick sweep that missed nothing.

They both took in the distance between Shane and Ilya — or lack of it — and whatever was still hanging in the air between them. Neither of them commented, though they did exchange a quick look.

“We have a problem,” Catherine said.

Shane leaned back slightly, one hand dragging briefly over his face. “Yeah,” he said. “We figured.”

“No,” she replied. “You figured part of it.”

That was enough to shift the room.

Yuna set her bag down on the table, deliberate and unhurried. Catherine pulled something up on her tablet and turned it so they could see.

The photos.

Again.

Shane didn’t look at them right away. He didn’t need to.

“NorthLine is involved,” Catherine said. “But not in the way you think.”

Ilya’s expression didn’t change, but something in his posture tightened. “Explain.”

“The images weren’t released directly,” she said. “They were circulated first. Smaller accounts. Reposts. Then picked up once the narrative had traction.”

Yuna folded her arms lightly. “It creates the impression that the story already exists before anyone credible touches it.”

Shane frowned. “So someone sold them early.”

Catherine shook her head. “No,” she said. “Someone placed them.”

That landed differently.

Not careless. Not opportunistic. Intentional.

For a second, no one spoke.

Then Yuna looked at Ilya and said quietly, “We know where we’ve seen this before.”

Shane felt it before he understood it.

“The night of the plane crash,” she said.

Everything in Ilya went still.

His head turned sharply. “What about it?”

Shane frowned, already trying to catch up. “I was unconscious—”

“There was a leak,” Yuna said.

The words dropped cleanly into the space.

Shane stared at her. “A leak? A leak of what?”

“An internal leak,” Catherine clarified. “About Ilya’s reaction. About what was happening in the room before there was any public confirmation of the nature of your relationship.”

Ilya didn’t react immediately.

That was how you knew it had hit.

“When?” he asked.

“Almost immediately,” Yuna said, gentler now. “Before Wiebe cleared the room.”

“That wasn’t public,” Ilya said. “That was the locker room. Staff. Teammates.”

“Yes,” Catherine agreed. “It wasn’t supposed to be.”

Silence stretched between them, heavier now.

“You knew,” Ilya said quietly.

Yuna held his gaze. “Harris identified the source quickly,” she said. “And it was handled internally. It was contained before it spread further.”

“That is not what I asked.”

“No,” Catherine said evenly. “It isn’t.”

A beat passed.

Then Harris spoke from near the door, quieter than usual. “We knew,” he said. “Wiebe and I dealt with it.”

The silence that followed was different. Sharper. More personal. Like the room itself had tightened around the words.

Ilya didn’t move.

“And no one told me.”

His accent had thickened. His voice had gone lower, colder.

“You were trying to get to him,” Yuna said. “You believed he might not survive. There was nothing to be gained by adding to that in the moment. Harris did the right thing.”

“That was not your decision to make.”

“No,” Catherine said calmly. “But it was theirs to manage. You were in crisis, Ilya. The last thing anyone needed was you turning around and putting your fist through the wrong person.”

That, more than anything, seemed to get through to him. He dragged a hand over his mouth and took a deep, uneven breath.

Shane stayed quiet, watching it unfold, something cold settling under his ribs as the shape of it came into focus.

“...So someone knew,” he said slowly. “While all of that was happening.”

“Yes,” Yuna said.

“And they told people.”

“Yes. They shared information about that moment externally.”

Another pause.

Then Yuna continued, quieter, “And now we believe they’ve done it again. Only this time, they had help. They may have passed along information about your plans with Scott and Kip, and someone else — someone with more reach — helped turn it into this.”

That was the moment it connected.

Not just the photos.

The timing. The framing. The way it had all seemed to exist before they could even react to it.

Shane exhaled slowly. “You think it’s the same person, and this time they had backup.”

“Yes,” Catherine said. “I believe we’re dealing with the same access point.”

Ilya’s jaw tightened. “If they broke the NDA, they’re liable.”

“Yes,” Yuna said.

Her voice didn’t change.

“They signed it knowing exactly what it meant.”

Silence settled again.

Heavier this time.

“So this didn’t start with the photos,” Shane said.

“No,” Catherine replied. “This started the moment someone realized they could reach into your life and make it public before you were ready.”

Ilya rubbed a hand over his mouth. When he spoke again, his voice was even lower.

“Why?”

Catherine didn’t hesitate. “At best guess? They don’t like what you represent.”

“Bisexual,” Ilya said automatically.

That almost made Shane laugh, if any of this had been remotely funny.

Yuna’s mouth twitched faintly, but only for a second. “And they wanted to see how much pressure it would take to destabilize you,” she said.

Shane let out a slow breath. “Okay,” he said. “What do we do for now? I’m assuming there’s a legal side to all of this.”

“There is,” Catherine said. “But for now, we don’t react publicly.”

“We watch,” Yuna added. “We track how it moves. Where it spreads. Who benefits.”

“So we trace it back to the actual power here,” Shane said flatly.

Ilya didn’t like that. It showed in every line of him. But after a second, he nodded anyway.

“Fine.”

Shane reached out without thinking, his hand finding Ilya’s and tightening around it before he pulled him a little closer.

“We might be able to stir the pot a little, then.”

Harris raised an eyebrow from the doorway. “You want to stir the pot?”

Shane looked at him, expression flattening in a way that made him seem suddenly older, steadier.

“I want to find the fucking asshole who thinks they can control our lives,” he said. “And our careers.”

Ilya turned and looked at him properly. “Are you sure, sweetheart? That’s much more public than you usually like.”

Shane met his eyes. “I have never been more sure of anything, Ilya.”

Then he looked back at Harris.

“Want to help us announce our engagement?”

For one rare, glorious second, Harris looked completely speechless.

Yuna let out a small gasp.

Catherine smiled.

And Ilya—

Ilya just stared at Shane, something astonished and helpless and fiercely in love moving across his face all at once.

Catherine was the first one to recover.

“That,” she said, calm as ever, “just might work.”

The article hit Scott halfway through his second coffee.

He wasn’t even looking for it. That was the part that irritated him most. One minute he was half-scrolling through game clips, half-listening to a panel argue about defensive structure, and the next his feed refreshed and dropped him straight into something that looked just credible enough to be a problem.

He stared at the headline for a second, sighed, then opened it anyway.

“Of course,” he muttered.

Across the room, Kip didn’t look up right away. He was sitting cross-legged on the couch, sketchbook balanced against his knee, pencil moving in quick, absent lines the way it always did when he was thinking through something else.

“That tone,” Kip said, “means you found something stupid.”

Scott huffed out a breath. “You could say that.”

Kip finally glanced up. “How stupid?”

Scott tilted his phone toward him.

Kip stood up and came over, lightly kissing his cheek as he leaned over just enough to see the screen, his body pressed up against Scott’s back.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” He said, exasperated.

Scott let out a short laugh. “Yeah.”

Kip reached down, took the phone from his hand without asking, and started scrolling properly. His expression didn’t flare into anger right away. It tightened. Focused. Which, if anything, was worse. Scott watched as Kip studied the pictures closely.

“That’s what they went with?” he said.

“Apparently.”

Kip flicked to the next photo. Then the next.

“They really committed to this angle, huh.”

Scott leaned back slightly, watching him instead of the screen. “You see it too.”

Kip tapped the screen, and turned the phone to show Scott the photo. How his hand was on Shane’s arm and Ilya was turned slightly away.

A moment that had lasted maybe two seconds, stretched into something it had never been.

“They picked it,” Kip said simply. “And framed it as something impossible, given both Ilya and I were there.”

Scott nodded once. “Yeah.”

Kip handed the phone back, but didn’t move away this time. He stayed where he was, wrapping his arms around Scott and resting his chin on his head., presence steady and familiar in a way that grounded everything else.

“You hear from them?” he asked.

Scott shook his head. “Not yet.”

A beat.

Then, more quietly—

“They’ve seen it.”

“Yeah,” Kip said. “No way they haven’t.”

Silence settled for a second, not uncomfortable. Just... full.

Kip shifted slightly, reaching back for his coffee without looking, fingers brushing Scott’s wrist on the way. Casual. Automatic.

“Okay,” he said. “So. Are we mad, or are we impressed by the sheer level of bullshit?”

Scott snorted. “Both.”

“Fair.”

Scott glanced back down at the screen, thumb hovering but not moving.

“They’re not actually coming for us,” he said after a second.

Kip’s mouth tilted slightly. “No.”

“They’re coming for them.”

“Yeah.”

It wasn’t a question.

Scott exhaled slowly. “We were just convenient.”

Kip leaned his head briefly against Scott’s shoulder. “We usually are,” he said lightly.

Scott huffed out a quiet laugh, but it didn’t quite land. His eyes were back on the photo again.

“You think this wasn’t random,” he said.

Kip straightened slightly. “No. I really don’t. It’s too clean, too specific. The cropping is done to make it look the absolute worst. And done badly, just to keep it a little vague.”

Scott shook his head. “Yeah,” he said. “I was thinking that too.”

Kip glanced at him, expression thoughtful now. “You don’t get that shot by accident. And you don’t get it at exactly the right moment unless you’re already waiting for it.”

Something in Scott’s chest tightened.

“Yeah,” he said again.

Across the room, the sports anchors started talking about the whole thing. Of course. Kip didn’t even look. He just reached for the remote and muted it without ceremony.

“Not today,” he said.

Scott’s mouth twitched faintly. “Appreciate that.”

Kip bumped his shoulder. “Always.”

A second later, Scott’s phone buzzed in his hand. He frowned slightly and looked down.

Kip leaned in automatically, reading over his shoulder.

“Hollandov Bodyguards?” he asked with a laugh. “Let me guess – Brad?”

Scott nodded slowly. “Yeah. He thinks he’s funny.”

The screen lit up with names before a single text from Shane made him pause.

Kip's eyebrow raised just a fraction. "Okay," he said quietly. "That's new."

Scott read through the messages, and looked at Kip in shock.

HOLLANOV BODYGUARDS (Group Chat)

Marchand:

okay but HOLD ON

Marchand:

why is everyone being calm all of a sudden

Marchand:

i don't like it

Hayes:

because people have lives, Brad?

Marchand:

rude

MacKinnon:

accurate

Shane Hollander has added Hayden Pike

Hollander:

hey guys.

Hollander:

we need a favour

Pike:

What the fresh hell is this and why am I here?

Pike:

Also, what favour?

Barrett:

define favour

Marchand:

if it involves crime i'm in

Crosby:

No, Brad.

Crosby:

What's up, Shane?

Rozanov:

listen

Rozanov:

we are going to post something tonight

Rozanov:

we need you all to support it immediately

Rozanov:

no hesitation or questions.

Hayes:

what are we backing

Hollander:

our engagement

Pike:

Oh man, Jackie is gonna be pissed I knew before she did

Rozanov:

I texted her already, Pike. She knows.

Pike:

Well fuck now I'm mad I didn't know first.

Marchand:

EXCUSE ME

Barrett:

???

MacKinnon:

hold on

Hayes:

well that's one way to do it

Crosby:

Are you sure?

Crosby:

Not about the engagement part, that's great and congrats. But the post?

Rozanov:

yes, and thank you Captain Canada.

Hollander:

Ilya. Behave. But yeah, Sid, we have a plan.

Hunter:

What do you need from us?

Hollander:

Engage fast. Like it, comment, don't let anything else take over the feed

Rozanov:

we are baiting them. but also actually engaged, so like the saying, two birds and one stone, yes?

Marchand:

OH WE CAN DO THAT

Marchand:

i was born for this

Hayes:

that's concerning

MacKinnon:

deeply

Hayes:

Also, wait – when did you get engaged?

Rozanov:

This morning. Was very sweet. Shane got on his knees for me in the training room

Hollander:

ILYA

Barrett:

Well that's a mental image that will never go away.

Hayes:

Wait – PLEASE tell me you told Yuna. You CANNOT go public without telling Yuna. She will kill you and make me bury the bodies.

Rozanov:

She knows.

Crosby:

Well I'm happy for you guys, even if the situation kinda sucks. Happy to help.

Crosby:

Scott, how are you and Kip holding up?

Hunter:

We're fine, thanks Sid. Not even the weirdest thing we've seen about us.

Marchand:

have you chosen colours yet? Venue? Flowers?

Rozanov:

Marchy you and I will be talking later.

Hollander:

Ilya. No.

Marchand:

Ilya. yes. I know people, I got you.

Hollander:

for fucks sake.

Hollander:

And hey, guys?

Hollander:

thanks

McDavid:

Always.

Price:

You know that.

Marleau:

Every time.

Hayes:

you don't even need to ask

Hunter:

We're in.

UNKNOWN POV

The room was dim, lit only by the glow of a screen that refreshed in steady intervals, each update feeding into the next before the last one had fully settled. The photos had already taken on a life of their own, circulating far beyond where they'd started. Reposted. Cropped. Reframed.

Harmless.

Every part of it harmless. And yet look what it had become.

He scrolled slowly this time, not interested in any one comment, but in the shape of it. The way the conversation bent. The way it fractured. The way people filled in gaps with whatever they wanted to believe.

It wasn't about the game anymore. That was the problem.

His thumb stilled against the screen as he seethed. "This is what happens," he muttered, voice low in the quiet, "when you let it turn into something else. It's supposed to be about hockey."

More arguments. More opinions. More people who had never stepped onto a rink in their lives suddenly deciding what belonged there.

His jaw clenched. "Hockey used to mean something. It wasn't about this. It was about what happened on the ice. Everything else stayed where it belonged."

The feed shifted as something new slid into place — cleaner, sharper, cutting through the noise instead of feeding it.

OTTAWA CENTAURS — OFFICIAL RELEASE

Centaurs announce Shane Hollander's debut with the team.

First game back following recovery from the plane crash to take place tonight against the New York Admirals. He will be playing center on the second line.

His grip tightened slightly around his phone. "Well," he said quietly. "At least they aren't on the same line."

A pause.

"Maybe this is still controllable."

His gaze lingered on the screen, not on the announcement — but on what would come after it. The coverage. The narrative. The attention.

"Maybe," they added, almost to themselves, "they remember what this is supposed to be."

A knock at the door.

"Sir? There's a call for you on line three. Press is asking for your statement on Hollander's return. And Hughes is on line two — he's requesting a meeting. Says he has information."

A beat.

His eyes didn't leave the screen. "Put the press through," they said. "I'll take the call here."

Another pause.

“And tell Hughes to come in at 1. We’ll talk then.”

The assistant hesitated just long enough to be noticed.

“Right away, sir.”

The door closed softly behind them, and the room fell into silence again before the soft beep of the phone on his desk letting him know the call was waiting for him. He took a deep breath and gave a booming statement in support – how thrilled he was that Hollander had recovered and was heading back to the ice, how thrilled he was for Rozanov and Hollander to feel safe in their community, and how hockey is a place for everyone.

After he hung up, his thumb hovered over his cell for a moment. Then very deliberately —

He opened a new message.

Chapter End Notes

So. Do you hate me yet? (I really hope not, but I mean, fair if you do!)

We’ve got:

- a confirmed pattern of leaks
- someone actively shaping the narrative
- the boys deciding to absolutely not cooperate with that

AND a very strategic, very public engagement about to drop

Also, just in case things felt too safe, there's also the end, because clearly we're not done making their lives difficult yet.

Next chapter will be fun though. The wheels are turning, the trap is closing, and romance is in the air.

Oh. And hockey. Shane is back where he belongs, on the ice showing everyone he's Shane Motherfucking Hollander.

As always—comments, screaming, theories, and emotional damage welcome 
Respectfully fo course.

Until next time!

-SD

Chapter 22: Overwritten

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya go public with their engagement in the most deliberate way possible, reclaiming the narrative that had been twisted against them and turning the internet fully in their favour. With the league, players, and fans rallying behind them, Shane heads into his first game back after the plane crash and puts on an absolute show, proving exactly who he is and what the rest of the league is now dealing with. But while the world celebrates, Roger Crowell realizes he is losing control of the story — and quietly begins setting something darker in motion.

Chapter Notes

Hi friends, loons, random passerby's, strays, and everyone else!

This chapter has everything I personally enjoy causing myself emotional distress over: giant public declarations of love, hockey chaos, revenge by social media, Shane Hollander being Shane MOTHERFUCKING Hollander, and a healthy amount of ominous bullshit happening in the background.

Also yes, I fully chose violence in the form of “what if his first game back was absolutely unreal?” and no, I am not sorry.

blows kisses

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

A carousel of images and video clips went live on the Centaurs’ social media in the hours before game time.

It started at the beginning. Rookie footage. Grainy, fast, a little rough around the edges. Shane on one end of the ice, already controlled, already deliberate. Ilya in another frame entirely — faster, sharper, dangerous in a way that didn’t ask permission.

Separate. At first.

Then the distance between them started to close. Games where they shared the ice. Not together — not yet — but close enough to feel it. A hit that landed a little harder than necessary. A shift that stretched just long enough to matter. A glance that didn’t quite belong in the moment it happened.

Nothing obvious, not really. Not unless you were looking for it. There were Cup photos. Different teams. Different years. Same kind of smile — earned, exhausted, lit from somewhere deep. Then something softer, The Irina Foundation.

Kids climbing all over them, both of them laughing in ways the cameras didn't usually catch. Coaches in the background. Familiar faces. And every now and then — just at the edge of the frame — they were closer than they needed to be.

Then gentle coverage of the crash. Brief and respectful, and did not linger. Then THE photo. Ilya at Shane's bedside, forehead pressed to their joined hands. Completely unfiltered. His hand wrapped tight around Shane's like letting go had never been an option. The kind of moment that had once been taken without permission. Framed. Twisted. Turned into something it had never been meant to be.

And now seen exactly for what it was. Love. Fear. Relief. All of it, stripped clean of anything else.

Then the carousel moved on, pictures of Shane in the hospital, awake and smiling. Shane and Ilya laughing at their house. The trade announcement. Shane standing with the mascot, laughing as Ilya pretends to be jealous and pouts.

And finally, one last image. Shane and Ilya on the ice in their practice jerseys, eyes on each other, smiles on their faces, a puck in motion between them as they completed a pass. The play looked amazing – of course it did – but it wasn't what stood out about the picture. It was the way they were looking at each other.

The caption didn't even need to explain anything.

@CensOfficial

Some stories take time.

Some take everything.

Through rivalry, distance, injury, and the kind of moments that change you — some things don't break, they build.

Congratulations to Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov on their engagement.

#CentaurHockey #Hollanov

Shane's post went up less than a minute later. No coordination visible, or any attempt to match the tone and scale. Just simple, sweet, and personal. A photo from home. Late afternoon spilling thorough the windows. Ilya laying with his head in Shane's lap, laughing at something off camera, one hand hooked loosely in Shane's shirt like he hadn't even noticed he'd done it. Shane smiling down at him, slightly exasperated. Hayden and Jackie are sitting on the other end of the couch, Hayden looking on with a bemused scowl and Jackie openly laughing, another body just off to the side. It looked like a fun afternoon with friends celebrating.

It felt so very normal.

@shanehollander

I didn't expect to find this. I definitely didn't expect it to take almost losing everything to understand how certain I am that you are everything.

I love you. I'm here. And I'm not wasting another second of it.

Can't wait to marry you, @IlyaRozanov81.

Ilya's was live at almost the exact same time, because of course it did. And of course it was chaos.

The first photo was of Shane on the dock at the cottage. Shirtless, feet in the water, hair falling into his face while he stared out over the lake like he didn't know anyone was watching.

The second was a selfie — both of them tangled together in a hammock, grinning, completely unbothered by the world.

@Rozy81

I was already his. He just made it official. Which is rude, because I was clearly planning to do it first.

I said yes. Obviously. (There was never another option. Have you seen my fiancé?? LOOK AT HIM. The beautiful freckles. Actually wait, don't look at him. I don't want to share.)

Also if you had opinions before — keep them. We are busy being in love.

He's mine. I'm his. End of discussion.

I love you, @shanehollander. Forever is not long enough, but we'll make it work anyway.

The internet didn't so much react as detonate. Which was the plan, but still caught them by surprise to a degree. Shares stacked in real time. Comments rolling faster than they could fully load. Media accounts hesitate for half a second before committing, and then committing hard.

On Shane's post, people didn't just like it — they lingered. Screenshot. Repost. Quote. The kind of engagement that didn't spike and disappear, but settled in and held.

And then —

Ilya's post. Which blew the whole thing wide open. Messy. Possessive. A little unhinged in a way that felt completely, undeniably real.

And right on time, as planned, the players showed up.

@BradMarchand63 (commenting on Ilya's post):

I KNEW IT

*seriously though—so happy for you both ❤️
also i'm planning something. you don't get a say.*

@WyattHayes:

about time honestly

love you guys. this is really, really good ❤️

@ConnorMcDavid97:

Happy for you both.

@CareyPricey:

This is almost obnoxiously sweet. Congratulations, you two!

@NathanMacKinnon29:

Finally.

(seriously—congrats, boys)

@TBarrett55:

yeah okay this is actually perfect

really happy for you both

@BoHorvat53:

Love this. Congrats guys 🙌

@MarkStone:

Hell yeah. Big congrats ❤️

@BradMarchand63 reposted @IlyaRozanov81

still can't believe you pulled hollander but good for you

(seriously though—love you both)

@WyattHayes reposted @ShaneHollanderHockeyPlayer

this one hit a little harder

proud of you, man

@SidneyCrosby87 reposted @OttawaCentaursOfficial

Proud of you both.

@ScottHunterNYA reposted @OttawaCentaursOfficial

Yeah. That makes sense.

Congrats, boys.

@HaydenPike (comment on @OttawaCentaursOfficial):

okay but real talk—this is really good

congrats guys ❤️

@MrsJackiePike (comment on @OttawaCentaursOfficial):

I am actually crying.

This is so, so good.

Congratulations—you deserve this ❤️

@BradMarchand63 (reply to @IlyaRozanov81):
I'M STILL DOING THE WEDDING

@NathanMacKinnon29 (reply to @BradMarchand63):
no you're not

@WyattHayes (reply to @BradMarchand63):
we're protecting them from you actually

@BradMarchand63:
you're all uninvited

@TBarrett55 (reply to @BradMarchand63):
worth it

@SidneyCrosby87 (comment on @shanehollander's post):
Really happy for you.

@HockeyCanada reposted **@OttawaCentaursOfficial**
Proud moment for the game.

@LilHaas reposted **@OttawaCentaursOfficial**:
this is unreal.
congrats guys ❤️

@BBQWithBood reposted **@OttawaCentaursOfficial**
yeah this is everything
so happy for you both

It spread. Fast.

But not just because of who was posting, because of what it *felt* like. And the fans —

Well, the fans lost their minds.

Instagram — @OttawaCentaursOfficial (comments):

@hockeygirl89:
I HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR THIS SINCE 2019 ARE YOU KIDDING ME

@pucksandpride:
THE BEDSIDE PHOTO???? THE GROWTH???? THE STORY????

@censfanforlife:
nah because whoever tried to make this a scandal earlier today is SICK right now 🤡
#FuckNorthLine #LoveIsLove

@bi4hollander:

HE SAID "I'M NOT WASTING ANOTHER SECOND" I AM UNWELL

@goaliechaos:

Ilya posting Shane shirtless is CRAZY WORK 🤡🤡🤡

@nhlmemesdaily:

Marchand in the comments already planning the wedding I can't breathe

@canadianicequeen:

THIS is what hockey is supposed to be about actually ❤️

@censarmy84:

DROP THE JERSEYS IMMEDIATELY I NEED A HOLLANDOV ONE YESTERDAY

@artbykate (liked by @MrsJackiePike):

not me crying over people I don't know again

Instagram — @IlyaRozanov81 (comments):

@thirstythirdline:

sir respectfully your fiancé is EVERYONE'S fiancé now

@iceanalyticsnerd:

the possession language??? the devotion??? i love this man

@softforhollander:

"LOOK AT HIM" SIR WE ARE

@goalhornenergy:

this is the most russian declaration of love i've ever seen

@marchanddefender:

BRAD IS RIGHT WE NEED TO DISCUSS THE FLOWERS

Instagram — @shanehollander (comments):

@quietskates:

this is the softest thing i've ever read in my life

@puckwitch:

"i'm not wasting another second" ok cool gonna go cry now

@nhlfan94:

the way this man just casually dropped the hardest line of the year

@censfanmom:

protect them at all costs

Twitter / X Trending: Hollanov Engagement

@rinkratlive:

*this went from “scandal” to “engagement announcement + league-wide support” in under 3 hours
whoever tried to set them up just got BURIED*

@hockeyopsinsider:

*players aren't just supporting this — they're amplifying it
this feels both coordinated AND genuine, which is... honestly impressive*

@puckculture:

the centaurs just rewrote the narrative in real time and the entire league said “yeah we're going with that”

@goalieunion:

*hayes reposting + marchand spiraling + crosby quietly showing up
this is the most hockey thing i've ever seen*

@eastdivisionwatch:

respectfully how is anyone supposed to defend a line with hollander AND rozy on it while they're IN LOVE

@fanthreadqueen (viral tweet):

okay but let's talk about the bedside photo

- 1. it was used against them*
- 2. they took it back*
- 3. they made it part of their ENGAGEMENT ANNOUNCEMENT*

that's not just romantic that's POWER

@nhlmemesdaily:

marchand planning a wedding like it's a power play strategy is taking me OUT

@censarmyupdates:

*just a reminder shane hollander is ALSO making his return tonight
like???? you're telling me we get THIS and a game????*

By the time the teams hit the ice for warmups, it wasn't about the photos anymore. The dinner wasn't on anyone's radar. Even the lawsuit had dropped from conversation. Instead, it was all about them – and Shane making his return to the ice.

The arena felt it before anyone ever said it out loud.

It wasn't just louder — it was *different*. The kind of energy that settled under your skin instead of just hitting your ears. It buzzed through the glass, through the boards, through the ice itself. You could feel it in the way people leaned forward before anything had even happened yet, like they were bracing for something they didn't have words for.

Shane noticed the jerseys first, and it made something in his chest loosen. It wasn't just Centaurs colours. Not just the usual spread of away fans. These were newer. Altered. Intentional. Rainbow stitching worked into names and numbers that hadn't looked like that before. ROZANOV was everywhere (and it took him a minute to figure out what that meant). HOLLANDER was also represented, in his new jersey — and now meant something else entirely.

The emotions of it caught him for half a second in the tunnel. Just long enough for it to land somewhere deeper than he expected. He exhaled softly and headed to the ice. It was just another hockey game after all — and he had played hundreds of those.

Routine.

Always the routine.

Warmups hit like a wall of sound the second his skate touched the ice. The roar surged, sharp and immediate, rising with him as he pushed into his first lap. The familiar scrape of his edges grounded him in a way nothing else had all day, the rhythm of it settling back into his body piece by piece. He didn't look up. Didn't acknowledge the reaction that followed every touch of the puck, every turn, every clean pass.

He just skated.

One lap. Then another.

Let his body remember.

Across the rink, Scott Hunter watched him through a tight turn, eyes narrowing slightly as Shane corrected mid-edge without losing speed.

“...yeah,” he muttered under his breath. “He’s going to be trouble tonight.”

Behind the glass next to the visitor’s bench, Kip’s pencil was already moving, quick, instinctive strokes chasing something he couldn’t quite capture as he drew the scene.

“Yeah well,” he said quietly. “It means more to him than probably anyone else.”

**

The puck dropped at 7:08.

“And we are underway here in Ottawa,” the play-by-play voice cut in, steady and familiar over the swell of the crowd. “All eyes tonight on Shane Hollander in his return — first game

back since the crash — and there's a buzz in this building you can't ignore."

"Yeah, and an interesting decision here," the analyst added. "He's not starting on a line with Rozanov. They're letting him find his footing on his own first."

"That makes sense though, they now have two elite centers. Why put them together when you can have two lines that feature a superstar?"

"The question remains – will we see Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov on a line together tonight? And could the fans handle it?"

His first shift was clean, controlled, and just slightly off. Shane took an early pass along the boards in neutral ice, turned it up through the zone with speed — but hesitated just a fraction too long at the blue line. The lane closed before he could cut inside, and he adjusted mid-stride, chipping it deep instead.

"Little bit of timing there," the analyst noted. "That's expected. It comes back quick."

Shane circled back through the play, tracking his assignment without overcommitting, keeping everything simple. No rush. No forcing it. Getting comfortable in his game again.

The second shift came easier.

He drove the zone harder this time, took contact along the boards and held it instead of releasing. Kicked the puck back to the point and stayed in position, ready for the return. When it came, he missed it by inches, stick just off angle as it slid past.

"Just off the blade there," play-by-play called. "But that's a good read."

By the third shift, something shifted. Not dramatically or in a way anyone could track really, just a quiet sense of comfort. A neutral zone pass telegraphed half a second too early — Shane stepped into the lane before it was even fully committed, stick out, clean interception.

"He's got space—Hollander carries—"

He didn't force it. He never had to when he was playing his kind of game. He simply dropped it clean to his winger, cut inside, pulled a defender with him, opening the lane instead of taking it.

The shot went wide, but the play stayed alive.

"That's a smart decision," the analyst said. "That's him trusting the game again instead of trying to rush it."

His first goal didn't come clean, of course, but it seemed inevitable. A point shot through traffic deflected wide, kicking out into a mess of bodies collapsing toward the crease. Sticks clashed. Skates scraped. The puck vanished for a split second under pressure.

Then suddenly Shane was there. He drove straight into it, took a shoulder to the ribs and stayed on his feet anyway, digging the puck free with one hand.

“It’s loose—still loose—Hollander battling—”

Second shove, tight pack, stick traffic everywhere. The angle was awkward. But somehow, he watched the puck slip between the goalie’s skate and the post and into the net.

“AND HE’S GOT IT!”

The sound hit all at once, a full-body reaction from the crowd that didn’t build — it just exploded.

“Hollander’s first goal back, and that’s a hard one,” the analyst said, almost approving.

“That’s not pretty. That takes effort, and shows the ribs must be healing well, considering the amount of contact he took to get it.”

Shane barely reacted. Just a sharp exhale, a tight fist, and he was already turning back toward the bench. His teammates swarmed him anyway, but his eyes were only looking for one person.

On the bench waiting for the shift change, Ilya didn’t move, just watched with a big grin on his face and gave Shane a nod and a wink.

The second period tightened everything. The Admirals, as always, adjusted quickly, closing space through neutral ice, forcing shorter plays and quicker decisions. Scott led it, setting the pace shift by shift, pushing the game back into something heavier and more structured.

“You can see New York changing the pace here,” play-by-play noted. “They’re not letting this turn into an easy win for the hometown star.”

Late in the period, Scott stepped into a pass at the blue line and suddenly had open ice. He immediately took advantage.

“And here comes Hunter — he’s got a step — he’s in alone —”

The building dipped into that sharp, collective silence as Scott easily dodged Barrett and netted his first goal of the game to tie it up. He celebrated with his team, and skated past Ilya with a grin and a cheeky little wink.

“Can’t let you guys have all the fun, Rozy!”

“Enjoy it while you can, old man!” Ilya shot back, also grinning on his way back to the bench.

Shane hit the ice the second Ilya cleared the boards. He pressured deep in the zone, forced a bad clear, stayed on the puck instead of peeling away. It came loose along the boards — he grabbed it, turned, and snapped a shot through traffic before the lane could close. It was in the back of the net before the goalie even realized it was coming.

“That’s two for Hollander,” the play-by-play called. “And that one looked vintage! He’s definitely finding his footing out there, what a great thing to see!.”

“Yeah,” the analyst added. “He’s not just back — he’s driving play. Highest hockey IQ on the ice. And he still hasn’t taken a single shift with Rozanov.”

By the third period, the game had opened again. It was faster and heavier, every shift layered with more contact and urgency. Shane wasn’t chasing anymore though. He was fully settled in and in his element. He was reading plays and players, waiting for his moments, choosing which ones to take advantage of.

So when one of the admirals were called for a hooking penalty and the latest chance for a power play arrived, Wiebe grinned and tapped Ilya on the shoulder. “Get in there Rozy, Right wing. Lets give the people what they are here to see. Go make your fiancé look like a superstar.”

He didn’t have to tell Ilya twice.

“Listen to that crowd! Now this is what everyone’s been waiting for,” the play-by-play voice said, laughter in his voice. “Rozanov and Hollander on the ice together. We are in for a treat.”

They didn’t look at each other.

They didn’t need to.

Shane easily won the faceoff, sending the puck to Ilya. Ilya held the puck high, patient, pulling the penalty kill toward him, waiting for something that wasn’t there yet. He could feel when the moment was right though. And when it was, he sent the puck across the ice without even turning his head.

Shane was already there and ready. It was a hard, fast one-timer that flashed past the glove of the New York goalie.

“They didn’t even look at each other,” the announcer said in disbelief. “And now Hollander has a hat trick in his first game back.”

“That’s instinct,” the analyst replied. “That’s not something you teach. They just know where the other is on the ice. The eastern conference is never going to be the same.”

Across the rink, Scott leaned back slightly on the bench, exhaling through his nose.

“...yeah,” he muttered wryly. “We are all absolutely fucked.”

The fourth goal felt inevitable, really. The game moved along, another penalty against New York, another power play that Ilya and Shane were on the ice together for. The puck was flying over the ice, moving too fast to be followed easily.

Blue line. Half wall. Down low. Back up again. Landed on Ilya's stick. He stepped in, pulling two defenders with him as he moved into New York's zone. He held on just long enough to open a lane that barely existed, and sent a blind pass through it, the Shane easily picked up. He danced around another player and flipped the puck from forehand to backhand before lightly chipping it into the net.

"And that's four!" the play-by-play shouted over the roar. "Shane Hollander with four goals in his return!"

"That chemistry is dangerous," the analyst said, almost laughing now. "The rest of this league is going to have to figure that out in a hurry. How can you beat not one, but two generational players at once?"

The Admirals answered once more, with Scott netting his second goal of the game on a sloppy pass he intercepted. He could help shaking his head and laughing as he skated past the Centaur's bench and hearing Ilya call out "Not bad for a dinosaur!"

When the final horn sounded it was 5–2 Ottawa. Shane was mobbed by his teammates "Shane MOTHERFUCKING Hollander!" Barrett yelled, planting a kiss on his cheek. "Welcome back, baby!"

Ilya gave him a playful shove. "No kissing my fiancé, Troy. That's my job."

"Not my fault, he's pretty and better than you."

"This was his night, not mine. And yes he's pretty. Still no kissing."

Shane laughed, and leaned in to lightly press a kiss to Ilya's mouth. "Don't be jealous. You get to go home with the first star of the game."

The arena nearly exploded when that moment was flashed on the Jumbotron. Wiebe groaned. "Hit the showers gentleman. Remember you're at work, Rozy – behave!" He paused, then patted Shane on the shoulder as everyone filed down the tunnel. "Welcome home, Hollander."

In the locker room, it turned into a more comfortable noise. Laughter. Voices. Gear hitting the floor. Someone singing badly in the showers.

Shane sat for a second longer than he needed to, hands braced on his knees, breath still uneven — not from pain like he was expecting, but from everything layered on top of the adrenaline. Ilya dropped down beside him.

"Four," he said. "Really, Hollander? Couldn't share?"

Shane glanced at him with a grin. "Well, I gotta catch up in points, don't I, Captain?"

Ilya's mouth curved slightly, eyes darkening. "Show off."

Shane huffed. “You passed me the puck.”

“Yes,” Ilya said easily. “Because you were where you were supposed to be. Do you expect a reward for being where you were supposed to be?”

Shane met his eyes, before flicking his gaze down to his mouth and back up. “Yeah, maybe I do. Captain.”

Ilya groaned and swore under his breath. “Can we just go home now? We have a shower at home that’s way nicer.”

With a cheeky grin, Shane stripped off his gear and sauntered off to the showers, glancing over his shoulder. “You can’t drive in skates, Ilya,”

Elsewhere—far from the noise of the arena, far from the sharp cut of skates on ice and the roar of a crowd that had already decided what story it wanted to tell—the screen kept refreshing.

The room itself was quiet. Intentionally so. Thick walls, controlled lighting, the kind of space designed to keep the outside world at a distance. But it didn’t matter. The noise was still there, just translated —numbers climbing in real time, metrics updating faster than they could stabilize, each refresh feeding into the next before the last one had fully settled.

Roger Crowell stood in the center of it, unmoving.

The engagement numbers were accelerating now, not in a steady climb but in sharp, aggressive spikes. Shares multiplying. Comments stacking in waves. Every second adding weight to something that, only hours ago, had been manageable.

Containable.

That was the problem. Not the posts themselves. Not even the announcement. Those could be addressed. Redirected. Reframed if necessary.

But this — the fan reaction and other player support – this wasn’t slowing. It was spreading.

The narrative he had spent days, quietly and deliberately, shaping had already begun to collapse under the weight of it. The insinuations, the careful framing, the questions that had been planted just deep enough to take hold weren’t being debated anymore. They were being outright ignored.

Crowell’s jaw tightened, just slightly. “This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

The words were quiet. Measured, even, but there was an edge to them now.

Across the room, Kieran Hughes shifted, the tension in his posture barely contained. His hands were clasped too tightly in front of him, eyes locked on the screen like he could will it back into something recognizable.

“They shouldn’t have had time to turn it,” Hughes said, voice low but sharp. “Not like this. It was working this morning. People were questioning it.”

Crowell didn’t look at him. His gaze stayed fixed on the screen, tracking the flow of it. The way the conversation bent, reformed, and redirected itself around the new narrative as it had always been meant to.

“They didn’t lose control,” he said evenly. “They redirected it. They’re smarter than we gave them credit for.”

Hughes let out a short breath, frustrated. “It shouldn’t matter,” he said. “It’s not supposed to be a romance; it’s not supposed to be about better representation. That’s all bullshit. It’s supposed to be about the game. That’s what people want.”

Crowell’s expression didn’t shift. “I agree with you, but the media angle on this is good. Turning it around now? That might be impossible. We might need something more drastic. Perhaps even dangerous,” he replied calmly.

The silence that followed stretched thin. Hughes shifted again, restless now.

Crowell turned then, finally giving him his full attention.

“Everything is something else,” he said calmly. “If you know how to present it.”

Hughes held his gaze for a second too long before looking away.

“They deserved to know,” he muttered. “Back then. What was happening. Rozanov never should have reacted so publicly, it makes people ask questions – “ He cut himself off, jaw tightening. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

Crowell didn’t respond to the whining of a disgraced assistant trainer. He certainly couldn’t validate or correct it.

So he Just let it sit there as he turned back to the screen.

“They’ve made their move,” he said. “Which means we make ours.”

Hughes looked at him again, something sharper now beneath the frustration. “What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing,” Crowell said at first.

Hughes blinked. “Nothing?”

“For now,” Crowell clarified. “We don’t react to this. We don’t chase it. We let it peak.”

His gaze shifted — not to the numbers this time, but to the structure beneath them. The accounts amplifying it. The timing. The coordination.

“They’ve chosen to make this public,” he continued. “Which means we move it somewhere they can’t control.”

Hughes frowned. “How?”

“You go talk to Mercer. See if the two of you can arrange...something.”

Crowell’s phone buzzed against the desk. He glanced at it once, then picked it up, gesturing Hughes towards the door.

“He’s expecting you,” he said.

Hughes hesitated. “That’s it?”

“For now.”

The bar was dim and dingy. It certainly wasn’t empty, just quiet enough that no one paid any attention.

Hughes spotted Mercer immediately, sitting in the back corner with an empty glass and an untouched drink sitting in front of him like he’d been waiting a while, but hadn’t bothered to check the time.

Hughes slid into the seat across from him.

“Crowell wants us to create an incident.”

Mercer didn’t respond right away. He turned the glass once between his fingers, watching the light catch against it before setting it back down.

“I heard,” he said.

Hughes leaned forward, lowering his voice. “So. What do you need me to do?”

Mercer was silent, staring into his drink like it held all the answers. The room felt colder as his expression turned into something mean. Mercer leaned forward just enough to close the space between them.

“Take care of it.”

The words landed differently this time, because this wasn’t strategy. This was much, much darker.

“Yeah,” he said slowly, menace threading into his voice. “Yeah. I can do that.”

Mercer nodded once.

Conversation over.

Hughes stood, and slid out of the booth. He didn't look around. Didn't hesitate.

Just turned and walked out. The door closed behind him with a quiet click.

And Mercer smiled again as he finally reached for his drink.

Chapter End Notes

That went super well and definitely nothing bad is coming next! (You believe me....right?)

The boys took back the narrative, the internet lost its collective mind, Shane came back like he had something to prove to god himself, and the league is now staring down the very real problem of Hollander and Rozanov on the same power play.

Unfortunately (for them, but fortunately for me as the author), some people remain deeply committed to being awful.

So what is Mercer planning? I guess you'll have to wait to find out. Is Crowell still a giant flaming piece of shit? Absolutely.

Next up we have fallout, escalation, and probably me making everyone suffer again. I'm sorry. (Not sorry at all.)

As always, comments, screaming, theories, and curses are welcome. Respectfully, of course.

Chapter 23: Crossing the Line

Chapter Summary

Harris gets a late-night call that changes everything. As Mercer and Cromwell's plot to "make it look accidental" comes to light, Yuna, Catherine, and Harris move fast to turn the trap back on them. What follows is a brutal public unravelling: leaked recordings, garage footage, arrests, and a civil court ruling that hits exactly where it hurts. And when it's finally over, Shane and Ilya get to come home to something they haven't had in a long time — peace.

Chapter Notes

Hi friends, loons, strays, and everyone else - and welcome back to the chaos!

This chapter is a bit of a turning point — plot-wise, tone-wise, everything-wise. We've been building tension for a while now, and this is where a lot of those threads finally snap into place. There's strategy, there's consequences, there's a little bit of chaos (okay, a lot), and there are some people who absolutely should have made better life choices.

As always — please mind the content warnings. There is violence in this chapter, though not graphic, and references to planned harm. Everything stays grounded in the story and the consequences are very real, but just be aware going in.

Also: shoutout to the characters who decided to be smarter than the villains. We love that for them.

Let's get into it 

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

Harris didn't answer unknown numbers.

Not calls. Not texts. Not anything that appeared on his screen without a name attached to it. That rule had served him well for years, and it had only gotten more useful since the lawsuit started snowballing and every idiot with a burner account seemed to think they had something worth saying.

So when his phone lit up just after midnight with a blocked number and a single message, his first instinct was to ignore it.

We need to talk. It's bigger than the photos.

His thumb hovered, ready to just delete and block. Then the second message came in.

Crowell is involved.

That was enough to catch his interest. Harris picked up the phone, and texted back two words: *Call me*

It rang immediately, which was a surprise. He set up his call record app and started it, then he answered without speaking. At first, all he heard was breathing on the other end. Then a deep breath and a voice he recognized.

"I didn't sign up for this."

Harris closed his eyes briefly, mentally preparing himself to get through this conversation. "Kieran." He said coolly.

A pause. "Yeah."

"Congratulations," Harris said flatly. "You managed to identify yourself in under ten seconds. That's got to be a new record."

"This isn't funny."

"No," Harris replied. "It's really not. So start talking. Keep in mind you signed an NDA before you were let go, and it still applies."

Silence for a beat. Then he sighed.

"They're not spinning it anymore. That was this morning. That was before the engagement, before the game, before the entire league decided this was a love story."

Harris didn't interrupt, but was taking notes to back up the recording.

"They're trying to fix it now," Hughes continued. "Not with media. Not with leaks. Something else."

That landed.

"Define 'fix,'" Harris said flatly.

"I heard them," Hughes said. "First Crowell this morning, when he sent me to Mercer to get instructions. Then Mercer who told me to, and this is a direct fucking quote, take care of it. They're planning something big, and Rozanov and Hollander are going to get hurt. They're both fucking insane – Crowell just wants it to go away, and Mercer is so sure his big break was stolen by them. I don't know how it all works, but hurting someone is way outside of what I'm okay with."

He hesitated. “I don’t like that they’re...together. I think it is a distraction and ruins the potential of the sport. But I don’t want to see them dead or something.”

Harris’s grip tightened slightly on the phone. “What exactly did you hear?”

“I didn’t just hear it. I recorded it.”

That changed everything. Harris leaned forward. “You what?”

“I recorded them,” Hughes snapped. “I’m not stupid.”

Harris let out a quiet breath. “That is... not the word I would have chosen.”

“Harris—”

“No,” he cut in. “You don’t get to act like we’re on the same side. You leaked private information during a crisis because you thought people deserved to know. So why are you calling me now?”

“I didn’t sign up for someone getting hurt. Especially if that means putting my own ass on the line.”

There it was – self-preservation, not remorse. It was fear that had him coming to them now. ‘*I can use that,*’ Harris thought to himself. He leaned back again.

“Send me the recordings.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It is,” Harris said. “You send them, or I tell Catherine you reached out and chose not to cooperate. As well as how you broke your NDA by feeding Crowell information.”

Silence. Then—

“I’m not taking the fall for this.”

“Good,” Harris said. “Then send the files.” He hung up the call unceremoniously and ran his hands through his hair. “FUCK” He grabbed his phone and fired off a text.

Harris Drover:

We might have something. Meet me tomorrow morning.

Yuna Hollander:

Come by the house, 9am. I’ll let Catherine know – this sounds like she should be there.

Harris Drover:

Yes, she should be.

The first recording arrived, sent via text. At first it was just static, then the voices slowly came in.

Crowell:

"...might need something more drastic. Perhaps even dangerous. Hughes, your intel about the dinner was spot on. Do you have anything else? Any chance of them being out in public somewhere...less protected?"

A pause. Then Kieran answered.

"I can ask my old boss if there's been anything, but after the dinner photos leaked, he tore a strip off me for breaching NDA and using him, so I don't know if he'll talk to me."

Crowell:

"I can override your NDA – that's not an issue. Get the information, and pass it to Mercer. He'll tell you what to do next."

Kieran:

"I'll see if he'll talk to me, but I'll head to see Mercer now for ideas."

Crowell:

"See that you do. This is absolutely ridiculous. Someone needs to remind them they aren't invincible, and this is about hockey. In the meantime, I am going to order them benched and see if I can undo the trade due to them now having a conflict of interest. We can't have married....players on the same team."

Kieran:

I...don't think you can do that, sir. But I'll go talk to Mercer."

The recording stopped there. Then the second recording came in.

Kieran:

"Crowell wants us to create an incident."

Mercer:

"I heard."

Kieran:

"So. What do you need me to do?"

Mercer:

"Take care of it."

Kieran:

"Yeah. Yeah, I can do that."

Mercer:

"Hollander drives a blue Jeep Cherokee. And the parking lot cameras at the stadium aren't always monitored, as you know. They tend to arrive in the same vehicle. Make it look accidental."

Kieran:

"I'll see what I can do."

Harris sat dumbfounded. He was in chock, he supposed, from what he had just listened to. He didn't even realize Troy had come into the room and was talking to him, or at least trying to.

"Harris. Sweetheart. Are you with me? You're as white as a ghost!"

Harris blinked and met his boyfriend's eyes. "Did you just call me sweetheart?"

Troy studied him closely before smiling slightly. "Well, at least that worked. Now what's going on?"

"Troy...Crowell and Mercer are planning something to hurt Shane and Ilya."

"They wouldn't sink that low, Harris. Not even those assholes are that stupid."

"You don't understand. I have copies of recordings."

Troy sat down with a thud. "What?"

"Kieran Hughes."

"The assistant trainer who was let go after leaking the aftermath with Ilya? What does he have to do with anything?"

"He went to Crowell. Fed him information to help twist the story. Something about how it needs to be about hockey, not romance...blah blah blah homophobic bullshit. They tried to get him to help, but apparently, he draws the line at actually injuring someone."

Troy whistled low. "He's fucked just from breaching his NDA, but this? Even if he sent you the recordings...won't he be criminally liable?"

Harris ran his hands through his hair. "I'm meeting Yuna and Catherine in the morning. We'll see what happens. But Troy...how can we keep them safe?"

Troy wrapped his arm around him and pulled him in close. "We'll figure it out, babe. But for now, let's get some sleep. You can't help anyone if you don't rest."

Harris sighed, and rested his head on Troy's chest. "Fine. But you know..."

"Harris. Shut up and come to bed. You can be a genius again in the morning."

Yuna and Catherine were already in the kitchen when he walked in the next morning. Yuna sat at the table with her glasses low on her nose, laptop open, clearly in the middle of something that required three tabs, two emails, and at least one quiet internal argument about strategy. There was a mug in her hand that had long since gone cold, but she hadn't noticed. Catherine sat beside her, jacket off but otherwise entirely untouched by the concept of fatigue — posture perfect, attention sharp, already working through something in her head.

They both looked up the second Harris stepped inside.

Yuna's expression shifted first. "You look like you didn't sleep," she said gently, already reading him too well. "What happened?"

Catherine didn't speak. She just watched him calmly as she sipped her coffee.

Harris didn't sit right away. He dropped his phone onto the table like it weighed more than it should.

"We have a problem," he said.

Yuna's brow furrowed slightly, a quiet exhale leaving her. "That's not new."

"This is."

That got her full attention.

Catherine leaned back slightly in her chair, eyes narrowing just a fraction. "Define new."

Harris dragged a hand through his hair before finally sitting down. "Kieran Hughes called me."

Yuna stilled completely, her eyes going from soft to hard in a split second.

Catherine's gaze sharpened instantly. "Why?"

"Because he's a fucking coward trying to save his own ass," Harris said. "Not because he's sorry."

"Good," Catherine replied immediately. "Fear is useful."

Yuna flicked her a look at that before turning back to look at him.

"Harris," she said softly. "What is it?"

He exhaled. "He says Cromwell is involved. And sent me recordings."

Yuna closed her laptop slowly and deliberately, then set it aside. Catherine didn't move, but something about her shifted — like she'd just locked onto a target.

"Show us," Yuna said.

Harris didn't waste time. He picked up his phone and hit play. Static filled the room first, then the voices came through. Crowell's calm, measured tone cut through the quiet in a way that made it worse.

"...might need something more drastic. Perhaps even dangerous."

Yuna didn't move. Catherine didn't blink. The first recording ended, and the second one began. Mercer's voice echoed through the space.

"Make it look accidental."

The recording cut.

For a second, no one spoke.

Harris watched them both, waiting for the reaction.

Catherine leaned forward first, elbows resting on the table, fingers steepled under her chin as she processed. “Again,” she said.

Harris replayed it.

This time, Catherine didn’t look at the phone. She stared past it, listening, pulling it apart, putting it back together in a different order.

When it ended, she leaned back slowly.

“Well,” she said after a beat. “That’s new.”

Yuna’s fingers curled slightly against the edge of the table. “They’re going to hurt someone,” she said quietly.

Harris nodded. “Hughes says Mercer wants it to look like an accident. Something off-ice. A car, maybe. You heard them bring up Shane’s car and that they often drive together.”

Yuna’s hand stilled around her mug before she set it down carefully, like it might break if she didn’t.

“Play the second one again.”

Harris did.

“...Hollander drives a blue Jeep Cherokee... make it look accidental.”

Silence settled again, heavier this time. Yuna closed her eyes for just a second. Not to block it out — to steady herself. When she opened them again, she was calm.

“They don’t get near them,” she said.

Simple. Immediate. Final.

Catherine nodded once. “Agreed.”

Harris leaned forward, elbows on his knees now. “Can we use this? Does it help anything?”

Catherine didn’t answer right away. You could see it happening, though. The shift. The pieces moving into place.

“Legally?” she said finally. “Maybe.”

Harris frowned. “That’s not reassuring.”

“It’s not supposed to be,” she replied evenly. “In Canada, one-party consent recordings can be admissible if the person recording was part of the conversation. Hughes being there helps. But admissibility is never guaranteed. Defence will challenge context, intent, whether anything was omitted — anything they can use to muddy it.”

“So it’s messy.”

“Yes,” Catherine said. “But it’s powerful.”

Yuna looked between them, already thinking ahead. “So we don’t wait for court.”

Catherine’s gaze snapped to hers and a cool smile crossed her lips. And that was the moment it clicked for all of them.

“No,” she said, more firmly now. “We don’t.”

She stood, not rushed, not dramatic — just...decided. She moved once around the table, slow, deliberate, already building the shape of something bigger.

“They’ve already made their move,” she said, glancing at the phone. “They tried to control the narrative. They failed. Now they escalate. So we need to make sure that fails too.”

Harris watched her carefully. “So what do we do?”

Catherine looked at him then, fully focused, and something in the room shifted with it.

“We move faster,” she said.

“How?”

“We let this exist,” she replied. “Publicly. Without a source. Without attribution. It appears somewhere credible enough to be picked up, and messy enough that it spreads before it can be contained.”

Yuna nodded slowly. “It reframes everything.”

“It buries everything,” Catherine corrected. “They’ll have no cover to hide behind, other than trying to prove the recordings false.”

Harris leaned back, exhaling slowly. “Okay. So we blow it open.”

“Yes,” Catherine said. “But that doesn’t stop Mercer. We know he’s lost the plot at this point. So we need to draw him out in another way.”

Yuna’s gaze dropped briefly to the table, her fingers brushing lightly over the edge like she was grounding herself in something solid.

Then she looked up again.

“Yes,” she said softly. “We need to draw him into the open.”

Catherine watched her. “You’re thinking something.”

Yuna didn’t deny it. “If he’s going to act,” she said, voice calm and steady, “I want to know when.”

“And where,” Catherine added.

“And how,” Yuna finished.

Harris went still. “Yuna—”

She looked at him then, and the warmth was still there. That was the thing about her. It never went away. Even now, even here.

“I am not letting him take a shot at Shane in the dark,” she said quietly. “Not in a parking lot. Not somewhere we can’t reach him.”

That wasn’t strategy.

That was a mother.

Catherine nodded once, already tracking it. “Controlled environment,” she said. “Witnesses. Cameras. Immediate response.”

Harris swallowed. “That sounds like bait.”

Yuna’s expression softened slightly. “It sounds like making sure he doesn’t get a second chance,” she said.

Catherine stepped back in without missing a beat. “It also strengthens everything we have,” she added. “If Mercer acts, we have assault. If we can tie Cromwell to direction or encouragement, we have grounds for counselling an offence. Criminal liability.”

Harris let out a quiet breath. “...Jesus.”

“No,” Catherine said. “Preparation.”

A beat passed.

Then—

“Who?” Harris asked. “And how?”

Yuna didn’t answer immediately. She thought about it carefully, weighing it in a way that made it clear she understood exactly what she was asking of whoever it would be.

“Not Shane,” she said first.

“Obviously,” Catherine agreed.

“Not Ilya,” Yuna added. “He won’t hold back, and as good as you are, Catherine, you’re not getting him out of a murder charge.”

Also obvious.

Another pause. Then Harris said it. “...Hayes. He’d love a chance to take another swing at Mercer. He still says he didn’t hit him hard enough the first time.”

Yuna nodded. “That could work. He’s visible,” she said. “And he won’t panic.”

Catherine tilted her head slightly. “And perhaps Crosby? He’s still in town, isn’t he?”

Yuna’s mouth curved faintly. “If Sidney Crosby is somewhere,” she said, “people notice.”

Harris huffed out a breath, tension and disbelief mixing together. “Okay,” he said. “Okay.”

He leaned back slightly, the weight of it settling in. “We’re doing this. If the guys agree.”

Catherine didn’t hesitate. “Yes,” she said.

Yuna reached for her coffee, took a sip, and made a small face when she realized it had gone cold.

Then she set it down again, gaze steady. “We’re ending this,” she said quietly. “Harris – I assume you know ways we can leak the recordings anonymously?”

Harris cracked a grin – but it wasn’t his usual warm and approachable smile. “Yeah. I do. I’ll get it done today.”

Catherine gracefully stood and grabbed her coat. “Then I’ll head into the office and start the paperwork we are inevitably going to need. Yuna, Harris, it’s been a pleasure. Call me when you have a chance to talk to the gentleman in question, and I’ll let them know what to do and how to make it work.”

Wyatt Hayes did not enjoy being told to lie low. More specifically, he did not enjoy being told he was part of a plan.

“I hate being bait,” he said again, slower this time, like if he dragged the words out long enough someone might reconsider the entire idea. He paced a loose line along the concrete, one hand dragging back through his hair before settling on his hip. “I really, really hate being bait. Can’t I just go punch him?”

“You’re visible,” Yuna replied calmly over speaker. “There’s a difference. Security is right around the corner. And you have the keys to Shane’s Jeep.”

Wyatt huffed out a breath that didn’t quite become a laugh. “That feels like the same thing.”

“It isn’t,” Crosby said mildly from a few steps ahead of him.

Wyatt shot him a look. “You’re not helping.”

Crosby didn’t turn. “I’m not trying to.”

That earned him a quiet, incredulous exhale. “Fantastic,” Wyatt muttered. “Love that for me.”

He didn’t argue after that. Not really. Because underneath the complaining, he understood exactly what this was. Understood the risk. Understood why it had to be him — and not Shane, not Ilya. Not the ones Mercer actually wanted.

Didn’t mean he had to like it, though.

The call ended a minute later, Yuna’s voice steady even as she reminded them — again — to stay aware, to stay in sight of cameras, to not engage unless they had to. Wyatt shoved his phone into his pocket harder than necessary and rolled his shoulders once, trying to shake out the tension sitting there.

“Next time,” he muttered, “we let someone else be visible. Happy to do the punching, less enjoying this part of it.”

Crosby’s mouth twitched faintly, but he wisely didn’t comment. They moved deeper into the garage corridor together, footsteps echoing faintly off the concrete. The arena above was quiet; this had just been a late practice pre-road trip, plus a photo op for Sid with Shane for Hockey Canada.

Wyatt noticed something off almost immediately.

Not the silence itself, but the quality of it. The way it pressed in. He slowed just slightly, his gaze shifting without turning his head too obviously, instincts kicking in before his brain had fully caught up.

“...okay,” he muttered, quieter now. “That’s not ideal. Sid, eyes up.”

Crosby stopped a half-step ahead of him, the first hint of his temper rising to the surface. “Stay close,” Crosby said, just as quiet.

Wyatt didn’t make a joke this time. “Yeah,” he said. “Got it.”

They continued walking towards Shane’s Jeep together, casually talking about nothing while also being very aware that something was off.

Then—

Movement.

A shadow peeling away from the edge of a pillar where there shouldn’t have been one. Mercer stepped out like he’d been there the entire time.

Waiting.

Wyatt's stomach dropped in that split second of recognition. Not in fear, but something sharper. Something that said this was no longer hypothetical.

Mercer looked at them, and at the keyfob in Wyatt's hand that had just unlocked the Jeep. Shock followed by fury raced across his face, and he moved. Fast. Too fast to try and talk him down, too fast for anything but reaction.

Crosby shifted immediately, cutting the angle without making it look like panic, trying to place himself just slightly between Wyatt and the line of attack.

It didn't matter.

Mercer was already there. Wyatt barely had time to register the motion before the hit came — hard and wrong, the angle off just enough that it was obvious it wasn't a punch. Something scraped across his cheekbone, sharp as it connected and he felt his skin split. The pain hit instantly — bright and disorienting, sharper than expected.

“Jesus—!”

He staggered a half-step, hand flying up on instinct. His fingers came away wet, slick with blood that was already starting to run. For a second, everything tilted.

Sound dulled. Vision narrowed.

Then it snapped back in a roar as he lifted his face to look at Mercer. His fist connected before he'd even realized he had thrown a punch. Mercer rocked back, hitting the pillar he'd been standing behind with a thud, before sliding to the ground.

Next thing he knew, Sid was standing in front of him, glaring down at Mercer with the kind of anger that scared the opposing players on the ice but rarely came through.

“Enough.” He hissed, his voice sounding nothing like Sidney Crosby.

The word cut through the space cleanly, and Mercer froze.

His breathing was off — ragged, uneven, like he'd already gone too far and knew it. His eyes flicked between them, unfocused, searching for something to latch onto that wasn't there.

Wyatt felt a flicker of something colder under the pain. This wasn't controlled or calculated. Not entirely, anyway. This was someone unravelling in real time. Sid kept his eyes on Mercer, but his words were for Wyatt.

“Come here so I can put pressure on that. Your wife will have my head if you get a new scar from this.”

“I got it man. You watch him while I find security.”

Footsteps echoed down the corridor then — fast, heavy, unmistakable. Voices layered over each other, sharp and urgent. Yuna must have called them in and told them to go looking.

Mercer heard it as well, and the moment broke. He staggered to his feet and took a shaky step back like he couldn't decide whether to stay or go.

Then instinct won.

He turned and ran.

Wyatt blinked hard, adrenaline catching up all at once, his hand still pressed tight against his face as the sting settled into something deeper and more persistent.

"Okay," he said, breath coming a little uneven now. "Yeah. That—"

He huffed out a short, disbelieving laugh that didn't quite land.

"That actually sucked."

Crosby turned toward him fully now, already shifting into something practical, assessing without panic.

"Let me see."

Wyatt hesitated for half a second, then lowered his hand just enough. Crosby's expression didn't change much — but something tightened in it.

"You're going to need stitches. Lisa is gonna be pissed."

"Yeah," Wyatt muttered. "I figured that part out."

Blood was still running, slower now but steady enough to matter. It dripped once onto the concrete between them, sharp and red against the grey.

Wyatt wiped at it again and winced.

"...that better scar well," he added under his breath. "I'm not doing this for nothing."

Security rounded the corner then, the energy shifting immediately as they took in the scene — the blood, the two of them still standing in the aftermath of it, and the distinct lack of an attacker.

"Sir—are you—"

"I'm fine," Wyatt cut in automatically, even as he pressed his hand back to his face. "He went that way. Barely a minute head start — you should be able to catch up."

Two of them took off immediately, boots pounding against concrete as they followed the direction Mercer had disappeared.

The rest stayed and started on first aid and the necessary calls. Wyatt let out a slow breath, the adrenaline fading away enough for everything else to settle in behind it. The pain, but also the reality of how close that had been to a disaster.

He glanced sideways at Crosby.

“...please tell me that was good enough to bury that fucker,” he said, quieter now.

Crosby met his gaze, steady as ever. “It absolutely was.”

Wyatt nodded once, slow. “Good,” he said.

A beat.

Then, softer — more honest than anything he’d said so far —

“...I still don’t think I hit him hard enough.”

Sid finally cracked and let out a laugh. “Hazy, you knocked him 5 feet back into a concrete pillar. Not sure you could have.”

By the next morning, the footage and the audio files hit the internet. Hard and fast, coordinated in a way that felt almost surgical, dropped across platforms within minutes of each other by accounts that had no history and no interest in sticking around long enough to answer questions.

A burner account on X, a hockey subreddit thread that usually argued about line combinations, and A forum post with no title, no commentary — just two files and a timestamp.

No explanation.

No warning.

Security footage from the Centaurs’ underground parking garage. Grainy, wide-angle, timestamped. The kind of footage that wasn’t meant to be watched closely really. At first, it looked ordinary.

Wyatt Hayes and Sidney Crosby entered frame mid-conversation, moving toward a familiar shape just out of view. The lighting was harsh, shadows cutting across the concrete in long, uneven lines. Their body language was relaxed. Casual. The kind of nothing moment that happens a hundred times a day and means absolutely nothing. Then the camera switched, and there was Mercer.

He wasn’t pacing. Wasn’t moving. He stood partially obscured by a pillar, close to the driver’s side of a blue Jeep Cherokee — close enough that it didn’t take much imagination to understand what he was doing.

He crouched slightly, glanced once over his shoulder, then reached down toward the vehicle. The footage wasn’t clean enough to show every detail, but it didn’t need to be. The angle. The position. The way his hand moved underneath the frame of the car—

Then Wyatt and Sid entered the frame, and Mercer jumped behind the pillar again, something metallic flashing in his hand. When Wyatt and Sid hesitated, looking around, the footage showed Mercer stepping out and swinging at Wyatt with the knife in his hand. Everyone got footage of it – Wyatt’s reaction, the blood, Sid turning to help and then Wyatt’s fist connecting with Mercer hard enough to knock Mercer straight back into the pillar. The whole scene was just suddenly there – online, public, and very real.

The moment hung there for a fraction of a second. Wyatt squared up, blood running down his face. Mercer was stunned, disoriented, and still clutching the blade. Crosby stepping in and just the sheer weight of his anger filling the frame as Mercer scrambled to his feet and ran out of frame.

The audio drop was equally stunning. It was also cleaner, and felt darker somehow.

“...might need something more drastic. Perhaps even dangerous.”

“...make it look accidental.”

And now the league had a massive problem, because the internet works faster than they could.

@rinkratlive (X):

 *BREAKING: Security footage appears to show Colin Mercer tampering with Hollander’s vehicle before attacking Wyatt Hayes with a weapon.
Separate audio circulating may indicate premeditation involving league leadership.
This is extremely serious.*

@hockeyopsinsider:

*if that’s him under the jeep??? safe to assume that’s a player’s car.
this isn’t escalation or anything other than attempted sabotage.
and the audio???
this goes WAY beyond mercer. #JusticeForHazy #JusticeforHollanov*

@puckculture:

*northline lawsuit
garage footage
league commissioner audio*

this is all connected and it’s not subtle anymore

@fanthreadqueen (viral):

timeline because WHAT is happening:

- *photos leak*
- *engagement announced*
- *league supports them*
- *narrative collapses*
- *someone panics*
- *brake lines???*

- *KNIFE???*
- *caught on camera*

this isn't drama
this is a CRIME

@legalwatchcanada:

if the recordings are real and link Crowell to direction, we're looking at:

- *counselling an offence (criminal code)*
- *possible conspiracy*
- *civil liability through the northline case*

this is massive

@nhlrumoursdaily:

northline + mercer + crowell???
this is starting to look coordinated

@eastdivisionwatch:

you're telling me they tried to spin this as a relationship scandal, gay is bad, blah blah blah
and it was THIS???

TSN Breaking Segment:

"What we're seeing now is a significant shift," the anchor said, tone sharp, controlled. "This is no longer about media narratives or locker room privacy. This is about alleged criminal behaviour involving a weapon — and potentially, direction from within league leadership to harm at least one player."

"Right," the analyst added. "And if that audio is verified, you're looking at something much bigger than a single reporter acting alone."

Sportsnet Panel:

"You can't ignore the timing," one of them said. "This all escalates right after the engagement announcement. The outpouring of support for Hollander and Rozanov seems to have caught the league flatfooted, and suddenly—this?"

"That's not a coincidence," another replied flatly. "For a league that claims to be inclusive and supportive, there seems to be a lot happening under the surface. Do we need to look back at the reactions to Hunter coming out earlier? Was he in the same danger, or is this because they are both players — generational talents at that — and now play on the same team?"

"True. Folks are going to be looking at the Scott Hunter situation much differently now. And so far, fan and player support is firmly behind Hollander, Rozanov, Hayes and Crosby in this current situation."

@OttawaCentaursOfficial:

We are aware of the incident that occurred in our facility involving Wyatt Hayes and Sidney Crosby.

Arena security responded immediately and local authorities have been notified. We are fully cooperating with the ongoing investigation.

The safety of our players, staff, and guests remains our highest priority. There will be heightened security measures for the foreseeable future as we move through this process.

@ShaneHollanderHockeyPlayer & @IlyaRozanov81 (joint post):

We are aware of the footage and audio currently circulating. First, we are safe and thank you for your concern and supportive messages.

We are grateful that Wyatt and Sidney are both safe, grateful they were not hurt worse, and grateful to the Centaurs staff and security for responding immediately.

We trust the appropriate authorities to handle this from here.

We will not be commenting further at this time.

@WyattHayes (IG story):

*stitches acquired 👍
having a doctor for a wife rocks*

should've hit him harder. ah well.

thanks for having my back, @SidneyCrosby87

@SidneyCrosby87 (reposting @WyattHayes):

Glad you're okay. Heal up quick – you're supposed to play Pittsburgh in 3 weeks and need to be sharp. I won't go easy on you.

@SidneyCrosby87

I'm fine, thanks for the support and messages.

The audio recordings released today are disturbing on many levels, and the players association plans on meeting soon to weigh our options. The Commissioner of this sport needs to be held to account for his actions if they are proven to be true.

@BradMarchand63:

A KNIFE????

ARE WE SERIOUS RIGHT NOW

*also hazy that punch was BEAUTIFUL
textbook honestly*

(glad you're okay. next time call me.)

Fuck Mercer, fuck NorthLine, and fuck Crowell. #JusticeForHazy #JusticeforHollanov

@ConnorMcDavid97:

No place for this.

Glad you're okay, Wyatt.

See you at the MLHPA meeting.

@NathanMacKinnon29:

yeah this is insane

glad you're alright

#JusticeForHazy #JusticeForHollanov

@ScottHunterNYA:

Yeah no.

We're not doing this.

Crowell needs to go. His reaction to me was bad, but this? This is unforgivable.

#JusticeForHazy #JusticeForHollandov

Oddly, the MLH was staying quiet. No statements dropped in Crowell's defence, but no statements in acknowledgment either. It seemed suspicious with the next statement that hit was not theirs, but landed with the same kind of impact as a bomb:

RCMP / OPP Joint Statement (Public Release):

Following an investigation into an incident that occurred at the Ottawa Centaurs arena, law enforcement has taken two individuals into custody.

Colin Mercer has been arrested and charged with assault with a weapon and mischief endangering life.

Roger Crowell has been arrested and charged with counselling the commission of an indictable offence.

Both individuals remain in custody at this time. Further charges may be pending as the investigation continues.

Faced with no other option, the MLH's media team finally broke their silence.

League Statement — Office of the Commissioner

The League has been informed that Commissioner Roger Crowell has been taken into custody by Canadian authorities in connection with an ongoing investigation.

Effective immediately, Mr. Crowell has been relieved of all duties pending the outcome of that investigation.

Deputy Commissioner Svetlana Vetrova will assume the responsibilities of the Commissioner on an interim basis.

The League is cooperating fully with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Ontario Provincial Police as this matter proceeds.

The safety of our players, staff, and community remains our highest priority. We are equally committed to ensuring that our league continues to be a place defined by professionalism, respect, and inclusion at every level.

The League looks forward to meeting with the MLHPA in the coming days to discuss next steps and to ensure continued alignment on these priorities.

No further comment will be provided at this time.

The courtroom was already full by the time they entered.

Not crowded — not in the chaotic, press-swarming way people might expect — but full in a quieter, more deliberate sense. Every seat taken. Every space accounted for. The kind of full that came from people choosing to be there, not because they had to, but because something about this case had tipped from routine into something worth witnessing.

Media lined the back rows, unusually restrained. A few league representatives sat stiffly together, their posture just a little too formal to be comfortable. Legal observers — people who lived for moments like this — watched with sharpened attention, pens poised, already anticipating the way this might unfold.

It felt heavier than it should have.

Shane noticed that first. It settled low in his chest as he stepped inside, as if the room itself was holding its breath and waiting for something to land. He adjusted the cuff of his jacket out of habit, fingers smoothing fabric that didn't need it, grounding himself in something small and controlled.

Ilya stayed close beside him, not touching constantly, but near enough that Shane could feel the heat of him, the steady presence of it. Their shoulders brushed once as they moved toward their seats. It was deliberate and anchoring, and Shane was grateful for his presence.

As they sat, Ilya's hand slipped briefly around his under the table, fingers pressing once — firm, certain — before pulling back like nothing had happened at all.

It was enough.

At the front, Catherine Bouchard didn't look up immediately. She was already seated, already working, already several steps ahead of everyone else in the room. Her files were arranged with quiet precision, tabs marked, notes layered in a way that suggested not just preparation, but certainty.

When she finally glanced up at them, it was brief.

"You're fine," she said quietly, voice low enough that it didn't carry beyond their space. "Just let me do my job."

Ilya's mouth curved faintly at that, something almost amused threading through it. "We are very good at that."

Catherine didn't bother responding, but she did let a smile ghost across her face.

"All rise."

The shift was immediate as the gallery shuffled to its feet. Justice Lemaire entered without ceremony, robes settling around her as she took her place at the bench. The room followed her lead in one clean, practiced motion — standing, sitting, quieting into something sharper and more focused.

“We are proceeding on the civil matter of Hollander and Rozanov versus NorthLine Media Group, the Montreal Metros organization, and Mr. Colin Mercer.”

Her voice was even. Controlled. The kind of tone that didn’t need to demand attention to receive it.

A pause.

“I am aware of the parallel criminal proceedings currently underway. Counsel will remain within the scope of the civil matter before this court.”

“Of course, Your Honour,” Catherine replied smoothly.

Across the aisle, Kessler echoed the sentiment — but there was a fraction of a delay now. A subtle tightening at the edges that hadn’t been there before.

Catherine stood for her opening arguments. No rush. No wasted movement. Just quiet control.

“Your Honour, the plaintiffs seek to introduce newly surfaced material evidence for the limited purpose of establishing context and damages.”

Kessler was already on his feet before she finished.

“Your Honour, we object. These materials are directly tied to an ongoing criminal matter and their inclusion—”

“They are not being introduced to establish criminal liability,” Catherine said, cutting across him with calm precision. No raised voice. No visible irritation. Just correction. “They are being introduced to demonstrate escalation and foreseeability of harm.”

Kessler pressed forward anyway, trying to regain ground that was already slipping. “The defence maintains that this is prejudicial—”

“Counsellor”

The judge didn’t raise her voice. Didn’t need to.

He stopped mid-sentence.

“Sit down.”

He sat.

Catherine inclined her head once, as though acknowledging something procedural rather than personal, and continued without missing a step.

“The court has already heard extensive evidence regarding the initial dissemination of private information,” she said. “The materials before you today do not repeat that. They simply establish what followed.”

She didn’t replay it. Didn’t need to. Everyone had seen it. Heard it. Processed it.

“What matters,” Catherine continued, “is that this progression — from disclosure, to amplification, to targeted harm — was entirely foreseeable.”

She turned slightly, just enough to include the defence in her line of sight without ever fully facing them.

“They were warned.”

A pause.

“They chose not to act.”

Kessler stood again, more carefully this time, like he was stepping onto unstable ground and knew it.

“My clients cannot be held responsible for the independent actions of Mr. Mercer,” he said, voice controlled but carrying strain underneath it now. “NorthLine operates as a media entity. The Metros are an organization – a hockey team — not a regulatory body. They cannot reasonably be expected to control public response or anticipate the actions of a third party.”

It was a good argument, on paper.

Technically.

But even as he said it, it felt thin.

Catherine rose before he had fully sat down. “Your Honour,” she said, “with respect—this is not about control.”

She stepped forward slightly, the movement subtle but intentional. Drawing the room with her.

“It is about responsibility.”

Her voice didn’t change.

“NorthLine did not merely report. They selected, framed, and amplified private information they knew — or ought to have known — was improperly obtained and in direct violation of PHIPA.”

A beat.

“They shaped the narrative.”

Her attention shifted, seamless.

“The Metros were aware of the harm. They were informed of the risk. And they chose not to intervene or defend their player. A player whose heroics saved the life of another player on their team.”

Another step.

“That is not neutrality in any sense of the word. That is participation.”

“And as for Mr. Mercer,” Catherine continued, “the defence would prefer this court to view his conduct as isolated.”

A faint tilt of her head.

“Independent.”

A beat.

“Your Honour has already seen enough to determine otherwise.”

Silence settled over the room again before the defence presented its case in full. Kessler could only repeat elements from his opening because they had nothing new to add. They seemed woefully unprepared in comparison. As the arguments wrapped up, Justice Lemaire leaned forward slightly.

“I believe I have heard enough. Court will recess.”

The ruling came later that afternoon.

Shane sat with his hands clasped in front of him, thumb pressing hard against his knuckle. He could feel the pulse there, steady and grounding. Beside him, Ilya’s shoulder remained solid against his, unmoving in a way that felt intentional. Catherine calmly sat beside them, looking over the paperwork, seemingly completely unbothered by anything. Justice Lemaire walked back in, the gallery sat back down, and she got right to it.

“The court finds, on a balance of probabilities,” Justice Lemaire began, “that the defendants — NorthLine Media Group, the Montreal Metros organization, and Mr. Colin Mercer — are each individually liable for the harms suffered by the plaintiffs.”

“Damages are awarded to the plaintiffs, Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov, as follows.”

A pause.

“Against NorthLine Media Group:
General damages in the amount of \$450,000.
Aggravated damages in the amount of \$250,000.
Punitive damages in the amount of \$800,000.

Total: \$1,500,000.”

She paused.

“Against the Montreal Metros organization:
General damages in the amount of \$750,000.
Aggravated damages in the amount of \$500,000.
Punitive damages in the amount of \$1,250,000.

Total: \$2,500,000.”

Another pause.

“Against Mr. Colin Mercer:
General damages in the amount of \$300,000.
Aggravated damages in the amount of \$200,000.
Punitive damages in the amount of \$400,000.

Total: \$900,000.”

It felt like the room let out a shocked breath.

“These awards reflect the seriousness of the conduct, the sustained nature of the harm, and the need for meaningful deterrence.”

The file closed.

“This court is adjourned.”

Shane blinked once, like his brain needed a second to catch up with what had just happened.

“Did she just—”

“Yeah,” Ilya said quietly.

Then something shifted between them — something that had been tight for too long finally giving way. Shane turned toward him, the disbelief breaking open into something brighter, lighter, almost disorienting in how quickly it replaced everything else.

“Holy shit,” he breathed.

Ilya huffed out a quiet laugh. “Yes. That.”

Before either of them could think better of it, Shane leaned in and kissed him. “We won!” Ilya wrapped his arms around Shane, and they both just stood there basking in the moment.

There was a murmur somewhere behind them — someone reacting, someone already typing — but it didn't touch them.

Not this time.

Beside them, Catherine gathered her files with the same calm precision she'd carried from the beginning, though that hint of a smile played across her lips. Across the aisle, Kessler sat for a second longer than he needed to, one hand dragging slowly down his face.

Then he stood. Professional. Composed. Trying to recover something that wasn't there anymore.

Catherine stepped around the table, slipping her notes into her bag before pausing just long enough to meet him where he stood and offer her hand for a shake. Her expression was calm, polite, and almost kind.

"That was a difficult position to argue," she said gently. "You handled it about as well as anyone could have."

Kessler blinked, taken aback. Because on the surface, it was generous

Respectful.

Professional, even.

But underneath it, there was no mistaking what she meant.

You never had a chance.

She gave him a small nod and turned away before he could respond.

The doors opened and the noise hit immediately. Voices layered over each other, cameras lifting, microphones pushing forward in a wave that had clearly been waiting for this exact moment. The energy shifted the second Catherine stepped out first, composed as ever, claiming the space without needing to force it.

"Ms. Bouchard—do you have a comment on the ruling?"

"Is this the largest award we've seen in a case like this?"

"What happens next with the criminal investigation—"

Catherine didn't rush. She stepped forward just enough, one hand lifting slightly—not to silence them, but to focus them.

"The court's decision today speaks for itself," she said, voice clear and even. "What matters is that the harm done to my clients was recognized — not just in theory, but in impact."

A pause.

“Privacy is not optional. Safety is not negotiable. And when those lines are crossed, there are consequences.”

The questions came faster after that.

“What about the recordings released this morning — do they change your position—”

“We are not here to try the criminal matter on the courthouse steps,” Catherine replied calmly. “That process will proceed as it should.”

Behind her, Yuna stood slightly off to the side — not stepping in, not taking focus, but present in a way that grounded the space rather than controlled it. Her hand rested briefly at Shane’s back as he and Ilya stepped forward, a quiet, steadying touch.

“Shane — how does it feel to win this case?”

He hesitated for half a second. “Like we can move on,” he said simply.

Ilya glanced at him, something softer flickering through his expression before he looked back at the crowd.

“That,” he added, voice edged with something sharper, “and like some people should be very nervous right now.”

A ripple moved through the reporters — half reaction, half recognition.

Catherine didn’t acknowledge it. She stepped back instead, reclaiming the moment before it could stretch. “Thank you,” she said, calm and final. “That will be all.”

They turned together, moving towards the waiting vehicles, with Shane and Ilya holding hands and reminding everyone they were a united front.

The house was quiet when they got back. The noise of the day didn’t follow them in. It stayed outside, caught somewhere between the courthouse steps and the closing of the front door.

Shane lingered there for a second, his hand still resting on the handle like he needed the extra moment to make sure it was real. That it was done. Or at least done enough to breathe.

He let out a slow breath and stepped inside. Shoes came off first. Jacket followed, and tie, meticulously folded and set down. Familiar motions. Automatic. The kind of normal that felt almost strange after everything else.

Across the room, Ilya moved with less precision, loosening his tie, rolling his shoulders once like he was trying to physically shake the day out of them. He made it as far as the kitchen before opening the fridge and just... standing there, staring into it like he’d forgotten why.

Shane watched him for a moment, something soft settling in his chest and a smile on his face.

“...we should probably eat,” he said eventually.

“Mm,” Ilya replied absently, still looking into the fridge. “Yes. Food. Very important. Big fan of food.”

He didn’t take anything out. Just closed the door again and leaned back against it, mirroring Shane without even seeming to realize it.

For a second, they just looked at each other.

“Is it over?” he asked quietly.

Ilya didn’t answer right away. He considered it properly, head tilting just slightly like he was turning the question over from every angle before giving it back.

“...No,” he said finally.

Honest. Always honest.

Then, softer—

“But this part is.”

Shane nodded once and pushed off the counter, crossing the space between them without thinking too hard about it. His hands found Ilya’s sides automatically, grounding himself in something solid and real, like he needed the reminder that this — right here — was what mattered.

“We’re okay,” he said, almost hesitatingly.

Ilya’s hands came up just as easily, settling at his waist, pulling him in a fraction closer.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. There was a brief pause, something softer moving through his expression before it settled into something warmer. “We are more than okay.”

Shane huffed out a breath that might have been a laugh, his forehead tipping forward to rest briefly against Ilya’s.

“Yeah?” he murmured.

Ilya didn’t move back.

“Mm,” he said. “We won the case. The Metros have to pay us a couple million dollars for being assholes. You kissed me in a courtroom where there were lots of cameras.”

“That was after,” Shane pointed out, voice quieter now but threaded with amusement. “And not the first time I kissed you in front of cameras.”

“Details,” Ilya said. “Still counts.”

Shane snorted softly, shaking his head a little.

“...you’re ridiculous.”

“Yes,” Ilya agreed immediately, completely unbothered. “But I’m your ridiculous fiancé.”

That did it. Something warm and bright pushed through the last of the tension in Shane’s chest, and he laughed properly this time, the sound softer now, easier. He didn’t pull away when he leaned in again, pressing a kiss to Ilya’s mouth that felt less like urgency and more like relief.

Ilya hummed into it, one hand sliding up Shane’s side, fingers curling slightly like he was holding onto something he had no intention of letting go of.

When they broke apart, it wasn’t by much.

“Also,” Ilya added, voice shifting just enough to signal trouble, “you owe me.”

Shane blinked, still close enough that their noses almost brushed. “For what?”

“For making me sit through hours of legal proceedings without letting me punch anyone,” Ilya said. “That took restraint. I should be rewarded.”

Shane’s mouth twitched. “Oh, is that how this works?”

“Yes,” Ilya said, completely serious. “It is in the contract.”

“What contract?”

“The one where you agreed to marry me.”

“That feels fake. Also, you agreed to marry me.”

“It is extremely real. Also, again you with the details.”

Shane laughed again, quieter this time, his hands still resting at Ilya’s sides, thumbs brushing absently against the fabric of his shirt.

“...what kind of reward are we talking about here?”

Ilya’s gaze shifted just slightly, something darker and warmer slipping in under the humour now.

“I think you can figure that out,” he said with a wink.

A beat.

Then, because he couldn’t help himself—

“Preferably somewhere that is not the kitchen. You’re still technically healing. Somewhere softer might be better...yes?”

Shane huffed out a quiet laugh, shaking his head as he leaned in again, brushing his mouth just lightly against Ilya's in a teasing motion.

"Yeah," he said softly. "Probably a good call."

Ilya's hand slid up into his hair this time, pulling him in just enough to steal his breath with another kiss, slower now, unhurried, like they finally had the space to take their time with it. Shane melted into it, his hands sliding to Ilya's hips and pulling him closer.

"Couch," was all he got out before Ilya picked him up and carried him to the living room.

He supposed they both deserved a reward, after all.

Chapter End Notes

We've officially crossed from "this is messy" into "this has consequences," and I am very, very pleased about it. The legal side, the public fallout, the players rallying — all of it was meant to feel like a shift in power, because that's exactly what it is.

Also, I'm a little in love with Catherine.

And now we get to breathe.

Not fully — we're not done yet — but enough to start looking at what comes after survival. What comes after winning.

We're heading into the final stretch of the story now. There are still a few things to resolve, a few people who aren't quite finished dealing with the consequences of their actions, and (very importantly) a wedding to plan...which I'm sure will go completely smoothly and without chaos. Obviously.

As always — thank you for being here, for reading, for yelling with me about these characters. We're almost there. You might have noticed the chapter count jumped a little. Blame Marchand. He has ideas that need their own chapter, and I just couldn't stick to the planned 26. I tried. These folks are merciless, even to their writer.

-SD

Chapter 24: Aftermath

Chapter Summary

The league moves fast — but this time, it's for the right reasons.

With Commissioner Crowell gone, Acting Commissioner Svetlana Vetrova wastes no time dismantling the systems that allowed harm to happen in the first place. The Montreal Metros face immediate consequences, and for the first time, the players are invited into the room where decisions are actually made.

Shane and Ilya walk into that room together — and walk out knowing something fundamental has changed.

Support shows up in unexpected ways. Players apologize. New allies step forward. And when the meeting ends, the players do what they always do best: they take up space, make noise, and remind each other what this game is supposed to be about.

Also, Brad Marchand brings spreadsheets. Wyatt threatens violence (supportively). Sidney Crosby somehow keeps everyone in line. And Shane realizes — maybe for the first time — that he doesn't have to brace himself anymore.

And later, behind a closed hotel room door, there's nothing left to hold back.

Not anymore.

Chapter Notes

Hi friends, loons, new eyes, and everyone else - surprise! Did you miss me? Is this a great treat?

WHy yes, sometimes I even surprise myself. Thank goodness for breaks in school allowing me to mostly write all day. I mean, it's really a win for all of us, isn't it?

This chapter is a bit of everything:

- league consequences (finally 🙄)
- Svetlana Vetrova being the absolute powerhouse we deserve
- players showing up like a real community
- Brad Marchand being... Brad Marchand (there is a spreadsheet. I will not apologize.)
- and a LOT of softness, because these two have earned it

Also yes, Hayden Pike is back because I missed him and he deserves to be here.

And for those of you here for the ✨vibes✨: this is the first time Shane and Ilya actually get to be them again after everything. So uh... yeah. We're leaning into that. I know you want smut, but swapping into full smut in the way this story has built felt...weird? So IMPLIED smut it is! I walk a line so you can use your imagination but it still felt true to the story.

Lets get to it, shall we?

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

The league moved fast because it had to.

Not out of instinct, and certainly not out of preference, but because anything slower would have looked like hesitation—and hesitation was no longer something they could afford. The moment had already outrun them. The footage, the recordings, the arrests—those had stripped everything down to something raw and undeniable, something that couldn't be reframed or softened with careful language. What had once been a narrative problem had become something far more dangerous.

This was a credibility problem.

And credibility, once lost in public, didn't come back quietly.

Svetlana Vetrova understood that immediately. She didn't approach the situation as something to manage or contain. She recognized it for what it was: something that needed to be corrected, decisively and without delay. There was a difference between stabilizing optics and restoring trust, and she had no interest in pretending one could replace the other.

She didn't begin behind closed doors. There was no internal memo, no drawn-out consultation process, no attempt to quietly align departments before taking action. That would have been too slow, too cautious, and far too reminiscent of the failures that had led them here in the first place.

She went public first.

The statement was released less than twelve hours after she assumed the role. It wasn't long, and it wasn't dressed up in language meant to buy time or soften impact. There were no vague acknowledgments of "ongoing review," no carefully padded phrasing designed to suggest movement without committing to it. Every word was deliberate, structured to land cleanly and without room for misinterpretation.

League Statement — Office of the Acting Commissioner

Effective immediately, the Montreal Metros organization is suspended from all league activities pending formal review.

This includes all team operations, player participation, and league representation.

The organization has also been assessed a financial penalty commensurate with its failure to act in response to conduct that directly impacted player safety and welfare.

This decision reflects a fundamental principle: silence in the face of harm is not neutrality.

It is participation.

Further measures may be considered as the review proceeds.

The League will be engaging directly with the MLHPA to ensure alignment on next steps and to reinforce standards of safety, accountability, and inclusion moving forward.

The statement did exactly what it needed to do. It drew a line—clear, immovable, and impossible to misread. There was no attempt to soften the implications or to leave space for reinterpretation. It wasn't written to reassure. It was written to establish position.

Internally, it landed with the force of something final. Not because the outcome itself was unexpected—there had already been enough public pressure to make some form of action inevitable—but because of how definitively it was delivered. There was no room left to debate whether the Metros had acted appropriately, no space to argue intent, optics, or internal process. The suspension didn't suggest an investigation might lead to consequences; it enforced consequence immediately, and the fine—substantial enough to matter without crossing into performative excess—reinforced that this was not symbolic.

It was structural.

People who understood the league, who had spent years inside its rhythms and politics, recognized something else just as quickly. This wasn't just discipline. It was positioning.

Svetlana wasn't reacting to what had already happened. She was getting ahead of what could come next. Where others might have focused on restoring the league's image, she had chosen instead to reinforce its foundation. If there was one thing she understood—better than most, and certainly better than her predecessor—it was that control didn't come from managing perception.

It came from protecting the people the league was built around.

By the time the MLHPA meeting was set to begin, she had already accomplished what no one else had managed in the days leading up to it. She had acted, and she had made it unmistakably clear that the players were no longer going to be treated as secondary considerations in that process.

So when she walked into that room, she wasn't arriving to negotiate terms or manage fallout. She was there to establish alignment, to set a direction that others would either follow or fall behind.

And she expected the players to meet her there.

The room was already full by the time Shane and Ilya arrived. Not just representatives or captains.

Players.

Dozens of them, pulled in from across the league in a way that didn't happen without reason. Veterans who had been through lockouts, trades, scandals, and everything in between sat alongside rookies who were still learning how to carry themselves under the weight of expectation. There were star players whose names filled headlines before they even stepped onto the ice, and depth guys who did the work quietly, whose value wasn't always visible but was never questioned inside a room like this. Goaltenders. Leaders. Enforcers. Playmakers.

All of them there.

Because whatever this had become, it wasn't routine anymore. It wasn't something that could be filed under league business and handled in a conference call or delegated through representatives. And it sure as hell wasn't something that could be managed quietly behind closed doors without the people it actually affected.

The low hum of conversation didn't stop when the two of them stepped into the room, but it shifted.

Not abruptly. Not enough to draw attention from the outside. But enough that Shane felt it immediately, the subtle recalibration of the space as awareness rippled outward. Conversations didn't end – they adjusted. Eyes lifted briefly, then returned to where they'd been, but not without acknowledgment.

It wasn't curiosity, or pity. Not that he could tell. It was something quieter than that, and perhaps heavier.

Recognition. Respect, maybe.

Shane adjusted the cuff of his sleeve as he moved forward, fingers brushing over fabric that didn't need fixing. It was automatic, something small and controlled to anchor himself in the moment, to keep his hands occupied when everything else felt just slightly too large.

Beside him, Ilya lightly touched his lower back. Not hovering, just there – steady in a way that didn't draw attention but made itself known all the same. Their shoulders didn't quite touch as they walked, but the space between them felt intentional, like it had been measured without either of them needing to think about it.

It grounded him more than anything else in the room.

They hadn't made it more than a few steps in before the first interruption came.

“Hey.”

Shane turned slightly, instinctively, and found one of the Western Conference guys stepping in — not someone he knew well, not someone he'd spent much time with outside of games. The kind of player you recognized on the ice more than off it.

Up close, he looked a little less certain.

“I just—” He rubbed a hand briefly along the back of his neck, like he wasn’t entirely sure how to phrase it. “Just wanted to say congrats. On... everything.”

His gaze flicked between Shane and Ilya, not uncomfortable — just careful not to step on any toes.

“And, uh—” he added, quieter now. “Sorry. For how some of that went down. Earlier. Should’ve been louder about it.”

Shane blinked once, caught slightly off guard by the directness of it. Then nodded.

“Thanks,” he said simply.

The guy nodded back, relief flickering across his face like that had gone better than expected, and stepped away without dragging it out.

He wasn’t the only one.

Another followed not long after — this one more familiar, someone Shane had actually shared ice time with more than once. His handshake was firm, deliberate.

“Congratulations,” he said. “And for what it’s worth... you deserved better from a lot of us.”

Ilya didn’t let that one pass unnoticed.

“Yes,” he said evenly. “He did.”

There was no bite to it, or accusation. Just truth. The guy nodded once, accepting that without argument, before clapping Shane lightly on the shoulder and nodding at Ilya before moving on.

It didn’t turn into a line. It wasn’t formal or organized in any way. Just... moments. One after another. A quiet acknowledgment passed from player to player in the space between everything else. A handshake. A quick word. A nod that lingered just long enough to mean something.

Support, in the way hockey players actually gave it — awkward, slightly media-trained, and unsure.

Real.

By the time Shane finally reached the table they were sitting at, something in his chest had shifted again.

Wyatt spotted them first. He was leaned back in his chair like he’d claimed the entire space the second he walked in, one arm slung casually over the back, posture loose in a way that suggested comfort but never quite crossed into careless. A glass sat in front of him,

untouched for once, condensation gathering along the sides as if even it was waiting for the moment to start.

“Look who finally made it,” he called, grin immediate and unbothered, like the past week hadn’t existed — or at least hadn’t gotten the better of him.

Shane huffed out something that might have been a laugh as he stepped in closer, easing into the seat beside him without hesitation. “You’re early.”

“I was told there would be food,” Wyatt replied, completely serious. “I don’t miss food.”

MacKinnon snorted from somewhere to the left, leaning back just enough to angle into the conversation. “You don’t miss anything.”

“Accurate,” Wyatt said easily.

Further down the table, McDavid gave a small nod. Stone lifted his glass slightly in acknowledgment. And then a familiar voice —

“Hey.”

Shane turned before he even fully processed the voice, something instinctive pulling his attention across the room.

Hayden Pike stood just off to the side of the table, one hand tucked into the pocket of his jacket like he wasn’t entirely sure what to do with it, the other leaning on a cane. He looked... solid. Present in a way that hadn’t always been the case, like whatever had settled since the crash had stayed there.

He stepped closer with an easy smile.

“Wasn’t sure if I’d make it in time,” he said. His eyes moved between them, landing briefly on Shane before shifting to Ilya. “Figured this was one I shouldn’t miss.”

Shane’s mouth curved, something genuine and immediate.

“Yeah,” he said. “Glad you didn’t.”

Hayden nodded once, then reached out, pulling Shane into a quick, firm hug that landed solid and familiar.

“Congrats,” he said quietly. “Both of you.”

He stepped back, glancing at Ilya.

“Take care of him, asshole.”

Ilya didn’t miss a beat, grinning at him.

“Jealous, Pike?”

“Nah. I know he loves me. Just want to make sure you’re worth sharing that with,” Hayden shot back, winking at him.

A surprised laugh burst out of Ilya before he reached out and hugged him – catching both Shane and Hayden by surprise.

“I will always take care of him, Hayden.”

There was something in the way Hayden held his gaze for a second longer — measuring, maybe. Not doubting. Just confirming. Then he nodded.

“Good,” he said. “The kids have already picked out their outfits for the wedding anyway. Apparently they think their Uncles need fashion tips and have asked me to submit your outfit choices for approval”

Ilya nodded, mock seriousness on his face.

“As soon as options are chosen, we will send pictures.”

A few seats over, Sid caught Shane’s eye. He was seated with his usual composure – the kind that didn’t demand space but somehow defined it anyway. He wasn’t speaking, wasn’t gesturing, wasn’t doing anything that would draw attention in a conventional sense. But there was a weight to his presence, the kind that came from years of leadership, from knowing when to step in and when to simply observe.

He smiled briefly. “Hey guys. Hope you’re ready for Brad – he brought folders.”

Marchand piped up from Sid’s other side.

“I keep telling you – I know people. You’re gonna love this.”

The room settled the moment Svetlana Vetrova walked in. She stepped into the space like she belonged there — and expected everyone to accept that.

They did.

Her gaze moved once across the room, taking in all the players who had shown up before stepping up to the podium at the front.

“I’ll keep this direct,” she said. “Because none of you are here for a speech.”

A faint ripple of agreement moved through the room — quiet, but real.

“What happened should not have been possible,” she continued. “Not structurally. Not ethically. Not operationally. There is no excuse, and no justification for any of it, and I will not try to give any.”

Her voice remained steady and sure of itself.

“I am not interested in preserving systems that allowed that to happen.”

She folded her hands loosely in front of her.

“So we are not simply adjusting policy,” she said. We are rebuilding it from the ground up.”

A pause.

“Player safety,” she continued, “is not a statement we release. It is a system we enforce. And right now, that system is broken. I will not allow it to remain that way. Effective immediately, the Montreal Metros organization is suspended from league operations pending full review.”

That got a reaction. Subtle — but unmistakable. A shift in posture. A glance exchanged. The quiet recalculation of what that meant.

Suspension wasn’t symbolic or performative. It was financial. Structural.

It forever tarnished a reputation.

More to the point, it hurt.

“In addition,” she continued, “the organization is subject to internal disciplinary review for failure to act in protection of a player under their contract.”

Her tone remained steady.

“Preliminary findings indicate organizational negligence at best. Complicity at worst.”

No one spoke.

“Financial penalties will follow,” she added. “They will reflect the scale of the failure.”

Wyatt let out a low whistle under his breath. “Yeah,” he muttered. “They’re done.”

“Good,” Ilya said quietly.

Shane didn’t say anything, but he felt the shift in the room.

“The League is also initiating an independent review of all media access and internal information pathways,” Vetrova continued. “That includes NorthLine and any affiliated sources.”

Her gaze flicked briefly — sharp, intentional.

“Access is a privilege,” she said. “Not a right. And it can – and will – be revoked.”

Crosby spoke then. He didn’t raise his voice. He didn’t need to, years of everyone listening to him had that effect.

“This doesn’t happen again,” he said simply.

Vetrova met his gaze directly.

“It won’t,” she said.

And this time, there was no mistaking the steel sat underneath the words.

Players asked questions—real ones. About reporting systems. About accountability. About what happens if something like this starts again before it spirals into something worse.

Vetrova answered every one of them. Clearly. Directly. Without deflection.

At one point, she paused.

“My wife works in film,” she said, almost conversationally. “Public image is her profession. She is actually very excited to help me with new ideas – she is also a huge hockey fan.”

A faint shift of attention. Recognition from a few people in the room, with a few nervous laughs.

After all, her wife Rose Landry wasn’t exactly obscure.

“She reminds me often,” Vetrova continued, “that anything built on performance collapses the moment someone stops believing in it. I am not interested in performance beyond what actually happens on the ice. I’m interested in modernizing the administration of this league so we can all get back to what matters – playing good hockey, and having a great time doing so.”

By the time the meeting ended, something had shifted with the players. Not dramatically. Not in a way anyone could point to and name outright. But it was there — quiet and steady, settling into the edges of the room like something that had been waiting for permission to exist.

The energy didn’t lift all at once. At first, it hesitated. Chairs scraped back more slowly than they normally would, conversations starting in low voices as if people weren’t entirely sure yet what was appropriate — what this moment *was*, exactly. There was still too much weight sitting in the air, too much that had just been said, decided, acknowledged. It lingered in the way players glanced at each other before speaking, in the careful tone of the first few exchanges, in the shared understanding that this hadn’t just been another meeting.

This had mattered.

And then, gradually, it started to loosen. Not because anyone told it to. Not because there was a clear shift or a defining moment. Just because that’s what happens when you put a room full of hockey players together and give them even the smallest opening to breathe. Someone cracked a quiet joke, tentative at first—but it landed. Someone else responded, a little easier this time. A chair turned. A voice got louder. Another followed. Guys grouped off with friends from different teams as the crowd began to thin out.

The tension didn't disappear — it just... changed shape.

It turned into movement. Into overlapping conversations. Into that familiar, unstructured drift of people who weren't quite ready to go back to normal yet, but also weren't willing to sit in the heaviness any longer than they had to. Shane felt it happen more than he saw it, that subtle shift from careful to comfortable, from measured to something that felt a little more like *them* again.

Beside him, Ilya adjusted in his seat, one arm draped loosely along the back like he'd decided, without saying it out loud, that they were done being formal for the day. The tension in his shoulders had eased — not completely, but enough that Shane noticed. Across the room, Wyatt was already leaning back like he owned the place, which, honestly, felt like the clearest sign that things were levelling out.

"Okay," he said, loud enough to cut through a few of the quieter conversations. "That was a lot of feelings for one day."

MacKinnon snorted immediately. "You had feelings?"

"Briefly," Wyatt said. "Didn't care for it."

That got a laugh. A real one this time — not forced, not careful. It spread quickly, catching and carrying, loosening something in the room that had been wound too tight for too long.

And just like that, it tipped. The hesitation cracked fully, giving way to something looser, warmer, easier. Conversations picked up speed, voices overlapping, someone swearing loudly about league policies while someone else immediately argued back. It wasn't polished anymore. It wasn't controlled.

It was familiar.

It was *normal*.

And it felt good.

Somewhere in the middle of it, someone — no one would ever agree on who — mentioned food. Another voice followed with drinks, the idea taking shape almost immediately, passed from one person to the next without needing to be formally decided. There was a brief pause, just long enough for the suggestion to settle—

—and then Wyatt, with impeccable timing and absolutely no authority, pointed at no one in particular and claimed it like it had always been his.

"Perfect," he said. "My idea. We're doing that. Lets go, boys!"

The restaurant knew how to disappear.

Not literally — nothing about it was hidden — but the way it functioned made it feel like it was. The private room sat just far enough away from the main dining floor that the noise softened into something indistinct, a low hum that never quite intruded. The lighting was warm without being dim, softening the edges of everything it touched. Conversations felt a little quieter here, laughter a little easier.

Staff moved in and out with practiced ease, never lingering, never interrupting. Plates appeared. Glasses were refilled. Empty dishes vanished without ceremony. It was seamless in a way that suggested intention.

No cameras. No interruptions. No one watching long enough to make anything feel observed. It was safe, and tonight, that mattered more than anything.

The room filled quickly, though never all at once. Players arrived in clusters, voices spilling in ahead of them, laughter echoing briefly in the hallway before they stepped inside. Chairs scraped, jackets were shrugged off and abandoned, someone claimed a seat and then immediately got back up to grab a drink, forcing the entire table to shift before it had even settled.

By the time Shane and Ilya walked in, the room was already alive.

Wyatt spotted them first. Again. The man never missed anything, it seems.

“—there they are,” he called, loud enough to cut through everything else, one hand lifting like he was flagging them down across the ice instead of across a room.

That was all it took.

Heads turned. Conversations shifted. Attention rippled outward in a way that should’ve felt overwhelming, but didn’t because it wasn’t scrutiny. It was recognition and friendship.

Warm. Immediate. Easy.

“Look who finally decided to show up,” Marchand added, already halfway out of his chair like he might physically intercept them before they reached the table.

“Sit down,” McDavid said without looking up from the drink menu.

“I’m welcoming them.”

“You’re hovering.”

“I’m engaging.”

“You’re annoying.”

“Semantics.”

Shane didn’t realize he’d slowed until he felt Ilya’s hand brush lightly against his back.

Just a touch.

A quiet keep going. We're safe here.

And then they were moving again, stepping fully into it.

They didn't find seats so much as get absorbed into the table. Wyatt shoved a chair out with his foot. Stone shifted. Someone pressed a drink into Shane's hand before he'd fully sat down.

And Ilya—

Well, Ilya didn't hesitate. He dropped into the seat beside Shane like there had never been another option. No pause. No question. Just there. His knee bumped Shane's under the table almost immediately, deliberate and grounding. His arm slid along the back of Shane's chair, settling there like it belonged.

Shane leaned into it without thinking.

And no one so much as blinked.

"Okay," Wyatt announced, already halfway through his drink. "Now that the league isn't actively trying to kill anyone—"

"Low bar," MacKinnon cut in.

"Extremely low bar," Wyatt agreed. "We need to address something important."

Shane didn't even look up. "Oh no."

Wyatt grinned.

"The wedding."

The reaction was immediate.

Groans. Loud ones. A napkin thrown. Someone swearing under their breath. And under it all a current of laughter and excitement.

Marchand leaned forward like someone had just handed him purpose.

"Finally," he said. "We're doing this."

"We are absolutely not doing this before dinner," McDavid replied.

"I've already started a spreadsheet."

Stone choked. "You what?"

"I have categories."

“That’s worse,” Horvat said.

“That’s so much worse,” MacKinnon added.

“I’ve got venues, colour palettes, potential guest lists—”

“You’re not invited,” Wyatt cut in.

“Says you. I’m hosting.”

“You’re banned.”

“I’m essential.”

“You’re a liability.”

It spiralled fast in the best way. Voices layered over each other, arguments stacking, suggestions flying in every direction. Someone said destination wedding. Someone else vetoed it instantly.

Brad plowed forward anyway, ignoring the chaos he always created, eyes on Ilya and Shane.

“Ilya,” he said, pointing across the table, “you’re clearly handling aesthetics.”

“I am absolutely not handling aesthetics,” Ilya replied smoothly — then paused, tilting his head slightly like he was considering it.

“...however,” he added thoughtfully, “if I *were* handling aesthetics, it would be extremely good.”

Wyatt let out a loud laugh. “Oh no, don’t encourage him.”

“I am not encouraging,” Ilya said calmly. “I am acknowledging reality.”

Marchand lit up. “See? He gets it.”

“I get that you are about to make this everyone’s problem,” Ilya corrected, but there was a hint of amusement threading through it now.

“Too late,” Marchand said. “It already is.”

Shane dropped his head into his hands, laughing under his breath.

“Brad,” he said, voice caught somewhere between fond and exasperated, “no.”

“Yes, Shane,” Marchand said immediately.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“I’ve already colour-coded things.”

“That’s not better.”

“It’s *significantly* better.”

Crosby, quiet until now, finally spoke.

“No.”

Marchand didn’t even look at him. “I hear you. I reject that.”

Wyatt lost it at that, laughing hard enough to lean into the table.

“God, I missed this,” he said.

“Missed what?” MacKinnon asked.

“Not being the biggest problem in the room.”

“Debatable,” Stone muttered.

Further down the table, Hayden had fully settled into things, leaning back in his chair with a dry, amused expression that suggested he was enjoying this far more than he’d expected.

“I’m just saying,” he cut in, voice easy, “if you let him plan this, there’s a real chance it ends with fireworks and at least one legal issue.”

“Worth it,” Marchand said immediately.

“Not helping,” McDavid muttered.

Through all of it, Shane felt himself settle. He leaned into Ilya again, more deliberately this time, shoulder pressing fully into his. Ilya adjusted without missing a beat, his hand sliding more firmly to the small of Shane’s back, thumb brushing once in a slow, absent motion that made Shane’s breath catch just slightly.

“You’re thinking again,” Ilya murmured.

Shane huffed. “Am I that obvious?”

“Yes.”

A beat.

Then softer—

“Especially with what you are thinking about right now.”

Shane turned his head, meeting his eyes.

“And what am I thinking about?”

Ilya held his gaze, something hotter settling there as he leaned in to whisper in Shane’s ear.

“What I’m going to do to you after dinner.”

Shane choked on his drink and blushed before shaking his head and laughing.

The night stretched after that, easy and unstructured. Food came and went, drinks replaced before they were empty. Conversations shifted from loud chaos to quieter moments and back again without warning.

At one point, Marchand was fully on his feet, trying to explain seating arrangements using salt shakers.

“This is you,” he said, pointing.

“That’s a pepper shaker,” Wyatt replied.

“Symbolic.”

“Of what?”

“I don’t know, but it’s you.”

“You’re unwell.”

Even Crosby cracked a smile at that, laughing along with everyone else and looking more at ease than usual.

Shane lost track of time somewhere in the middle of it.

Eventually, people started to leave. Slowly. Reluctantly. Conversations trailing into the hallway, into the night.

Wyatt was one of the last. He stopped behind Shane’s chair, dropping a hand onto his shoulder.

“You good?” he asked.

Shane nodded. “Yeah. Sorry about the stitches, though.”

Wyatt studied him for a second, something quieter under everything else. Then nodded.

“Lisa says it makes me look badass, so no apologies necessary. Besides, she shipped you guys long before any of us knew you had already shipped yourselves,” he said. “If you need me to punch anyone else, I’m available.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Please don’t,” Ilya added.

Wyatt ignored him. “I’m serious.”

“I know,” Shane said, smiling.

And then it was just them, and the room felt bigger. Quieter. Softer.

Shane leaned back slightly, exhaling. “...that was a lot.”

“Mm,” Ilya agreed. “But not bad.”

Shane glanced at him, taking in all the angles of the face he loved more than anything in the world.

“No,” he said quietly. “Not bad.”

Ilya’s hand found his under the table, fingers threading together easily as he tugged him to his feet.

“What now?” Shane asked.

Ilya tilted his head, watching him for a moment. Then he smiled, slow and dangerous.

“Now,” he said softly, “we go upstairs.”

And the way he said it made it very clear exactly what his intentions were.

The hotel room door barely had time to shut.

The click echoed behind them and for a brief second the night lingered with them. The noise, the laughter, the warmth of being surrounded by people who had their backs — it clung to Shane’s skin like it hadn’t quite realized it was over yet.

He had just started to turn—

—and Ilya’s hand closed around his waist.

He stepped in without hesitation, guiding — no, *driving* — Shane back against the door in one smooth motion. The impact was soft, but enough to knock the breath from Shane’s chest in a quiet rush, surprise flickering across his face even as something warmer followed close behind.

“—oh,” Shane managed, already smiling.

Ilya didn’t give him time to recover. His other hand came up to Shane’s face, fingers sliding along his jaw, thumb settling just beneath his cheekbone. It wasn’t rough, but it wasn’t gentle either — it was *certain*, grounding him there, keeping him exactly where he wanted him.

“Hi,” Shane breathed, already a little wrecked.

Ilya’s mouth curved faintly, something warm and a little undone flickering through his expression. “Hi.”

And then he kissed him.

It wasn’t slow. It wasn’t careful. It was immediate – heat and intent and weeks of restraint snapping all at once. Shane’s head tipped back against the door, breath catching as Ilya stepped in closer, closing every inch of space between them. The hand at his face held him steady, kept him there, while the one at his waist tightened, pulling him flush against him like even that wasn’t enough.

Shane’s hands were already moving, like they’d been waiting for permission. They fisted in Ilya’s shirt first, then slid higher, fingers tangling in his hair as he pulled him back down, chasing the kiss instead of just receiving it.

“God,” Shane breathed against his mouth, the word half a laugh, half something deeper. “We haven’t—”

“No,” Ilya said, barely pulling back, his mouth brushing Shane’s again like distance wasn’t something he was willing to commit to. “We haven’t.”

There was a beat—just enough for his thumb to shift slightly against Shane’s cheek again, deliberate, grounding and tracing the freckles.

“And I am done waiting.”

Shane let out a breathless laugh, the sound breaking as they separated just enough to breathe — and his hands didn’t stop moving. They slid down Ilya’s chest, gripping, tugging, impatient in a way that felt almost instinctive now.

Then he just *pulled*.

Ilya’s shirt came with it, dragged up and over his head in one quick, slightly messy motion, neither of them slowing down enough to make it clean. The fabric was gone a second later, forgotten somewhere behind them.

For a heartbeat, they just looked at each other.

Close enough to feel the heat. Close enough that neither of them actually stopped touching.

Ilya huffed out a quiet laugh, rough around the edges. “Better.”

Then he was back in again, kissing him harder, deeper, like the interruption had only made the need sharper. His hands didn’t stay still this time either. One slid back under Shane’s shirt, warm against his skin, fingers spreading along his side before moving higher, slower this time, deliberate in a way that made Shane’s breath hitch.

The other shifted from his waist to his back, pressing him forward, keeping him exactly where he wanted him. Shane made a soft sound against his mouth, his grip tightening reflexively, like he needed something to hold onto, something to ground himself in the middle of it.

“Yeah?” Ilya murmured, voice low, threaded with something teasing.

“Don’t—” Shane started, then broke off when Ilya’s hand shifted again. “Don’t start with that.”

“With what?” Ilya asked, completely unrepentant.

“You know what.”

“I do,” he said easily. A beat. Then softer—“And you like it.”

Shane didn’t even try to argue this time. His hands slid down again, gripping at his sides, pulling him closer like he couldn’t help it, grinding his hips against him with a low sound ripping from his throat.

They didn’t stay at the door.

Somewhere between one kiss and the next, between the way their hands kept wandering — never settling, always pulling, always finding — they moved. Clothes being pulled off and discarded in a hurry – Shane didn’t even stop to fold them – the bed was the only logical next step and neither of them had the patience to pretend otherwise.

Shane barely registered the shift until the back of his knees hit the mattress and he went down with a soft *oof*, dragging Ilya with him. The movement pulled another laugh out of him — short, breathless, still tangled up in everything else.

Ilya caught himself just enough not to crush him, bracing one arm beside his head while the other stayed anchored at his side, holding him there like he had no intention of letting him go anywhere.

For a second, he just looked at him — eyes darker now, focus sharper.

“Still okay?” he asked, quieter.

Shane didn’t hesitate.

“Yeah,” he said, already pulling him back down, hands sliding up his back again. “Fuck. Yeah, I’m—”

And Ilya moved. Not careful. Not measured. Not pacing himself the way he had to while Shane healed, while everything felt uncertain and fragile and *temporary*. Whatever restraint they’d been holding onto the past few weeks was gone.

Hands moved faster now. More certain. Every touch felt sharper, more immediate, like they were making up for lost time and had no interest in doing it slowly.

“Missed this,” Shane muttered against his mouth, breath catching when Ilya pressed closer again, like there was still somehow space between them.

Ilya huffed softly, a quiet laugh that melted into the next kiss. “You think?”

“Shut up.”

“No.”

After that, everything blurred. Not in a way that lost detail, but in the way moments do when they stop being about anything except what’s right in front of you. Time stretched, slipped, disappeared entirely. It wasn’t about pacing or thinking anymore, just the way they kept finding each other again and again, like they couldn’t quite believe they were allowed to.

Laughter slipped in where it didn’t belong and stayed anyway, soft and real and grounding in the middle of everything else. Shane’s hands felt, traced, and held on like he needed to keep confirming this was real, that this was *theirs* again. That there was nothing awful waiting on the other side of it.

Later — much, much later — the room settled back into quiet.

Shane lay half on top of him, breath finally even, his fingers tracing slow, absent patterns along Ilya’s chest like he didn’t quite know what to do with the stillness now that it had finally come.

“...okay,” he said softly, voice a little rough. “That was worth the wait.”

Ilya laughed quietly beneath him, one hand sliding into his hair, fingers threading through it lazily.

“Mm,” he agreed. “We should not wait that long again.”

“Yeah,” Shane said, softer now.

A slightly drowsy moment later, Shane tilted his head up to look at Ilya. Top of Form

“We’re not actually letting Brad plan the wedding, are we?”

Ilya laughed, leaned down and kissed his forehead.

“I think we should. His spreadsheet looked rather detailed. Would save some effort on our part.”

Shane groaned. “If we agree to look at it and maybe let him pick the flowers, think that would be enough?”

“Probably not. But we can try. Should we go shower now?”

Shane looked around at the chaos around them and groaned again. “Yeah, let’s clean up. Now my clothes are going to be all wrinkled.”

Ilya laughed and swatted him on the butt. “Let’s go get clean, sweetheart.”

Chapter End Notes

We made it. They’re safe. They’re supported. They’re (mostly) legally vindicated (obviously something is brewing there, but no bricks! I promise!) The league is finally acting like it has a functioning moral compass.

AND THEY GOT TO BE HAPPY AND HORNY ABOUT IT.

Look at us. Growth.

This chapter is really the pivot point into endgame territory. The storm isn’t fully over (we’ve still got the criminal side looming in the background), but the tone has shifted. They’re not surviving anymore, they’re living out and proud and I love that for them.

Coming up:

- consequences
- Marchand in full wedding planner mode (I’m so sorry in advance....but also very not sorry)
- actual wedding prep chaos
- and eventually... the wedding itself perhaps

Also, if you think Brad is going to accept “maybe you can pick the flowers” as a boundary, you are deeply underestimating that man. He’s a fucking menace. And bossy as hell when he decides to become an actual character and not just a dude in a text chain.

Thanks for sticking with me through all the angst to get to this part. The payoff only works because you were here for the hurt 🧡 Keep yelling at me in the comments, keep sharing, hell, tag me on the socials if you so desire - you feeding me means I have more to feed you. And since I also recently started another AU...apparently I’m just going to keep doing so.

-SD

Chapter 25: The Things That Hold

Chapter Summary

Svetlana Vetrova steals a hotel key, Wyatt Hayes terrorizes the media, Shane and Ilya keep being disgustingly good at hockey, and somewhere between a postgame win and a panic attack at thirty thousand feet, Shane realizes something new:

maybe being held doesn't always mean being trapped.

Maybe sometimes, it means you're safe.

Chapter Notes

Yes, I got this written obnoxiously quick. I had downtime. I'm gonna be so productive you guys are going to be sick of me. I apologize for nothing.

This chapter is a little softer. A little steadier. Which, frankly, these idiots have earned.

We've got surprise hotel visitors, hockey being hockey again, Wyatt Hayes in full goalie goblin form, Shane being calm and sharp at the mic, and a quieter kind of aftermath than what we've been living in lately. This one is really about support—professional, personal, public, private, all of it. About the things that hold when everything else has already tried to come apart.

Also yes, Svetlana absolutely sweet-talked her way into that room key. Rose definitely helped. No, I will not be hearing objections at this time.

Just a small word of caution - there is a fully lived-in panic attack in this chapter (I kissed the brick). If that is something you need support for, make sure you have it, or you skip past that section. Mental health is actually my day job, so it does feel very real. Remember it's good to ask for help and support when you need it!

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

The knock on the hotel room door came far too early for it to be anything good.

Shane didn't move at first — not because he hadn't heard it, but because he was warm, half-buried under blankets, and currently being held in place by a very large, very solid Russian who had absolutely no intention of letting him go anytime soon. Ilya's arm was draped low

across his waist, heavy and unyielding even in sleep, like he'd fallen asleep mid-claim and simply... stayed there.

"...you hear that?" Shane muttered into the pillow, voice still thick with sleep.

"Mm," Ilya replied, not moving, his grip tightening just slightly as if the answer might somehow make the problem disappear.

It didn't.

The knock came again—more deliberate this time, less patient.

Shane cracked one eye open and stared vaguely toward the door, as if ignoring it hard enough might make it resolve itself. "It's not going away," he said.

"No," Ilya agreed.

Neither of them moved.

Shane huffed out a quiet laugh. "You gonna get that?"

"No."

"...great."

The knock came again.

And then—

"Ilya, if you don't open this door, I'm coming in."

That did it.

Ilya's eyes snapped open immediately, focus sharpening in a way that had nothing to do with waking up and everything to do with recognition.

"...fuck," he muttered, already pushing himself upright.

Shane blinked, now fully awake. "...who is that?"

"Problem," Ilya said, dragging a hand down his face.

"Helpful."

"Big problem."

Another voice filtered through the door then—lighter, amused, and entirely too entertained. "You have about five seconds before she stops asking and just uses the key."

Shane froze. "...the what?"

Ilya closed his eyes briefly. "...of course she has a key."

"Three."

"Okay, that's worse—why does she have a key—"

"Two—"

"I am opening door!" Ilya snapped, already crossing the room.

He yanked it open.

And there she was.

Svetlana Vetrova stood in the hallway like she owned the building—which, given the circumstances, she very nearly did. Perfect posture. Absolute control. The faintest hint of satisfaction in her expression like this had gone exactly how she expected it to.

And beside her—

Rose Landry leaned casually against the wall, keycard held up between two fingers like evidence.

"I told you he'd open it before I had to use this," she said brightly.

Shane stared. "...you have a key."

Rose wiggled it slightly. "Front desk loves me."

"They should not," Ilya muttered.

"They absolutely should," Rose shot back. "I was charming."

"You were threatening."

"Semantics."

Svetlana didn't comment on that.

She just stepped forward, slipping past the doorframe with quiet, effortless authority like the room had already been hers before they'd even opened it.

"You got engaged," she said.

Ilya didn't flinch. "Yes."

"You did not tell me."

"No."

"You did not warn me."

“No.”

“You allowed me to find out with the rest of the world.”

There was the smallest pause.

“...yes.”

Rose made a soft choking sound into her coffee, very clearly trying—and failing—not to laugh.

Svetlana stepped further into the room, turning now to face him fully.

“Ilya Gregovich Rozanov,” she said, the full name landing like a memory instead of a threat, “I have known you since you were nine years old and broke your arm trying to jump off a roof because you thought you could fly.”

Shane blinked.

Ilya sighed. “I was very convincing.”

“You were very stupid.”

“Also true.”

Svetlana crossed her arms, but the edge in her posture had softened—just slightly. “I have watched you fight coaches, ignore trainers, and argue with referees who were twice your size.”

“They were wrong.”

“They were correct.”

“They were occasionally correct.”

“You do not get,” she continued, quieter now, “to disappear into the biggest story in the league, fall in love, get engaged, and not tell me.”

Ilya held her gaze.

“I know,” he said.

A beat.

“I should have told you.”

That landed differently.

Svetlana studied him for a long moment, something older and more familiar settling into place beneath the authority.

Then she nodded once. “Yes. You should have.”

Rose stepped in before it could sit too heavily, nudging Svetlana lightly with her shoulder. “Okay, great, we’ve established he’s emotionally incompetent—can we meet the fiancé now or are we going to keep emotionally ambushing him?”

“I am getting to that,” Svetlana said, though there was no real heat behind it anymore.

Her attention shifted.

To Shane.

And this time, when she looked at him—

it wasn’t sharp.

It was warm.

“And you,” she said.

Shane straightened instinctively, suddenly very aware of himself in a way he hadn’t been five minutes ago. “Yeah. Hi.”

“I only know you as Shane Hollander, but he’s a hockey player that is better than this idiot over here. You must be Ilya’s Shane when you’re like this, and not the other guy, yes?”

“...yeah.”

There was a brief pause, and then she stepped fully into the room.

“Hello,” she said, extending her hand.

Shane took it.

“Congratulations,” she added, and this time there was no mistaking it—she meant it. “I meant what I said at the meeting. The league is going to have your back. All of you. That is not changing.”

Something in Shane’s chest settled at that in a way he hadn’t expected.

“Thank you,” he said, quieter now.

Svetlana gave a small nod, then glanced briefly at Ilya before looking back at him.

“And for the record,” she added, almost casually, “you are the better player.”

There was a beat.

Ilya blinked. “Excuse me—”

“You heard me.”

“That is incorrect.”

“That is extremely correct.”

Rose lost it completely. “Oh, I *love* him.”

Shane laughed, caught off guard. “I’m not getting involved in that.”

“Smart,” Rose said, already crossing the room and dropping into a chair like she belonged there. “Stay neutral. That’s how you survive.”

“I am right here,” Ilya said.

“Yes,” both women said at the same time.

Shane laughed again, easier now.

Rose pointed at him. “You’re handling this well.”

“I don’t feel like I am.”

“You are,” she said. “You laughed. That’s step one.”

Shane huffed a breath, shaking his head slightly. “This is... a lot.”

“Welcome,” Rose said. “It doesn’t get less.”

Svetlana moved a little further into the room now, her presence still controlled, still precise—but no longer cold.

“I just wanted to see you,” she said, glancing between them. “Both of you. Not in a meeting. Not in a room full of people.”

A beat.

“Just this.”

It landed.

Ilya nodded once. “Good,” he said quietly.

Rose stood, draining the last of her coffee. “Alright. We’ve checked in, we’ve caused emotional distress, we’ve bonded—”

“You caused nothing,” Svetlana said.

“I caused *everything*,” Rose corrected. “Let’s go.”

Svetlana gave Shane one last look.

“Welcome,” she said simply.

And this time—

it felt like she meant more than just the room.

Then they were gone.

The door clicked shut behind them.

Silence settled into the room in the space they left behind—quiet, but not heavy. Not like it had been before. This was something softer. Something that didn't press in.

Shane stood there for a second, staring at the door like he was still catching up.

“...okay,” he said finally, a quiet laugh slipping out as he dragged a hand through his hair. “I like them.”

Ilya exhaled slowly, some tension he hadn't quite been carrying loosening now that the moment had passed. “Yes,” he said. “They are... a lot.”

Shane glanced over at him, mouth twitching. “So are you.”

“That is different.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.”

“...no.”

That got a faint huff of laughter out of Ilya, and just like that, the last of the sharp edges from the past few days seemed to... settle.

Shane dropped back onto the bed, stretching out like he'd just remembered how to breathe properly.

“...she meant that,” he said after a second, staring up at the ceiling. “What she said. About the league.”

“I know,” Ilya replied.

There was no hesitation in it.

That, more than anything else, landed.

Shane turned his head slightly, looking at him. “You trust her.”

“Yes.”

Simple and certain.

Shane nodded once, letting that sit where it wanted to.

“...okay,” he said.

The arena felt alive before they even stepped onto the ice.

Not chaotic—just charged. The kind of energy that settled into the bones of a building when something mattered. When the crowd wasn’t just present, but invested. It hummed through the concrete, through the glass, through the low swell of voices that never quite faded, even between plays.

“Big one tonight,” the colour commentator was saying as the broadcast rolled. “Not just because of the standings — though that matters, especially this late in the season— but because of everything surrounding this team right now.”

“Yeah,” the play-by-play voice replied. “They’ve been through a lot the past couple weeks, and you have to wonder how that affects them on the ice. Sometimes it rattles you.”

A beat.

“Sometimes,” he added, “it brings a group together.”

Shane adjusted his gloves as he stepped onto the ice, the scrape of his skates grounding him instantly. The cold hit his face, sharp and clean, and for a second everything else fell away — the noise, the headlines, the weight of everything that had come before.

Just ice. Just movement. Just the game. It really was that simple to him – play the game he loved, with the man he loved.

He glanced toward the stands out of habit and paused. There in the stand, in a city on the other side of the continent, were fans wearing rainbow jerseys, holding signs, and cheering. They were watching, but not like before.

Not the sharp, invasive attention that came with scandal, or the passion that comes from rooting against the visiting team. Not curiosity, either. It was something he was starting to realize really mattered to him – it was support.

“...you see that?” he muttered under his breath, leaning against the board and looking down at Ilya who was stretching on the ice.

Ilya didn’t look up right away, finishing his stretch before straightening beside him. “Yes. They are here for us. San Jose will be cranky. Especially when we win.”

Shane swallowed lightly, something steady settling into his chest.

“...yeah.”

San Jose came out fast, driven by the young super star Macklin Celebrini, who played like he already belonged at this level.

“Kid’s good,” Shane muttered.

“He will be a problem,” Ilya replied. “Reminds me of you at that age.”

“Already is a problem. And thanks I think? ”

The first goal came from instinct. Shane drew two defenders, cut inside, and passed without looking —because he knew Ilya was there.

One touch. One shot. Goal.

The crowd erupted.

“Great pass.”

“Great goal.”

“Always.”

San Jose pushed back, but it didn’t break them. After all a team can’t win just because one player is poised to be a superstar. But by the third period, Ottawa controlled the game. Shane scored twice, Barrett scored once, and it just seemed like they were untouchable when they played together.

It just felt easy.

The locker room was loud.

Not chaotic—there was a rhythm to it—but full in the way it always was after a win. Voices overlapped, laughter cut through from one side of the room to the other, the sharp hiss of the showers running in the back mixing with the dull thud of gear being dropped onto benches and kicked under stalls. The air was thick with heat and sweat and the lingering edge of adrenaline that hadn’t quite burned off yet.

It felt earned.

Shane stepped into it with the kind of ease that only came from doing this a hundred times before, the noise settling around him instead of pressing in. His gloves came off first, tossed into his stall without much thought, helmet following a second later with a soft clatter. His shoulders were still tight from the game, but it was the good kind of tension now — muscle, not stress.

Across the room, Wyatt was already talking, because of course he was.

“I’m just saying,” he was halfway through, still in most of his gear, one pad off and set aside and the other very much not, “if we’re being honest about that game, I carried you.”

A chorus of groans answered him immediately.

“You made twenty-eight saves,” Luca shot back from across the room, peeling off his jersey. “That’s literally your job.”

“Not like that,” Wyatt said, waving him off. “Those were *impactful* saves. There’s a difference. Celebrini only got one past me today!”

“You stopped a puck that hit you in the chest.”

“It hit me because I positioned myself perfectly.”

“It hit you because you didn’t move.”

“That’s strategy, baby.”

Troy snorted from somewhere behind him. “That’s luck, Hayes.”

Wyatt pointed at him like that proved something. “Luck is just preparation meeting opportunity.”

“Where’d you get that, a fortune cookie? That’s not —” Troy stopped, exhaled. “You know what, I’m not doing this today. Good game, guys.” He wandered off to the showers, shaking his head.

Shane dropped onto the bench at his stall, shaking his head slightly and smiling as he reached for the tape at his wrists. The conversation rolled on without needing him, filling the room in that easy, familiar way that made everything feel grounded again.

Ilya moved in a few seconds later, close enough that Shane didn’t have to look up to know he was there. His presence settled into the space beside him without disruption, skates hitting the floor with a soft scrape as he stepped out of them, gloves coming off slower, more deliberate.

“...not bad,” Ilya said, low enough that it didn’t carry, a content smile on his face.

Shane huffed a quiet breath, not quite a laugh. “You mean the part where I scored twice or the part where Wyatt thinks he’s the star of the game?”

“Both,” Ilya said, completely seriously, the smile turning into a mischievous smirk.

That got a real laugh out of Shane as he shook his head and finished taking off his gear.

“Unbelievable,” Wyatt was still going. “I make multiple game-saving stops and suddenly everyone forgets.”

“You let in two goals,” Luca called.

“Details.”

“Important details.”

“They were strategic goals.”

“That’s not a thing.”

“It is when I decide it is.”

Laughter broke across the room again, louder this time, the kind that came easy when the result was already decided and no one was carrying anything heavy into it.

Coach Wiebe’s voice cut through it without needing to raise.

“Hayes.”

Wyatt froze mid-motion, one skate half off. “...no.”

A few guys laughed immediately.

Wiebe rubbed a hand over his mouth to hide the smile. “You’re up for media.”

Wyatt blinked at him like he’d just been personally betrayed. “I gave everything out there.”

“You can give five more minutes.”

“I have nothing left.”

“You’ve been talking for ten straight.”

“That’s different.”

“It’s not.”

Wyatt looked around the room, like he was searching for backup and finding none. “This is a hostile environment.”

“Lose the gear, grab a fast shower and put a shirt on - and go,” Wiebe said, already moving on.

Wyatt sighed dramatically but didn’t argue further, reaching for his shower kit and stomping off with all the enthusiasm of someone being asked to do manual labour.

“Fine,” he muttered. “But if I say something that causes problems, that’s on all of you.”

“That’s already on you,” Troy said, laughing.

Shane snorted softly, shaking his head as he peeled off his base layer and added it to the meticulous pile of gear behind him. The noise around him didn’t fade — it never did — but it

settled into something that didn't require his attention anymore. Just background. Just normal.

"Hollander."

He looked up.

Wiebe was standing a few feet away now, arms folded, expression neutral in that way that meant the decision had already been made.

"You're up too. Someone has to keep Hayes in line."

Shane blinked once. "...yeah, okay."

Wyatt turned immediately, pointing at him. "This is your fault."

"I didn't do anything."

"You scored. TWICE. That's doing something."

"Sorry."

"You should be."

Ilya glanced over, one brow lifting slightly. "You could try scoring less."

Shane looked at him, deadpan. "You first. Besides, you like to watch."

Wyatt made a strangled noise. "See? This is what I'm talking about. You two are a problem."

"Save more," Luca offered.

"Or," Barrett added, "stop complaining."

"I will do neither. I already save plenty. Without me it wouldn't matter how many goals these two score."

"Shocking. But also probably fair."

Shane pushed to his feet, rolling his shoulders once as he grabbed his shower gear. After a quick rinse off he grabbed a clean shirt and jogging pants. The fabric was cool against his skin, grounding in a way that felt different from the ice — less immediate, but just as real.

Around him, the room kept moving. Guys headed for the showers, guys left the showers, conversations shifting and overlapping, someone arguing about a missed call in the second period like it still mattered, someone else already halfway into talking about the next game.

Ilya stepped closer as Shane pulled his shirt down, close enough that their shoulders brushed for just a second.

"You good?" he asked quietly, his eyes searching Shane's face.

Shane glanced at him, then nodded. “Yeah.”

A beat passed.

Then, softer, “Yeah, I am. I promise.”

Ilya held his gaze for a second longer than necessary, like he was checking the answer instead of just hearing it. Then he nodded once and stepped back.

“Don’t let him talk too much,” he added.

Shane huffed a quiet laugh. “I don’t think that’s something I can control.”

“No,” Ilya agreed. “But you can try.”

Across the room, Wyatt was already halfway to the door, still talking.

“I’m just saying, if they ask about the saves, I’m walking them through it step by step—”

“Please don’t,” someone called.

“I’m doing it.”

“We know.”

Shane shook his head, grabbing his jacket and falling into step beside him as they headed out toward the hallway. The locker room noise followed them partway, then dropped off behind them.

And just like that it was back to the cameras.

The media room was already packed by the time they stepped into it.

Cameras lifted almost immediately, a ripple of movement that travelled faster than sound. Microphones angled forward, bodies shifting, voices layering over each other in that familiar rhythm that wasn’t quite shouting and wasn’t quite conversation—just noise waiting for something to latch onto.

“Shane—Wyatt—over here—”

“Quick word—”

“Walk us through that first goal—”

It came at them all at once.

Wyatt stepped into it like he’d been personally invited.

“Absolutely,” he said, already grinning, already at ease in a way that made the whole thing feel less sharp. “Which part do you want? Because there were several important elements.”

“You had twenty-eight saves tonight—”

“Right, but some of them were *elite*,” Wyatt cut in, gesturing like he was diagramming the play in midair. “You’re gonna want the one early in the first. That sets the tone for everything.”

“It was a point shot,” someone said.

“It was a *dangerous* point shot,” Wyatt corrected immediately. “Limited visibility, potential traffic—”

“There was no traffic.”

“There *could have been* traffic,” Wyatt shot back. “I prepared for traffic. That’s the difference.”

A few reporters laughed, the edge softening just slightly as beside him, Shane stepped up to his own mic, quieter, more grounded. The shift wasn’t in volume—it was in presence. Wyatt filled the space with a brash style all his own, and Shane centred it with his calm and cool professionalism.

“Shane, that first goal—looked like you didn’t even check before passing.”

“I didn’t,” Shane said simply.

A pause followed, just long enough for the answer to land.

“You didn’t?”

“No,” he repeated, a small shrug following. “Didn’t need to.”

“Because you knew Rozanov was there?”

“Yeah.”

That answer was simpler than the question deserved, and somehow that made it stronger.

“That kind of chemistry—how long does that take to build?”

Shane’s mouth twitched slightly. “Depends who you’re playing with.”

Another ripple moved through the group — not loud, not disruptive, just a shift in tone. Recognition. Understanding.

Wyatt, two feet away, added to the conversation.

“I’m also pretty sure I screened their goalie on the second one,” he added.

“You were at the other end of the ice,” Luca’s voice carried faintly from somewhere behind the scrum.

“Energy travels,” Wyatt replied without missing a beat, flashing a smile at the reporter nearest to him.

Shane huffed a quiet breath, the hint of a smile slipping through before he could stop it.

“Wyatt,” another reporter tried, valiantly, “what did you see on the Hollander goal from your end?”

“Leadership,” Wyatt said instantly.

“...from sixty feet away?”

“If there’s one thing you should know about goalies by now, it’s that we see everything.”

Shane leaned slightly toward his mic, not even looking at him. “He yells a lot.”

“That’s communication,” Wyatt shot back. “Not my fault you’re always in their end and not closer. I wouldn’t have to yell if you weren’t always scoring.”

“That’s still yelling, Hazy.”

That got a real laugh out of the group. And for a while, it stayed friendly and typical. Questions about the third period. Defensive structure. Matchups. The stretch run before the playoffs. Shane answered easily, his voice steady, his posture relaxed in a way that only happened when the conversation stayed where it belonged.

Hockey made sense.

Hockey was easy.

“Shane—what did you see from San Jose tonight? Especially from Macklin Celebrini?”

Shane nodded once. “He’s good,” he said. “Fast. Reads the play well. Doesn’t hesitate. I was impressed with him out there.”

“Does he feel like a rookie?”

“No,” Shane said simply.

Wyatt leaned in again. “I had him covered,” he added.

“You faced him twice.”

“Dominant twice.”

“You made one save against him.”

“One save against that kid is equal to two saves against anyone else.”

Shane shook his head, laughing under his breath.

“Shane—one more—”

The tone didn’t change, trying to stay friendly and warm, but the direction it took did.

“Given everything that’s come out recently... do you feel like the league failed you before it supported you?”

There it was. He’d known this was coming. It wasn’t super blunt, but I certainly wasn’t subtle either.

Wyatt made a quiet, almost impressed *oh* beside him and immediately took a breath to defend him or redirect. Shane touched his arm gently and shook his head, then turned back to the reporter in question. He didn’t answer right away, though. He let the question sit there, just enough to make it clear he wasn’t reacting. Wasn’t being pushed.

Then he looked up.

“Yes,” he said, simply.

The word landed clean.

A pause followed, longer this time.

The reporter blinked. “That’s it?”

Shane didn’t look away; instead, he took a breath. “Yes,” he said again, calm and steady. “I was failed. I was treated badly. I was stalked and harassed for being in love with someone they didn’t approve of. My life was threatened because I got engaged to the man I love.” He didn’t raise his voice. He didn’t need to. “If that’s not failure, what is?”

The shift in the room was immediate.

“That isn’t exactly diplomatic.” Someone responded.

“It’s accurate.”

No hesitation in Shane’s voice at all, and absolutely no apology.

Another voice pushed in, faster now that he’d answered the question everyone wanted him to.

“Do you trust that there will be support moving forward?”

Shane’s jaw tightened just slightly.

“I do.”

“And if something like this happens again?”

“It won’t.”

A beat.

“...that’s a strong statement.”

Shane held the gaze, steady and unflinching. “Yeah,” he said. “And I stand by it. Ms. Vetrova is determined to change things, and I support her in that. My team has proven time and again, even though I’m still new to them as a teammate, that they will not tolerate anything less. The fans have been clear about their support.”

“Is that because of what you’ve been told by the acting commissioner,” another reporter asked, “or because of what you believe?”

Something flickered at the corner of Shane’s mouth.

“Both. As I said. I support the changes coming.”

Wyatt leaned toward his mic again, because of course he did. “Also because we’d win that situation too,” he added with a smirk. “No one comes for our fiancés of chaos.”

Laughter moved around the space again.

“Wyatt, do you feel like—”

“I feel great,” Wyatt cut in. “Huge fan of how things worked out.”

“That’s not what I—”

“I stand by it.”

Shane exhaled quietly, the edge of a smile returning despite himself.

“Last one,” a staffer called, stepping in.

“Shane—does this team feel different right now?”

That one wasn’t bait at least.

Shane glanced down briefly, letting the smile come to his face fully before looking back up, the answer already there before he said it.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, it does.”

“Why?”

He didn’t overthink it, just answered from the heart. “Because we’re playing like we trust each other,” he said. “Because we do. That always makes the difference.”

“Alright, that’s it—thanks guys—”

Wyatt leaned in one last time. “And seriously, clip that first save—”

“We’re done,” the staffer cut in firmly with exasperation.

Wyatt sighed, deeply put upon. “No one respects goalie contributions.”

“Go,” Shane muttered with a laugh, nudging him away from the mic.

The space didn’t empty all at once, of course. Reporters broke into smaller clusters, cameras lowering, voices softening as attention shifted elsewhere. Equipment cases rolled past, someone called for a follow-up down the hall, and the sharp edge of the moment blurred into something less defined.

Shane stepped back from the podium, rolling his shoulders once, like he was physically shedding the last of it. Then he glanced up, eyes searching the space. And found Ilya.

He was standing at the back of the room, just beyond the lights and the press of bodies. Not hidden —just not in it. Arms folded loosely, posture relaxed in that way that meant he was paying attention to everything without drawing attention to himself.

From here, Shane could see it clearly — the steadiness, the way Ilya tracked everything without reacting to it, the way his attention never drifted.

Their eyes met, and the corner of Ilya’s mouth turned up slightly as his eyes went soft. Shane could feel how much he loved him just from that look, and it made him feel warm and safe – and that was new. His mouth twitched faintly before he looked away, already turning toward the hallway as Wyatt fell into step beside him, mid-sentence about “grossly underappreciated goaltending contributions.”

The noise picked up again around them as the team made their way to the chartered bus and on to the airport for the trip home.

The plane was quiet. Or maybe Shane’s brain was just being loud. The energy didn’t press in here the way it did in the locker room. It spread out instead, settling into low conversations, the occasional laugh, the soft shuffle of bags being stowed and seats being claimed. It was the kind of quiet that came after the work was done, when the adrenaline had somewhere to go and nothing immediate to burn it off.

Shane tried to meet it there; he really did.

He slid into his seat, shoulders loosening by habit more than comfort, and leaned back just enough to convince himself this was normal. The fabric gave under him, softer than the benches, less solid than the ice, and something about that lack of solidity sat wrong in his chest. It felt contained in a way he didn’t trust — too enclosed, too dependent on something he couldn’t control.

He reached down and buckled in, hoping the normal moments would help him feel more grounded. The click landed sharp and final, louder than it should have been, and his hand

lingered there for a moment, fingers resting against the latch like they were waiting for something else to happen.

They hadn't flown in. He and Ilya had driven hours in a rental car, the road stretching out ahead of them, every decision his. Speed, distance, when to stop, when to breathe. If something went wrong, he could pull over. Get out. Fix it. Or at least pretend he could.

This wasn't that. This was a plane. He couldn't control a plane.

The cabin door closed somewhere behind them, and the shift in pressure was subtle but immediate. Shane felt it before he consciously registered it, his fingers starting a quiet, uneven rhythm against the armrest — tap, pause, tap — that didn't quite settle.

"...you okay?"

Ilya's voice came low and close, careful without being cautious, like he already knew the answer and was just giving Shane space to say it.

Shane let out a breath that didn't feel like enough air.

"Yeah," he said, and then, because that wasn't entirely true, "I just..." He exhaled sharply, his voice failing him for a moment.

Ilya knew what it had taken for him to be here. He had known the moment Shane said they'd drive down and fly back. Known it without pushing, without making it a conversation Shane could back out of. Just known, and stayed beside him through it.

He didn't ask him to explain or elaborate. He reached for him instead. Slowly. Deliberately. His hand found Shane's and then closed around it with both of his, warm and steady, holding without gripping. There was no urgency in it, no attempt to fix or pull him out of anything—just presence. Just something real to hold onto.

"You don't have to be okay with it," he said quietly. "You're allowed to be scared, sweetheart."

Not *you're fine*. Not *it's nothing*. Just soft, unwavering support. Shane swallowed, his throat tight.

"I know."

The engines started low, a vibration more than a sound at first, threading up through the frame of the plane and into his body before his brain had time to catch up. His breathing shifted without permission, shorter and sharper, like his lungs had suddenly forgotten how to take up space.

He felt his grip tighten in Ilya's hands and couldn't quite stop it.

It's fine.

He knew that. But the knowing didn't reach this.

The memory didn't come in pictures. It came in sensation — the wrong kind of stillness, the split second where everything stopped making sense, the moment where control had slipped clean out of his hands.

His chest tightened, sharp and immediate. He tried to take a deeper breath and couldn't quite get there. Tried again.

It caught.

His shoulders locked.

"I—" The word stalled in his throat, unfinished and useless, his breath stuttering as he tried to pull it back under control. "I can't—"

Ilya's grip shifted just slightly, not tightening, not restraining—just more present. His thumbs moved slowly over the back of Shane's hand, grounding, steady, something Shane could follow without thinking too hard about it.

"Hey," he murmured. "Just breathe with me. I'm right here."

Across the aisle, Wyatt had gone quiet, carefully tracking the situation. He met Ilya's eyes for a split second, then he leaned back in his seat and said, loud enough to carry but casual enough not to draw focus, "You know what I've been thinking about all game?"

Troy groaned immediately. "That's never a good start."

"Ilya," Wyatt continued, ignoring him completely, "needs to let someone else score once in a while."

"Excuse me?" Ilya said mildly, without letting go of Shane's hand.

"I'm serious," Wyatt went on. "It's becoming a problem. You and Hollander out there like it's your personal highlight reel."

"Three goals between them," Luca added from a few rows up, catching on immediately. "Selfish, honestly."

"Extremely selfish," Troy agreed. "Some of us are trying to build careers."

"You have a career," Ilya pointed out drily.

"Not if you keep stealing all the goals. Who's going to notice me when I share a line with both Rozanov AND Hollander sometimes??"

Wyatt gestured broadly. "Exactly. I'm thinking we start a rotation. You take a shift off. Let the rest of us shine."

Shane heard it distantly at first, the conversation threading in around the edges of everything else. Familiar voices. Familiar cadence. Something normal, something *easy*, moving forward whether he could keep up with it or not.

It helped, surprisingly. Not because it fixed anything, but because it gave his brain somewhere else to land.

The plane started to move then. Shane felt it immediately, his body reacting before his mind could catch up. His chest tightened further, breath catching hard as the motion translated through the seat, through his spine, through something deeper than logic.

His grip on Ilya's hands tightened sharply as his breath stuttered again and his vision started to tunnel. Ilya didn't pull away, or react beyond a slow, steady press of his thumbs.

I'm here. Stay here, with me.

"Unbelievable," Wyatt was saying. "Shane got, what, two goals tonight and at least one assist?"

"Two assists," Luca corrected.

"Even worse," Wyatt said. "Greedy."

Shane squeezed his eyes shut for a second, trying to force his breathing into something steady.

In—

it stuttered.

Out—

too fast.

Again.

Ilya's voice stayed low, even. "With me, Shane."

Shane focused on that. On the rhythm of it. On the warmth of his hands, solid and real and unmoving.

The engines roared louder, the vibration building as the plane picked up speed, and for a second it felt like too much — too fast, too sudden, too out of his control —

"Ilya, you hearing this?" Wyatt went on. "I'm just saying, maybe next game you pass to someone who isn't your fiancé."

"I pass to best option," Ilya replied smoothly. "It's not my fault he's there first."

"Bias," Troy said.

"Severe bias," Luca added.

Shane let out a breath that almost turned into a laugh, shaky but real, the sound catching in his chest as the tension held tight.

The plane surged forward.

Faster.

Faster—

and then it lifted.

The drop hit sharp and immediate, his stomach lurching, his chest locking tight enough that for a second—

nothing.

No air.

No space.

Just pressure.

His fingers dug into Ilya's hands.

Ilya didn't move, didn't so much as flinch. Just held on, steady and present.

"I'm here," he said softly, pressing a gentle kiss to the back of Shane's hand. Shane dragged in a breath.

It shook.

Then another.

Still uneven, but there.

The moment stretched as he fought what felt like the weight of the world sitting directly on top of him. His ribs ached. He could only hear the frantic beating of his heart in his ears, the voices around him fading into murmurs. He closed his eyes.

And the moment passed.

The angle shifted. The vibration changed as the plane settled smoothly into cruising speed. The sound around him started to filter back in, his team's voices as they teased each other, sounds of someone grabbing something out of their bag in the overhead, the rustle of someone turning a page in a book. Then with an almost popping sensation, he found himself back in the middle of the conversation still going on around him.

"...okay," Wyatt said after a second, like he'd just come to a decision. "Next game, I'm scoring."

"You're a goalie," Troy said with a laugh, shaking his head.

"Details."

“You’re not leaving the crease.”

“I won’t need to. I’ve got a good slapshot. I’ll just steal your stick.”

“Please don’t,” someone muttered from behind them. “Goalies who get goals are insufferable.”

Shane laughed then, quiet but real, the sound easing something in his chest that had been wound too tight for too long. He leaned his head back against the seat, eyes closing for a moment as his breathing finally started to settle into something closer to normal.

His hand was still in Ilya’s. He had never let go. And as the plane continued on its way and the noise settled into that steady, constant hum, Shane realized something he hadn’t expected.

He hadn’t had to fight it alone. And that thought more than anything else is what kept the rest of the fear at bay.

The cabin settled into quiet. Not all at once, and not completely, but enough that the noise softened into something distant and indistinct. Conversations tapered off, one by one, fading into murmurs and then into nothing. A few screens glowed in the dimmed light, flickering reflections against the windows. Someone shifted in their seat. Someone else adjusted a blanket and went still again.

It wasn’t silent, but it was close.

The kind of quiet that came when there was nowhere left to be and nothing left to do but let the time pass.

Shane stayed where he was. He didn’t move much, not beyond the slow rise and fall of his breathing as it worked its way back toward something steady. He definitely didn’t unbuckle his seatbelt. The tension had drained out of him in uneven waves, leaving behind that strange, hollowed-out feeling — like his body had spent something it hadn’t meant to.

Beside him, Ilya’s hands were still wrapped around his. Not tight or anchoring him in place anymore—just simply there. A quiet, constant presence that hadn’t asked anything of him and hadn’t gone anywhere while he figured himself back out.

Shane shifted his fingers slightly, feeling the warmth of it, the steady weight.

Real.

He let his head tip back against the seat and looked toward the window.

There wasn’t much to see.

Just darkness, stretching out past the glass in a way that felt endless, broken only by the faint reflection of the cabin lights. No ground. No horizon. Nothing to track or measure or control.

Once, that had been easy.

Once, this had been the part of flying he didn't think about at all. A seat, a window, the low hum of the engines beneath it all — background noise to something else. Music. Conversation. A nap stolen between cities. It had been... nothing.

Normal.

He could almost remember it.

Not clearly — not in a way that felt like he could step back into it — but enough to recognize the shape of it. The version of himself who had sat like this without noticing the weight of the air, without tracking every shift in sound, without bracing for something that never came.

Shane let out a slow breath. He didn't have that anymore.

Maybe he never would have that again. But as his fingers tightened just slightly in Ilya's hands, he knew that he had something better.

He had this.

Shane closed his eyes, not to shut anything out, but to sit in it — to let the quiet settle around him instead of pressing in.

This was his chance to build the life he always wanted and never believed he'd have. And there, 30,000 feet in the air, holding the hand of his fiancé, feeling the warmth of the team around him — he finally let himself believe it was going to be okay.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was important to me. And if you struggled with the panic attack, I am giving you the biggest hug right now.

I wanted to let them win without immediately punishing them for it. I wanted Shane to have a moment where support doesn't feel theoretical, or conditional, or like something he has to earn by surviving well enough. I wanted him to be held up by his team, by Ilya, by the people choosing him on purpose—and to let that matter.

Also, Wyatt Hayes remains a menace and a public service at the exact same time.

We're not done yet, though. There are still loose ends, and one of them wears a criminal file and deserves to be dragged back into the light very soon. So while this chapter ends with a little air in their lungs again, the story definitely isn't finished with consequences. You'll love them. Also, Marchand is back in the very near future. He might even be chatting with Yuna. Wouldn't that be something? (Why yes, I am cackling, how did you know?)

But for now, they've got each other. And sometimes, that's everything.

I won't promise a chapter every two days, this one just worked out that way, but we will be seeing the end in the next week or so!

As always, so much love for you for sticking with me through this. And the one-shots that this story is starting to spin off. And (hopefully) some of my other stories. I can't wait to see/hear/feel you all in the comments!

-SD

Chapter 26: Earned Ice

Chapter Summary

They win.

Not just the game. Not just the fight. Not just the narrative.

Everything.

Shane Hollander puts on the kind of performance people talk about for years. Ilya Rozanov gets thrown out for doing exactly what needed to be done. The Ottawa Centaurs clinch a playoff spot in a six-nothing statement game that feels like more than hockey.

And somewhere in the middle of all of that—

everything they fought for finally starts to feel real.

Chapter Notes

Hi friends, loons, random passersby, and folks who followed a Threads link!

This chapter is where the tide officially turns and we head into our HEA. You ready to come along for the ride?

Because I am. I have been WAITING to get here.

We've done the angst. We've done the chaos. We've done the "oh my god are they going to survive this" portion of the program—and now? Now we get to watch them live in it. In the love, in the team, in the life they fought like hell to build.

Which means Shane Hollander drops the gloves, Ilya Rozanov is the proudest (and loudest) fiancé alive, the team has fully turned into a unit—and for the first time in a long time, it actually feels like things are settling into place.

This is a victory lap chapter, and I leaned into it HARD. No regrets.

As always, thank you for being here, for reading, for yelling about these idiots with me. It means more than I can say 

Alright. Let's go win a hockey game.

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

Brad Marchand -> Yuna Hollander:

Okay. Important question.

Yuna Hollander:

I am already concerned.

Brad Marchand:

Open bar?

Yuna Hollander:

Yes.

Brad Marchand:

Great. Strong start. We're aligned.

Brad Marchand:

Next: venue.

Yuna Hollander:

Backyard.

Brad Marchand:

Obviously. I just wanted to make sure you weren't about to say ballroom.

Yuna Hollander:

I would never.

Brad Marchand:

Okay good because that would have been a problem.

Brad Marchand:

Backyard is perfect. Intimate. Controlled. Also we can lock the gate if necessary.

Yuna Hollander:

That will likely be necessary.

Brad Marchand:

I'll handle security.

Yuna Hollander:

You will not.

Brad Marchand:

I will supervise security.

Yuna Hollander:

That is worse.

Brad Marchand:

Agree to disagree.

Brad Marchand:

Okay next—seating.

Yuna Hollander:

Chairs. How is that a question?

Brad Marchand:

No.

Yuna Hollander:

Brad. People need to sit.

Brad Marchand:

Hear me out.

Brad Marchand:

No chairs.

Yuna Hollander:

Bradley.

Brad Marchand:

No seriously. Soft seating. Gentle textures. Sensory friendly – that’s so important.

Yuna Hollander:

Explain?

Brad Marchand:

Blankets.

Brad Marchand:

Pillows.

Brad Marchand:

Layered. Comfortable. Intentional. Informal. Brings people together.

Brad Marchand:

Feels more like them.

Yuna Hollander:

...

Brad Marchand:

You see it, Mama Yuna?

Yuna Hollander:

I do, actually.

Brad Marchand:

We do low tables too. Not formal at all, just enough to keep it relaxed. Plus easier for any kids. I know that at least the Pike kiddos will be there.

Yuna Hollander:

Yes. That works, actually. That's a really great idea, Brad. And oddly thoughtful.

Brad Marchand:

I knew you'd come around.

Yuna Hollander:

Don't get used to it.

Brad Marchand:

Too late.

Brad Marchand:

Okay colours. This is important.

Yuna Hollander:

Go ahead. You've already surprised me once.

Brad Marchand:

No stark white. That's too ridiculous.

Yuna Hollander:

Agreed.

Brad Marchand:

Warm tones. Maybe muted green or a dash of Centaurs' colours, but muted.

Brad Marchand:

Something that looks good at sunset.

Yuna Hollander:

Yes. This might be the best thought you've had yet.

Brad Marchand:

Not overdone. Nothing that looks like a hotel wedding brochure. They'd hate that.

Yuna Hollander:

Absolutely they would.

Brad Marchand:

We want it to feel like them. Not staged or like...attention seeking.

Yuna Hollander:

That is exactly it.

Brad Marchand:

Okay flowers is the next category on the spreadsheet.

Yuna Hollander:

Keep it simple. And spreadsheet?

Brad Marchand:

Didn't Ilya tell you? I have a spreadsheet. It's colour coded. Anyway, I was thinking wildflower-adjacent but curated.

Brad Marchand:

Soft textures. Nothing too structured.

Brad Marchand:

Maybe eucalyptus, ranunculus, garden roses.

Yuna Hollander:

You have thought about this. I am surprised, to be honest.

Brad Marchand:

I commit to the bit.

Yuna Hollander:

This is not a bit, Bradley.

Brad Marchand:

No, this part isn't, but don't tell them that.

Brad Marchand:

Also nothing too tall. I want people to actually see each other.

Yuna Hollander:

Good. I like it.

Brad Marchand:

Okay next up is lighting.

Yuna Hollander:

String lights?

Brad Marchand:

Yes, obviously.

Brad Marchand:

And candles.

Yuna Hollander:

Candles?

Brad Marchand:

Obviously safe candles. Battery operated. I'm not burning their house down before the honeymoon.

Yuna Hollander:

Good. Because again, there will be kids too.

Brad Marchand:

Also—hear me out

Brad Marchand:

We need a moment.

Yuna Hollander:

Define “a moment?”

Brad Marchand:

Like a pause in the ceremony. Something quiet.

Brad Marchand:

Not performative. Just...them. They've been through so much this year.

Yuna Hollander:

Yes.

Yuna Hollander:

We will build that in.

Brad Marchand:

Good.

Brad Marchand:

Are you sure no ice sculptures?

Yuna Hollander:

I am sure, Brad.

Brad Marchand:

Unless—

Yuna Hollander:

No.

Brad Marchand:

Okay. Fine. I'll take them out of the spreadsheet.

Yuna Hollander:

Send it to me so I can look at this. You have put WAY too much time into it for me not to see it.

Brad Marchand:

I knew it.

Yuna Hollander:

This is for oversight, not support you know.

Brad Marchand:

This is collaboration. Mama Yuna and Brad Marchand, wedding planners!

Yuna Hollander:

This is my son's wedding.

Brad Marchand:

Yeah. I know.

Brad Marchand:

We're going to get it right, I promise. You don't even need to tell them how involved I actually am.

Yuna Hollander:

Well...I might give you credit.

Brad Marchand:

Also—

Brad Marchand:

playlist.

Yuna Hollander:

We will discuss that carefully.

Brad Marchand:

I have ideas.

Yuna Hollander:

I am certain that you do.

Brad Marchand:

You're going to like at least one of them.

Yuna Hollander:

We shall see.

Brad Marchand:

That's a yes.

Yuna Hollander:

That is not a yes.

PUBLIC RECORD – CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS (CANADA)

Joint RCMP / Ontario Ministry of the Attorney General – Official Statement

Following the conclusion of criminal proceedings in the Ontario Superior Court of Justice, the Crown confirms the convictions and sentencing of the following individuals:

Colin Mercer has been found guilty on multiple counts, including:

- Assault (s. 266 Criminal Code)
- Assault with a weapon (s. 267(a))
- Aggravated assault (s. 268)
- Mischief endangering life (s. 430(2))
- Uttering threats (s. 264.1)

The court determined that Mr. Mercer engaged in deliberate, premeditated conduct intended to cause bodily harm to multiple individuals, including the use of a weapon and interference with a motor vehicle in a manner that could have resulted in fatal consequences.

Mr. Mercer has been sentenced to:

- 8 years imprisonment (federal custody)
- \$250,000 in combined fines and restitution
- A lifetime prohibition on contact with the victims

Roger Crowell has been found guilty on the following charges:

- Counselling the commission of an indictable offence (s. 464(a))
- Conspiracy to commit an indictable offence (s. 465(1)(c))

The court found that Mr. Crowell, in a position of authority, knowingly encouraged and facilitated actions that posed a direct and serious risk to the safety of others.

Mr. Crowell has been sentenced to:

- 5 years imprisonment (federal custody)
- \$500,000 in fines
- A lifetime ban from holding any executive or governance position in professional sport organizations in Canada

The Crown emphasized that these sentences reflect:

- The seriousness of the offences
- The abuse of power and position

- The risk posed to public safety
- The need for deterrence in cases involving targeted violence and systemic misconduct

No further comment will be made at this time.

TSN – Breaking Segment

“This is a landmark ruling,” the anchor said, voice steady, measured. “Not just because of the severity of the sentences, but because of what the court recognized; this wasn’t an isolated incident, it was just the most recent.”

“Right,” the analyst replied. “This was coordinated. It involved power, influence, and intent. And the court made it very clear—those things matter.”

A brief pause.

“And I think what stands out most,” the anchor continued, “is that this outcome didn’t happen because the system worked immediately. It happened because people forced it to.”

Sportsnet Panel

“You don’t see sentences like this tied to hockey very often, if ever,” one analyst said.

“You don’t see cases like this in hockey very often,” another replied. “At least not ones that make it this far.”

A third voice cut in, quieter.

“And I think that’s the part people are going to sit with. This didn’t come out of nowhere. This was allowed to build.”

LEAGUE STATEMENT – Major League Hockey

Official Release – Major League Hockey (MLH)

The Major League Hockey acknowledges the conclusion of criminal proceedings related to the recent investigation involving former Commissioner Roger Cromwell and associated parties.

The League unequivocally condemns the actions that led to these convictions.

There is no place in this sport—or in any professional environment—for behaviour that compromises the safety, dignity, or well-being of its players, staff, or community.

The League further acknowledges that failures occurred at multiple levels. These failures are being addressed through ongoing internal review and structural reform.

Effective immediately:

- Svetlana Vetrova has accepted the role of Commissioner of the Major League Hockey on a permanent basis.
- The Montreal Metros organization remains suspended from all league activities, including playoff participation for the current season, pending the outcome of the ongoing investigation into organizational conduct and complicity.

The League is committed to:

- Rebuilding trust
- Ensuring accountability
- Creating a culture defined by safety, respect, and inclusion

We recognize the courage of those who came forward, and the players who stood firm in the face of adversity.

This League will be better for it.

No further comment will be made at this time.

@rinkratlive:

8 years. 5 years.

That's not symbolic. That's real, actual time.

Which means that they were UNDERSELLING how bad it was for Hollander and Rozanov.

@hockeyopsinsider:

league had no choice but to clean house after that ruling
this is what accountability actually looks like

@legalwatchcanada:

Important distinction: Court explicitly cited abuse of power and premeditation.
That's HUGE in sentencing.

@fanthreadqueen (viral):

timeline because WHAT is happening:

- plane crash. players injured.
 - photos leak
 - engagement announcement
 - league scrambles
 - attempted cover-up
 - attempted *murder* (??? hello???)
 - caught on camera

- arrests
- convictions

this is not a scandal, or overdramatic. this is a full system collapse

and somehow Ottawa is still winning games???

@puckculture:

metros suspended

commissioner jailed

players backed publicly

this season is unreal.

Official Statement – Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov:

We are grateful for the outcome of today's proceedings.

Accountability matters.

Safety matters.

We appreciate the support we've received from our teammates, fellow players, the league, and the fans.

We are ready to move forward and look forward to seeing you all in the playoffs!

Official Statement — Sidney Crosby

I think the outcome of the proceedings speaks for itself. Accountability matters, and it's important that the right steps were taken.

I've been around this league a long time, and you want to believe that players are protected—that the system works the way it's supposed to. When it doesn't, it's on all of us to make sure it gets better.

What we're seeing now is a step in the right direction. There's still work to be done, but there's also a real opportunity here to build something better than what was there before.

Shane and Ilya handled a very difficult situation the right way. They stayed focused, supported each other, and kept showing up. That's not easy to do.

I'm happy for them. They've earned the chance to move forward and just play hockey, without everything else hanging over them.

@WyattHayes:

so just to be clear

we were RIGHT

@BradMarchand63:

EIGHT YEARS???

yeah okay that feels about right

also

wedding planning continues....right boys?

@ConnorMcDavid97:

Important outcome.

Respect to everyone who pushed for this. It's about time hockey culture started changing

@NathanMacKinnon29:

yeah this was needed

@ScottHunterNYA:

This is what accountability looks like.

Long overdue.

The locker room in Toronto carried a different kind of quiet that night.

It wasn't silent—there was always movement before a game—but the usual edge to it had softened into something steadier. Equipment shifted in familiar rhythms. Tape wrapped tight around wrists and sticks. A few low conversations drifted up and faded again without ever taking over the space. No one was forcing energy into the room. No one was trying to fill it. The focus was already there, settled into the bones of the group.

It didn't feel like nerves or pressure.

It felt peaceful. It felt earned.

Coach Wiebe stood in the middle of it, taking his time as he looked at the activity around him. He didn't rush to speak, and he didn't try to pull attention to himself. He let the room come to him instead, let the quiet settle fully until every player was listening without needing to be told.

"Alright," he said finally, his voice calm and even. "You already know what tonight is."

A few heads lifted. A few players straightened where they sat. Others stayed exactly as they were, but their focus sharpened all the same.

"This isn't complicated. You win this game, you're in. First time in longer than we care to think about or remember."

He let the words sit for a moment, long enough to register without turning them into something bigger than they needed to be.

"But that's not the point. The point is how we got here."

That shifted the room in a way that wasn't loud but was unmistakable. His gaze moved slowly across the space, taking in each player, each stall, each piece of a group that had been tested in ways most teams never were.

"You've had every reason to lose focus," he continued. "Every reason to let everything outside this room get into your game. To let it divide you. To let it distract you. And you didn't."

No one spoke. No one needed to. The words were simple, but they carried so much behind them.

"You stayed accountable. To each other. To the room. To the standard you set."

He paused then, not for emphasis but because the moment called for it.

"That matters. That's what teams are built on. Not talent. Not systems. That."

Something tightened through the room, subtle but real. Shoulders squared. Hands stilled. The kind of shift that came from recognition rather than hype. Wiebe's expression softened just slightly.

"I'm proud of you."

It wasn't dramatic. It wasn't meant to be, but it also wasn't just words. Wiebe let it settle, and then met the eyes of every single player in the room.

"But we're not done. You don't get here and take your foot off the gas. Not now, not when it actually counts. You go out there, you play our game. Fast. Physical. Smart. You trust what got you here. And you make it matter."

He looked around one last time, making sure it landed where it needed to. Then he gave a single, decisive nod.

"Let's go to work, boys."

The arena felt alive before the puck even dropped, in that "this game carries a lot of significance" kind of way that is so unique about the end of the season.

It wasn't chaotic yet, not in the way a crowd could be when things tipped too far into noise. This was something more contained, more focused. The energy sat just under the surface, humming through the building, carried in the low swell of voices and the constant movement in the stands. Every seat was filled. Every shift on the ice during warmups drew attention. It felt like a night where something mattered, and everyone in the building knew it.

"Big night here," the play-by-play voice said as the broadcast opened, the camera sweeping slowly across the crowd before settling on the ice. "Ottawa Centaurs in town to take on the Toronto Guardians, and the stakes couldn't be clearer."

“Win and you’re in,” the colour commentator added. “It’s that simple. But there’s nothing simple about the way this is going to play out. Toronto would love to spoil this, and they’ve come in prepared to make it as difficult as possible.”

The shot tightened, following the final minutes of warmups. Players moved through their routines with practiced precision, shots snapping off sticks, pucks thudding into pads, skates carving clean arcs into the ice. It lingered briefly on Ilya as he finished a quick exchange at the top of the circle, then shifted to Shane along the boards, tapping his stick lightly against the ice as he waited for the next pass.

From there, the camera cut across to the far side.

Dallas Kent stood with his line, shoulders loose, expression unreadable from a distance. There was no rush in the way he moved, no wasted motion, but there was something coiled underneath it. Not nerves. Not hesitation. Something closer to intent.

“Keep an eye on the matchups tonight,” the analyst continued. “There’s history between some of these players, and there’s tension that hasn’t gone anywhere. You can feel it even before the puck drops.”

The camera pulled back again, widening to take in the full sheet of ice as the final horn for warmups sounded. Players began to peel off toward their benches, the crowd rising in volume with them, the hum building into something louder, sharper, ready to break.

Like it was waiting for something.

The game started fast.

Not reckless, not out of control, but deliberate. Toronto came out with purpose, their forecheck tight and structured, closing lanes before Ottawa could settle into anything resembling rhythm. Sticks cut through passing options, angling pucks off course before they could develop. Bodies finished checks just hard enough to wear things down over time, never crossing the line, never giving the officials a reason to intervene. It was disciplined pressure, the kind that didn’t look dramatic but built into something suffocating if it went unanswered.

“They’re not giving them anything easy,” the play-by-play voice said over the broadcast. “Toronto’s making them earn every inch of ice right now.”

Shane adjusted quickly, as he always did. He read the pressure as it formed, shifting his positioning by inches that opened space where there shouldn’t have been any. He didn’t force plays into coverage or rush decisions under pressure. He let the game come to him, trusted the timing of it, and moved through it with a kind of quiet precision that didn’t draw attention unless you were looking for it.

Ilya approached it differently.

He didn’t wait for space to appear. He created it.

The first real collision came along the boards just inside the neutral zone. It was clean, perfectly timed, shoulder through the body with enough force to stop momentum without crossing into anything illegal. The sound of it carried, a solid impact that drew a sharp reaction from the crowd before the play continued up ice.

Kent absorbed the hit and stayed on his feet, but not without feeling it. He pushed off the boards, turned back into the play, and then, just for a second, his focus shifted.

He looked at Ilya.

Not quick. Not dismissive.

Measured.

There was nothing outward in it that could be called. No shove after the whistle, no obvious retaliation. Just that look, the way it lingered a fraction longer than necessary, the edge of something in his expression that didn't read as frustration.

It read as intent.

When he rejoined the play, it showed in smaller ways. A stick that stayed in a lane just a second too long. A shoulder that rode higher through contact than it needed to. A second push after the puck had already moved on. None of it enough for a penalty. All of it deliberate.

From the lower bowl, a few voices started to rise.

“Watch it—”

“That's late—”

The noise didn't take over, but it threaded into the game, sharp and reactive, the crowd seeing pieces of it even if they didn't catch all of it.

Midway through the first, they lined up across from each other at a faceoff.

Close enough that there was no space for anything except the draw and whatever else came with it.

Kent leaned in slightly, voice low enough that it shouldn't have carried beyond the two of them.

“You ever get tired of pretending?” he said.

Shane didn't react. His stance stayed the same, his grip on his stick steady, his eyes fixed forward. But something in him tightened all the same.

Kent's mouth curved, just slightly. “Or is that part of it for you?”

The puck dropped, snapping them back into motion.

The shift didn't end there. It carried forward, threaded through the next few minutes of play in ways that built instead of broke. Kent stayed close. Too close. His stick lingered where it didn't belong. His body checked just a fraction later than it should have, just long enough to be felt.

It wasn't loud.

It was targeted.

And now the crowd was starting to feel it too.

A few more voices cut through the noise.

"Hey—leave it—"

"That's dirty—"

Ilya didn't look at them right away. He didn't need to. He tracked the play instead, reading the movement, waiting for the right opening. When Kent picked up the puck again through the neutral zone, Ilya closed the gap in two hard strides and stepped into him with full force.

The hit was clean. Shoulder to chest, perfectly timed, driving through the body with enough power to send Kent down hard onto the ice. He slid across the surface as the crowd reacted, the sound rising sharply in response.

"Big hit from Rozanov," the commentator called. "That's a message."

The building came alive with it.

"YEAH—"

"LET'S GO—"

Kent didn't stay down. He was on his feet almost immediately, the impact still fresh in the way he moved, but the response already there. His gloves came off in one sharp motion.

The shift in the crowd was instant.

"Oh here we go—"

"Drop 'em—"

Ilya didn't hesitate.

He dropped his gloves and stepped forward to meet him, his movements controlled, measured. There was no wild swing, no loss of structure. His first punch landed clean. The second followed before Kent could reset. Kent tried to answer, but he was already off-balance, already reacting instead of dictating the pace.

"This is one-sided right now," the analyst said as the linesmen moved in.

By the time they got between them, it was clear how it had gone.

The crowd let them hear it.

“LET THEM GO—”

“COME ON—”

“HE STARTED IT—”

They separated them, holding them apart as both players settled, the energy still sharp, still sitting high in the air. The officials gathered quickly, conferring only briefly before making the call.

Five minutes each for fighting.

An additional minor to Kent for instigating.

And then—

A game misconduct for Ilya.

For half a second, there was confusion.

Then the reaction hit.

Loud.

Immediate.

“What?—”

“ARE YOU KIDDING—”

“THAT’S BULL—”

“That’s a tough call,” the play-by-play voice said carefully.

“That’s a bad call,” the colour commentator replied, no hesitation this time. “If you’re calling the instigator, you don’t toss the other guy. That doesn’t add up.”

The noise didn’t die down. It swelled, rolling through the building in waves as Ilya stood there for a moment, jaw set, expression unreadable.

He didn’t argue.

He didn’t look at the officials. He didn’t throw his hands up or make a show of it.

He simply adjusted his grip on his helmet, like this was just another part of the game he’d already decided how to handle.

Before he turned, he looked once toward Shane.

Just long enough for it to land.

Then he pushed off and skated toward the tunnel, the sound following him all the way off the ice.

“RO-ZA-NOV—”

“RO-ZA-NOV—”

The chant caught, spread, grew louder as more voices joined in, filling the building with something that felt less like celebration and more like defiance.

Underneath it, something sharper threaded through.

Frustration. Disbelief. A shared sense that what had just happened didn't sit right.

On the ice, play reset around it. Lines changed. Sticks tapped. The officials moved the puck back into position like the moment had already passed.

But it hadn't.

Not really.

Because as the noise settled into a low, restless hum, the edge of it stayed behind. It lingered in the way players moved, in the way the bench leaned forward, in the way the game picked back up just a fraction tighter than it had been before.

And when Shane stepped back into the play—

it came with him.

Something changed after that.

It didn't announce itself. There wasn't a single moment you could circle and say *there*, no replay that would capture it cleanly. It moved through the game more quietly than that, settling into the pace, into the timing, into the way Ottawa came back over the boards after the next whistle like nothing had happened and everything had. The energy didn't spike. It steadied.

And Shane stepped back into it with that steadiness sitting under his skin.

Not reckless. Not out of control.

Focused.

The next shift started in their own zone, Toronto pressing again, trying to keep the momentum from the call and the crowd reaction. The Guardians worked the puck high,

cycling it along the boards, looking for a seam. When the shot came from the point, it came through traffic, a low, hard release that didn't have a clear lane.

Shane didn't hesitate. He dropped into it, turning his body just enough to take the puck clean off his shin pad. The impact echoed, dull and sharp at the same time, but he was already moving before the rebound had fully kicked loose. He found it in stride, pulled it off the wall, and accelerated.

"Big block there from Hollander," the play-by-play voice said as the rush developed. "That's the kind of play that flips a shift."

It did more than that. It flipped the ice.

Shane pushed through the neutral zone with speed, the puck settled on his stick, head up the entire way. Two defenders closed on him as he crossed the blue line, angling to cut him off before he could drive deeper. He didn't force it. He held it just long enough to pull them in, just long enough to make them commit, and then slid the puck wide at exactly the right moment.

Barrett stepped into the space Shane had created and didn't hesitate. The shot came clean, quick, and high.

Goal.

The Ottawa bench erupted, sticks hammering against the boards as Barrett pointed once in Shane's direction before disappearing into the pile at the glass.

"Great finish," the colour commentator said. "But that entire play starts with Hollander. That's a defensive read, a transition, and a perfect setup all in one shift."

"And he's not done," the play-by-play added. "He looks like he's just getting started here tonight."

Shane didn't linger in the moment. He tapped gloves as he came off, nodded once, and reset. By the time the next line change was complete, he was already leaning forward again, already tracking the puck, already back in it.

The shifts that followed didn't break. They built.

He was everywhere. Not in a way that drew attention to itself at first, but in the way that showed up over time. A stick in the right lane to break up a pass. A body in position to take away space. A quick touch to move the puck out of danger before pressure could close in. He turned small plays into controlled exits, controlled exits into clean entries, and clean entries into sustained pressure.

When the puck was his, it stayed moving. Tape to tape. Clean, deliberate, always just ahead of where the defense expected it to be.

And when the chance came to him, he didn't pass it up.

The first goal came from pressure. He drove the middle lane hard, followed the play as it broke down in front, and stayed with it through the chaos. The rebound came off the pad and dropped just enough for him to step into it.

He buried it before the goaltender could recover.

“Second effort pays off,” the play-by-play called. “Hollander right there to finish it.”

“Not just right place,” the colour commentator replied. “That’s anticipation. He’s reading that play before the shot even gets through.”

The second goal came a few shifts later, and this time it started with him.

Toronto tried to break out through the middle. Shane stepped into the lane, lifted the stick cleanly, and took the puck in one motion. He didn’t slow down. He cut inside, pulled the defender just off balance, and snapped the shot through before anyone could close the gap.

“Shane Hollander is taking control of this game,” the broadcast said. “And he’s not letting go.”

“No, he’s not,” the analyst added. “And right now, Toronto doesn’t have an answer for him.”

The pressure didn’t let up. If anything, it sharpened.

Late in the period, Ottawa broke out clean again. The puck moved up through the neutral zone with speed, and Shane carried it across the line with control. He held it just long enough to draw both defenders toward him, just long enough to open the lane behind them, and then slipped the puck back across the slot.

Haas met it in stride and drove it home.

Goal.

The sound in the building shifted again, louder now, reacting not just to the scoreboard but to the way the game was unfolding.

“Four-point night already,” the play-by-play voice said, a note of disbelief creeping in. “Two goals, two assists, and he’s been involved in everything.”

“That’s a takeover,” the colour commentator replied. “He’s dictating the pace, the space, the decisions. Everything is running through him right now.”

“And he’s doing it at both ends,” the play-by-play added. “We saw the block that started the first goal. That doesn’t show up the same way, but it matters just as much.”

On the Ottawa bench, the energy had shifted completely. Players leaned forward, tracking every shift, feeding off the momentum that seemed to build every time Shane stepped onto the ice. It wasn’t chaotic. It was controlled, confident, the kind of energy that came from knowing exactly what you were capable of and seeing it play out in real time.

Across from them, Toronto tried to adjust. They tightened coverage, shortened their gaps, looked for ways to disrupt the rhythm before it could carry any further.

It didn't matter.

Shane kept finding his way through it.

In the locker room, Ilya didn't look away from the screen.

He could have. He knew how to detach when he needed to, how to pull himself out of a game once he wasn't in it anymore. It was part of staying sharp, part of keeping frustration from bleeding into whatever came next.

But this wasn't something he wanted distance from.

On the screen, Shane moved through another shift with a kind of certainty that didn't read as ease so much as control. Every touch had purpose. Every decision came just a fraction earlier than it should have, like he was working from a version of the play no one else could see yet. He wasn't chasing anything. He wasn't reacting. He was shaping it, setting the pace, forcing everything around him to adjust.

The commentary filtered in and out of Ilya's awareness, quieter than the game itself but still there, still threading through the room.

"...he's just reading everything right now..."

"...you can't teach that kind of instinct..."

"...he's dictating the pace of this game..."

Normally, Ilya would have tuned it out. He had never had much patience for the way people tried to explain things from the outside, reducing something instinctive into something tidy and manageable. He would have showered and changed and watched a movie on his phone or something.

But this time, they weren't wrong or exaggerating.

His jaw shifted slightly, the corner of his mouth pulling into something that wasn't quite a smile. There was a familiarity in what he was watching, something he recognized down to the smallest details. The timing. The patience. The way Shane held onto the puck for just a fraction longer than expected, forcing defenders to commit before he made his move.

It wasn't luck. It wasn't a hot stretch. It wasn't even showmanship. It was just Shane.

It was control, and it was complete.

Another shift rolled by, another clean exit turned into a controlled entry, another moment where Shane created space where there shouldn't have been any. Ilya felt something in his

chest ease without realizing it had been tight to begin with, the last edge of the earlier call settling into something quieter, something steadier.

Not just pride, though that sat solid and unmistakable under everything else. Not just admiration, though that threaded through it too, sharp and constant. No, this was something deeper than that.

He had always known how good Shane was. Long before anyone else had started saying it this loudly, this consistently, Ilya had seen it in the smaller moments. The plays that didn't make highlight reels. The decisions that shifted a game without drawing attention to themselves. Hell, he'd been watching him since they were 17. He thought he knew every single aspect of his game.

But this felt different.

This was Shane stepping fully into it, without hesitation, without holding anything back. This was him taking control of a game that mattered and refusing to give it up.

And Ilya was here to watch it. Maybe not from the ice with him, but it was just beautiful to even glimpse.

His hands shifted slightly where they rested together, his thumb brushing absently across his knuckles in a small, unconscious motion. His gaze never left the screen.

"...he's been the best player on the ice tonight, no question..."

"...yeah, and I don't think it's particularly close..."

Ilya let out a quiet breath at that, something almost amused threading through it. His head tipped just slightly, like he was acknowledging the statement even as he resisted it on instinct.

He would never say it like that.

Not out loud. Not to Shane. Not where it could settle into something real between them. That would take all the fun out of it.

But here, in the quiet of the room, watching him move through the game like this, there wasn't much to argue.

Shane was better tonight. And not just better – he was unstoppable.

The thought didn't sharpen into anything competitive. It didn't press at him or demand comparison. It settled easily, without resistance, because this wasn't something he needed to measure himself against.

This was something he got to stand beside. Something he got to be part of.

The word came to him again, unprompted, still new enough to feel like it caught slightly as it formed.

That's his fiancé.

Ilya's expression softened, just for a moment, the shift there and gone again before it could become anything obvious. On the screen, Shane reset into position, stick tapping once against the ice as he read the next play before it unfolded. Ilya leaned back slightly, shoulders loosening, the last of the tension leaving him completely.

There was pride in it. There was admiration. There was something close to awe.

But more than anything, there was certainty.

He didn't need the commentary to tell him what he was watching.

He already knew.

And he wasn't looking away.

By the time Kent came back late in the second period, the game had already tilted. The ice felt different under it now. Ottawa controlled the pace, controlled the flow, and every shift seemed to bend in their direction whether Toronto liked it or not. The building could feel it. The benches could feel it. Even the broadcast had stopped talking about *if* and started talking about *how much*.

Kent stepped over the boards like nothing had happened, like the earlier hit and the fight and the call had all been part of the same game he'd always played. His posture was loose, almost careless, but there was something tighter underneath it now, something that hadn't been there before.

They lined up across from each other again. Same circle. Same distance. Same narrow strip of ice where everything else fell away.

The air between them carried more weight this time. Less about testing, more about something already decided.

Kent leaned in, closer than he needed to be, his stick angled just enough to crowd the space, and quietly said something directly to Shane. Whatever he said didn't carry, but Shane and the linesman heard him clearly. The linesman just stared at Kent. Shane, however – well Shane surprised everyone.

He didn't react the way he had earlier. There was no stillness this time, no quiet tightening that he held onto and moved past. Whatever Kent had been building toward all game finally landed where it was meant to, and Shane was done letting it sit.

His gloves hit the ice before the linesman even had time to recover.

The reaction was immediate. The official jumped back on instinct, the puck falling untouched between them as the crowd surged to its feet, the sound rising all at once.

“Did not see that coming,” the play-by-play voice said, the surprise cutting through the noise.

Kent barely got his hands free before Shane was already moving in. There was nothing wild in it. No loss of control. If anything, it was the same control he’d shown all night, just redirected, just sharpened into something physical and immediate. He stepped in clean, closed the space, and slipped Kent’s first swing without breaking his balance.

The first punch landed hard and direct, snapping Kent’s head back before he could reset. The second came faster, tighter, driving through the opening Shane had already created.

Kent tried to answer, tried to get his feet under him, but he was already behind the play. Already reacting instead of leading. His next swing came wide, off-balance, and Shane stepped inside it again, keeping his base, keeping his timing, landing another clean shot that forced Kent back another half-step.

“That’s not frustration,” the colour commentator said, his voice tightening with the shift in tone. “That’s controlled. He knows exactly what he’s doing here.”

“And he’s in complete command of it. We’ve never seen Hollander like this. He’s not known for fighting,” the play-by-play added. “And Kent hasn’t been able to get set at all.”

Another attempt from Kent, slower this time, less certain. Shane read it before it fully came, slipped it cleanly, and answered again. Short. Direct. Enough to break whatever balance Kent had left.

When Kent’s footing finally gave, it wasn’t dramatic. It was inevitable. He went down hard, skates slipping out from under him as Shane followed just long enough to make it clear the exchange was finished, one hand still gripping his jersey as he controlled the fall, then releasing him before the linesmen could even fully step in.

The whistle had already gone.

The building exploded as even Toronto fans went wild.

It wasn’t just noise anymore. It was approval, sharp and immediate, rolling down from every section as Shane stepped back on his own, breathing hard but steady, his chest rising and falling but his posture still composed.

On the Ottawa bench, players were already on their feet, sticks hammering against the boards, the reaction loud and unfiltered.

Across the ice, Kent didn’t get up right away.

The officials hovered for a second before waving the trainers on, the shift in body language immediate as they knelt beside him. When he finally moved, it was slower, less certain than before, his head dipping forward as they helped him to sit.

They got him to his feet with assistance, guiding him carefully toward the tunnel. He stayed there a second longer than he needed to, weight uneven, before disappearing down the hallway.

He wasn't coming back, and everyone knew it.

The officials gathered at center ice, the call coming quickly this time, no hesitation, no extended discussion.

Five minutes each for fighting.

An additional minor to Kent for instigating.

Nothing more. Shane Hollander would stay in the game.

The imbalance from earlier lingered in the air, but this time it didn't land the same way.

Shane didn't argue. He didn't look toward the officials, didn't gesture or question. He just bent to pick up his helmet, adjusted it once, and pushed off toward the penalty box and stepped inside, closing the door behind him. He sat down without a word, forearms resting on his knees, breathing settling back into something steady.

Like it was just another part of the game and not something that almost never happened.

On the ice, the lines reset. The puck was brought back into position. The officials moved the players into place like the moment had already passed and the game moved on.

But it hadn't.

Not really.

Because the edge of it stayed behind, threaded through the rest of the period, sitting in the way players moved, in the way the crowd stayed just a little louder, just a little more invested in every touch.

The game went on.

But it didn't feel the same.

And everyone in the building knew exactly why.

The penalty clock ticked down with a steadiness that didn't match the energy in the building.

Ottawa didn't give an inch. If anything, they got better. The penalty kill came out clean and structured, every lane sealed before Toronto could settle into anything resembling rhythm. Sticks stayed low and active, bodies in the right places at the right times, forcing everything to the outside. Hayes tracked it all without panic, square to every shot, swallowing rebounds or steering them harmlessly into corners where nothing could come of them.

"Big kill here," the play-by-play voice said as another attempt from the point was blocked and cleared. "They've been under pressure, but they haven't given Toronto anything to build on."

“They haven’t all night,” the colour commentator replied. “This is a group that knows exactly who they are right now.”

By the time Shane stepped back onto the ice, the shift in the game was inevitable. He didn’t come out chasing anything. He didn’t need to. He stepped into the flow exactly where he’d left it, picking up the puck along the boards and carrying it through the neutral zone with that same measured control. Haas cut through the middle. Barrett drifted wide, drawing his coverage just enough to open the seam.

Shane held the puck for a fraction longer than anyone expected, then sent it across to Haas. He sidestepped a Toronto defender and tapped his stick. Haas passed it back, and he immediately he sent it to Barrett in the slot.

Barrett buried it.

Goal.

The Ottawa bench erupted again, sticks hammering against the boards as the sound rolled through the building, louder now, fuller, feeding off what had already been building all period.

“That line again,” the play-by-play called. “Haas, Hollander, Barrett—and they are clicking at exactly the right time. Only thing that could be better is if Rozanov were out there.”

“That’s five points for Hollander,” the analyst added. “And every one of them driving play. This isn’t just production—it’s control.”

Toronto tried to answer. They had to. They pushed harder through the next few shifts, tightening their structure, forcing pucks deep, trying to grind something back into the game before it slipped too far out of reach. But every attempt ran into the same wall. Ottawa didn’t bend. They didn’t scramble. They absorbed it and moved it back the other way with calm efficiency.

And then a turnover high in the zone, one of those small mistakes that usually goes unnoticed. The puck glanced off a stick, drifted just far enough out of position to be dangerous.

Shane was already there. He stepped into it without hesitation, pulled it onto his blade, and cut toward the slot with space opening in front of him. The defender reached, missed by inches, and that was enough.

The puck hit the back of the net before the goalie could even get set.

For a split second, the building held its breath, and then –

It broke.

Hats came down in waves, scattering across the ice as the realization hit all at once, the noise rising into something sharp and overwhelming.

“Hat trick for Shane Hollander,” the play-by-play voice said, barely cutting through the sound. “What a night for him.”

“This is a statement,” the colour commentator added. “Not just from him, but from this entire team.”

Shane lifted his stick once, a small acknowledgment, before he was swallowed by his teammates at the boards. Gloves knocked against his helmet, his shoulders, the contact quick and solid before he pulled free again, skating back toward center ice like there was still work to do.

Because there was.

Behind it all, Hayes remained exactly what he’d been from the start. Unshakeable.

Toronto found small looks here and there, the kind of chances that might have mattered earlier, might have shifted something if the game had been different. But every shot met the same result. Clean save. Controlled rebound. Reset.

“Hayes has also been excellent tonight,” the play-by-play noted as another chance was turned aside. “Six-nothing game, but he’s earned every bit of that.”

“He really has,” the analyst agreed. “This is a full team effort, and you don’t get a result like this without your goaltender holding the line.”

As the clock wound down, the tone shifted again, the conversation moving away from the score and into everything that had shaped it.

“You have to talk about the officiating tonight,” the colour commentator said carefully. “Some of those calls felt... uneven.”

“That’s been part of the story,” the play-by-play replied. “And given the history involved here, it’s hard not to notice.”

A brief pause.

“Dallas Kent has had prior incidents, comments that have drawn attention from the league before. You wonder if some of what we saw tonight—on the ice and off—connects back to that.”

“Either way,” the analyst added, “Ottawa responded the only way they could. They took control of the game.”

“And they didn’t give it back.”

The broadcast cut briefly to an update.

“We’re hearing now that Kent has been taken for further evaluation. There’s concern about a possible jaw injury—he’s been sent for imaging.”

The camera returned to the ice, but by then the outcome had already settled into something inevitable.

The final minutes didn't carry tension, they simply held certainty. This was Ottawa's night, even standing on Toronto ice. And when the horn sounded, it cut clean through everything, sharp and final.

Ottawa 6.

Toronto 0.

"Final score here tonight," the play-by-play called. "And with that, the Ottawa Centaurs clinch a playoff spot for the first time in decades"

The bench emptied almost immediately in the way moments like that are always celebrated. Gloves tossed. Sticks lifted. Bodies collided in quick, solid embraces. It wasn't just celebration.

It was release.

Shane came off the ice last. He slowed just slightly as he reached the bench, his gaze flicking once over the ice still scattered with gear, over the crowd still on its feet, over the space where everything had shifted. He raised his stick in acknowledgement, then he stepped off and headed down the tunnel.

The noise off the ice was exactly what it should have been in this scenario. Voices carried. Laughter cut through. Someone shouted something about playoffs, about drinks, about finally being able to breathe again. It echoed off the walls, spilling in waves every time the door opened and closed.

Inside the locker room, it was worse.

Inside the locker room, it was everything.

Shane barely had time to get two steps through the door before the room hit him.

Noise. Movement. Bodies.

And then—

impact.

Ilya hit him full force, arms wrapping around him without hesitation, lifting him just slightly off his feet as the momentum carried them both back a step.

"That is my fiancé!" Ilya said, loud enough to cut through everything else, the words breaking out of him in a way that didn't even try to stay contained. "That is my team!"

Laughter exploded around them, loud and immediate, sticks banging, voices shouting over each other as teammates closed in, hands clapping Shane on the back, on the shoulders, pulling him into the center of it.

Shane laughed, the sound coming out breathless as he grabbed onto Ilya just as tightly, steadying himself on his skates even as he leaned into it.

“You’re a lot,” he managed, laughing.

“Yes,” Ilya said without hesitation, not letting go, his grin sharp and bright and completely unrestrained. “And you are incredible. I am so proud of you. I love you.”

There was no filter on it. No holding it back.

Around them, the room surged, alive in a way that felt bigger than the game, bigger than the win. Someone shouted about the hat trick. Someone else about the fight. Hayes got dragged into a hug he absolutely didn’t ask for. Barrett was still talking, loud and animated, replaying the goal like it hadn’t just happened minutes ago.

It was chaos.

It was perfect.

Chapter End Notes

Okay. So.

They’re in the playoffs.

(!!!)

And somehow, we are officially in the final stretch of this story—there are only four chapters left after this one. I’m not entirely convinced that’s real, but here we are.

As I mentioned at the start of this chapter, this is where we head into the HEA portion of the program. Not in a “everything is magically perfect forever” kind of way, but in a “they fought for this, they earned this, and now they get to live in it” kind of way.

So yes—there’s a playoff run coming. There’s a wedding that I promise you will not forget. And there is a whole lot of Shane and Ilya just being in love without the world trying to tear it out from under them every five minutes.

Also, quick reminder that this universe has a growing collection of chaotic little one-shots under Controlled Chaos (Allegedly) – If This Is It Universe. That’s where I get to lean fully into the fun, ridiculous, off-ice moments—and I am absolutely open to ideas if

there's something you want to see these idiots get up to, or collabs if that's more your style!

As always, thank you for being here, for reading, for yelling about them with me. We're almost at the end, and I'm so excited to take you through the rest of it 

Chapter 27: What We Kept

Chapter Summary

They take the series in five.
They look to take the East next.

But for the first time, it's not just about winning.

It's about what stayed, and everything they finally get to keep.

Chapter Notes

Hi friends, loons, Threads folks, and anyone else:

This chapter hints at a few things: they win their first playoff series, Ilya Rozanov delivers a captain's speech that absolutely should come with a warning label, and this team fully becomes a team. Not just on the ice, but everywhere that matters.

Also yes—there is champagne.
Also yes—feelings happen.
Also yes—Ilya is insufferably proud of his fiancé.

I hope you're still here for the ride as we go for the happy ending.

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

The morning after the Toronto game, the game coverage had already moved past the highlight reels. Those were still running—of course they were, Shane Hollander was his own highlight reel—but they weren't the point anymore. The hit, the fight, the penalties...they played on a loop in the background while something else took shape over top of them.

Panels filled the screen. Analysts who, until recently, had kept things careful and contained now sounded more certain. Headlines scrolled across the bottom of broadcasts, not just about the game, but about everything surrounding it.

KENT'S CONDUCT UNDER SCRUTINY
LEAGUE FACES QUESTIONS AFTER CONTROVERSIAL CALLS
MULTIPLE ALLEGATIONS RESURFACE FOLLOWING INCIDENT

The footage ran over and over. Rozanov stepping into Kent along the boards—heavy, but clean and controlled. Kent dropping his gloves almost before he'd fully recovered. The fight

that followed, sharp and decisive in a way that left very little ambiguity. Then the calls.

Five and a game for Ilya, five and a 2-minute minor for instigating for Kent.

“What people are reacting to isn’t just the fight,” one analyst said, his tone steady, deliberate in a way that suggested this wasn’t new to him. “It’s the disparity in how it was handled. Kent has been getting preferential treatment for a long time”

“Yes, this is absolutely not the first time,” another added. “And I don’t just mean the penalties. I mean the pattern emerging throughout his career.”

The clips shifted as they spoke, pulling in moments that hadn’t carried weight on their own at the time. Scrums that lingered just a little too long. Exchanges at the faceoff dot where Kent leaned in closer than necessary, talking low, smiling like it meant something. Post-game interviews where his answers edged into something sharper—comments about “real competition,” about “guys who belonged,” delivered with a tone that didn’t quite match the words.

“You start stacking it like this,” the first voice continued, “and it stops being about one moment. It becomes something undeniably ugly.”

“And when you look at how certain players get treated compared to others,” the second added, “you have to ask why.”

The footage cut again, this time to older interviews. Kent at a podium, shoulders loose, expression confident in a way that bordered on dismissive.

“Some guys play hard,” he’d said at one point when asked about playing against Rozanov, shrugging like the rest of it didn’t concern him. “Some guys play... other ways.”

The clip didn’t need context. Not anymore.

It shifted again—more recent now, after everything had come to light. And the casually mean tone shifted into cruelty. Shorter answers with sharper edges. The confidence remained, but it twisted into something meaner that sat wrong even without the words being fully clear. Sharp enough that it didn’t need to be spelled out to understand the malice underneath it.

“He’s a good player,” one analyst said carefully, the kind of careful that came from choosing words on purpose. “No one’s denying that.”

“But that’s part of the problem,” the other replied. “When someone produces at that level, there’s a tendency to look the other way. To let things slide that wouldn’t be tolerated from anyone else.”

“And that doesn’t just apply to what we’re seeing on the ice.”

The screen shifted again.

**MULTIPLE WOMEN COME FORWARD WITH ALLEGATIONS
LEGAL SOURCES CONFIRM ONGOING COOPERATION WITH AUTHORITIES**

The clips didn't linger there long, but they didn't need to. The implication settled in anyway, threading through everything else that followed.

"That's where this gets bigger than hockey," the first analyst said. "Because now you're not just talking about penalties or discipline. You're talking about whether things were ignored."

"Or protected," the second added quietly.

The segment cut to a clean graphic, filling the screen with stark clarity.

OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER — MAJOR LEAGUE HOCKEY

The anchor didn't rush it. He let it sit for a moment before speaking.

"Major League Hockey is releasing an official statement this morning regarding Dallas Kent. We head live to the office of the commissioner."

The camera tightened, Svetlana coming into view in front of the head office doors. She looked cool and collected, as usual. She stepped up to the mic and calmly addressed the cameras.

"Effective immediately, Dallas Kent has been suspended from all league activities pending the outcome of an ongoing investigation into conduct violations, including behavior inconsistent with league standards both on and off the ice.

This decision reflects not only the events of last night's game, but a broader pattern of conduct that is currently under review in cooperation with relevant authorities.

The league remains committed to ensuring a safe, respectful environment for all players and will not tolerate behavior that undermines that standard. We will no longer tolerate less. Thank you."

When the statement ended, it shifted back to the studio where there was a pause. Not long, just poignant as the analysts and anchor sat and processed.

"That's a shift," the analyst said finally, almost delicately.

"Yeah," the other agreed. "That's not a fine or a warning. That's the league stepping in and saying this goes beyond the game and they will hold the players accountable."

"And beyond one player," the first added. "That's the other piece of this. You don't issue a statement like that unless you're acknowledging something bigger."

The camera pulled back to the desk again, the energy quieter now, more deliberate.

"Acting Commissioner Svetlana Vetrova has made it clear since stepping into the role that accountability was going to be a priority," the anchor said. "This is the first major example of what that looks like in practice."

"And it won't be the last," came the quiet reply.

The locker room felt good when they arrived for practice in the morning.

Not the version that had been stretched thin or held too tight over the past few weeks, not the one that carried tension just under the surface like something waiting to give. This was steadier than that. Familiar in a way that didn't ask for attention.

There was tape pulled in long, practiced strips, the sound sharp and rhythmic against the low hum of conversation. Music drifted from somewhere across the room, quiet enough that it didn't compete with anything, just filling the space between voices. Gear shifted, sticks leaned against stalls at easy angles, and somewhere in the middle of it all someone laughed at something that didn't quite carry, but didn't need to.

It all layered together without pressing. It felt like home.

Shane stepped into it without thinking, the noise settling around him in a way that felt... right. Not something he had to push through. Not something he had to brace against. Just something he could exist inside. He'd almost forgotten that's what it should feel like.

Ilya followed a step behind him, already talking to someone across the room, his voice cutting easily through the background without forcing it. There was still something in him from the night before, an edge that hadn't entirely burned off, but it wasn't sharp. It wasn't spilling over. He'd taken the suspension without argument, accepted it in that blunt, practical way he approached most things. That didn't mean he was staying away. Practice, for him, wasn't optional. Most of the time anyway.

Across the room, Wyatt was already in the middle of something. He stood half-turned toward Barrett, hands moving as he talked, fully committed to a point that probably didn't matter as much as he was pretending it did. "I'm just saying, if we're being honest, I carried you last night."

Barrett didn't look up, just kept working the tape around his stick with the same quiet precision he always had. "You always say that."

"Because it's always true."

"It's mostly true."

Wyatt paused like he might argue it further, then shrugged. "I guess that's fair."

The exchange didn't disrupt anything. It folded into the room the same way everything else did, part of the background rhythm that made the space feel like it belonged to them. Shane found himself smiling a little as he dropped his bag on the bench in front of his stall, shaking his head slightly as he unlaced his shoes. The motion was automatic, familiar enough that it didn't require thought. His shoulders loosened without him noticing, tension easing out of habit rather than effort.

“Morning,” Haas said from the next stall over. He was already halfway through organizing something—tape, gloves, maybe both—with a kind of focus that made the rest of the room blur at the edges. Everything about it was deliberate, precise in a way that said he didn’t need to rush to keep up.

“Morning rook,” Shane returned easily, watching with amusement when the young player’s ears turned red.

Across the room, Wyatt’s attention shifted abruptly, his head turning toward the doorway as something caught his eye. “Hey,” he called, voice carrying just enough to pull focus. “You sticking around or what?”

Shane glanced up, and couldn’t help the grin from spreading across his face. Hayden Pike stood just inside the room, hoodie pulled up, one hand resting lightly on his cane. He wasn’t moving much, just taking in the space with that quiet, observant stillness of his, like he was measuring where he fit inside it. For a second, it looked like he might turn around again, but then he met Shane’s eyes.

“Depends,” Pike said, his tone dry, easy. “You trying to get rid of me already?”

“Absolutely not,” Wyatt shot back immediately. “We’re recruiting you.”

“That so.”

“Management’s already looking at your contract,” Barrett added without lifting his head. “We’ve all heard rumours.”

Pike’s mouth twitched, something almost like a smile pulling at the corner of it. “That feels unofficial.”

“Very,” Wyatt said. “But also inevitable. Everyone wants to be here right now.”

A couple of guys laughed under their breath, the sound soft, familiar.

Shane caught Hayden’s eye again, just long enough for something quiet to pass between them. Nothing that needed to be said out loud but managed to say everything. Hayden nodded once and shifted his weight back against the wall.

“Well then,” he said, with his usual playful grin sliding into place, “guess it’s time for me to see for myself how things work around here.”

The ice felt fast. Sharp and clean, and moving at a pace that didn’t have much room for hesitation. The drills flowed one into the next without breaking, the puck snapping from stick to stick with a kind of precision that came from trust more than anything else.

It wasn’t about thinking through the play. It was about being there before it fully formed.

Ilya set the pace the way he always did, direct and unapologetic, driving through space instead of waiting for it to open. He didn't adjust himself to the drill so much as force the drill to meet him where he was. It pulled the rest of them with him whether they meant to follow or not. He lead by example and by skill. It really was something that Shane finally got to appreciate as a teammate.

He met Ilya there without thinking. It just felt right. Where Ilya pushed, Shane read. Where Ilya created pressure, Shane found the space inside it, moving through it instead of around it. It wasn't something they talked about or worked at in any deliberate way. It just existed, built over time into something that didn't need explanation.

Around them, the rest of the team adjusted naturally. Barrett picked up the rhythm without breaking stride, Haas sliding into passing lanes a fraction earlier than he would have a month ago, Hayes calling something out from the crease that shifted the angle of the play just enough to keep it moving.

It wasn't perfect, but fuck it was close. This was what hockey should feel like, a team just reading each other and feeling the game instead of fighting each other to make an impression on the ice.

It felt like it could actually hold.

Somewhere along the boards, he heard Ilya call out, easy and unbothered.

"Didn't you guys miss playoffs?"

The question drifted across the ice without much weight behind it. Shane glanced over to see who Ilya was talking to, and saw Sidney Crosby. He stood with one shoulder resting against the glass, watching the drill unfold in front of him like he'd been there the whole time. He was in street clothes and looked amused.

"Yeah," he said. "Figured I'd come watch you guys work a bit. Keep things interesting. Maybe figure out your magic."

Ilya let out a short laugh as he circled back into position. "Thinking of coming back to your home country to play? Or wishing you were engaged to Shane so he would play like a man possessed to defend your honour?"

Sid glanced over at him, one eyebrow lifting just slightly. "And get stuck with you? No thanks. I'll stay in Pittsburgh. And as delightful as Shane is, not my type so you're safe there."

"Fair," Ilya shot back. "You couldn't keep up anyway."

"Sure," Sid said, dry enough that it didn't need anything else, his attention already shifting back to the ice.

Shane didn't think twice about Crosby being there. He'd been around enough over the years—Hockey Canada, camps, media things—that it didn't register as unusual. Just another

presence along the boards, another familiar face in a space that didn't feel crowded anymore. He sent over a quick wave and got back to practice.

At some point, Crosby pulled his phone out and glanced down at it.

It was a small thing. Easy to miss if you weren't looking, but something in his expression shifted. Not much. Just enough that if someone was looking, they might notice something. And as usual, Wyatt noticed something.

"You smiling at your phone now? You know how to smile?" he called, loud enough to carry across the ice. "That's new."

Sid didn't look up. "Aren't you supposed to be practicing, Hazy?"

Wyatt grinned. "That's a yes."

"Back to work. Your glove side needs a little more focus. Not every team is as bad as Toronto"

"Sure. Not like you're gonna be out here testing it."

"Keep chirping and maybe Brandon will have me run the next practice" Crosby shot back as he slipped the phone back into his pocket and pushed off the glass, moving down the boards like the moment hadn't happened.

Shane watched him for a second longer than he needed to, something about it sticking just enough to register.

Then the puck came back to him, clean and fast, and he stepped into the play without breaking stride, the rest of it falling away as the drill carried on.

The games came quickly the way they always did in the playoffs. There wasn't much space between them, not enough time to sit with a win or pick apart a loss before the next one was already waiting. Everything felt sharper and faster. Definitely more deliberate. Every shift carried weight, and every mistake lingered just a little longer than it would have in the regular season.

Boston didn't make it easy.

They weren't built that way, even after Ilya left. The Raiders played a heavy, structured game that forced teams to work for every inch of ice. They closed lanes early, finished their checks, and slowed things down whenever they could. It wasn't flashy, but it was effective, and it meant Ottawa had to stay patient instead of trying to force something that wasn't there.

Game one came without Ilya. He served the suspension without argument, watching from above instead of from the bench. The distance sat with him, even if he didn't show it. Shane knew it bothered him, Partly because he enjoyed playing against Brad, partly because he honestly just missed playing.

Shane absorbed the distance and ran with it though.

He didn't try to replace what was missing. He didn't force the game to bend around him. He just expanded into the space that opened up, controlling the tempo, keeping the puck moving, making sure Ottawa stayed in the play even when Boston tried to slow it down. For the first time it felt like he was playing without holding anything back, and it was breathtaking to watch.

It was close. The kind of game that could have gone either way, decided by a bounce that didn't land in their favour. Boston took it, but it didn't feel like a loss that lingered. It felt like a starting point. Ottawa had announced that not only were they there to play, they were a legitimate contender now.

Game two changed the shape of things.

Ilya came back, and with him came a shift that Boston hadn't fully accounted for. It wasn't just about adding him back into the lineup. It was about what happened when he and Shane were on the ice together again, reading the play at the same pace, moving through space without needing to search for it. The pressure built differently. The lanes that had been closing a fraction too quickly in the first game didn't hold the same way anymore.

Boston adjusted, because they had to. They tightened their structure, leaned harder into the physical side of the game, tried to disrupt the rhythm before it could settle.

It worked, sometimes. Just not often enough. Ilya and Shane adapted to everything Boston did with an almost psychic ability. Shane drove the play in a way that felt steady and inevitable, creating chances before they fully formed and pulling defenders out of position without needing to force it. Ilya pushed through whatever resistance Boston put in front of him, drawing attention, finishing when it mattered, and opening ice for the rest of the line simply by being where he was supposed to be.

Barrett found his timing early in the series and stayed there, stepping into his shots with a confidence that didn't waver. Boodram added depth in quieter ways, the kind of presence that didn't always show up in highlights but changed how the game flowed. Haas, still technically the least experienced player on the ice most nights, played with a calm that made him look anything but, making smart, efficient decisions that kept things moving.

And Hayes held the net.

He wasn't perfect, but he didn't need to be. He read the play early, controlled rebounds, and gave the team exactly what they needed when Boston pushed hardest. Even in the game they lost, he kept them within reach. In the wins, he made sure they stayed ahead.

Boston didn't win another game. By game 5, Ottawa had basically dismantled them, and easily took the series just by playing their type of game. So when that final horn sounded in game 5, it didn't feel like a surprise, it felt inevitable.

The locker room was a mess of sounds and chaos after that final game. The noise came in layers—sticks cracking against the floor as guys came off the ice, gear hitting in heavy, familiar thuds, voices rising over each other as the adrenaline carried through. Laughter cut through it, sharp and easy, the kind that came from something earned instead of something forced.

Shane stepped into it with the game still sitting under his skin, not quite burned off yet. His gloves came off first, tossed somewhere behind him without much thought, his helmet following a second later as he dropped into his stall. His hands still buzzed, that leftover energy humming through him, but it didn't overwhelm him.

It didn't need to. This was his favourite part of the game – winning those big moments together as a team, and celebrating them as a team. He'd missed this more than he expected. Shane huffed a quiet laugh, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, letting the room settle around him. It didn't press in. It didn't feel like something he had to brace against.

It just... fit. And something inside him felt safe.

And then something in the air shifted. One by one, guys looked toward the middle of the room.

Toward Ilya.

Shane watched as he stood slowly, pushing up from the bench, dragging a hand over the back of his neck as he worked through what he wanted to say. He didn't call for attention. He didn't need to.

The room gave it to him anyway.

For a moment, he just looked at them.

All of them.

"...okay," Ilya said finally, his voice steady, carrying without effort. "We won. We go to next round."

A couple quiet laughs moved through the room.

He lifted a hand slightly, cutting it off before it could build. "No— no, listen."

The room settled immediately.

"It's not simple," he went on, more serious now. "Not for us. Not this season."

He took a breath, his gaze moving across them. "You all know what this year has been. We had every fucking reason to lose focus. Every reason to let everything outside this room get inside it. To let it break us." He paused, searching briefly for the word that fit. "To divide us. Yes. That."

He nodded once, satisfied.

“You stayed,” he said. “You stayed for each other. Even when it was hard. Even when it was...” He exhaled sharply through his nose, shaking his head. “a fucking mess. Even when I was a fucking mess.”

A few guys laughed, softer this time.

“Yes,” Ilya said, gesturing loosely. “It was a big mess. But you stayed anyway. And we won – together – in front of our fans.”

He looked around again, slower now.

“That is not just talent. That is not just systems. That is not—” he flicked a hand toward the back, “— just coaching.”

Wiebe made a noise.

Ilya didn’t even turn. “Okay, it’s definitely a little coaching,” he added, and that was enough to get a ripple of laughter before he continued without losing the thread.

“But mostly,” he said, his voice settling into something quieter, steadier, “that is you. That is who you are as team. And now we don’t just play to get beat. We don’t just fight to get through. Now, we play to win. Together.”

His gaze flicked, briefly, to Shane before returning to the room.

“And that...” Ilya said, his voice sharpening just enough, “that is a big fucking problem for everyone else.”

A couple sticks tapped the floor. Someone let out a quiet “yeah,” but it didn’t break the flow.

“We are not done,” he continued, not raising his voice. “You don’t get here and relax. You don’t get comfortable. That is how you lose.”

He gestured toward the door.

“They are all waiting for us to fall. To make mistakes. To lose this.”

He paused, then let his familiar smirk cross his face.

“Let them fucking wait. Because this is our game, this is our year, and it’s our fucking pennant. Next we face New York. We know how they play, and we know how to beat them. So tonight, we celebrate. Tomorrow we get to work, because I want everyone to know we own the East, and we will own the rest, and we will win the fucking cup.”

The roar was deafening as everyone jumped up and cheered at once. The champagne sprayed around the room as the entire team and staff just let loose.

“Okay, that was actually really good,” Wyatt said, pointing at Ilya like he was personally offended by it. “Like I was ready to chirp you, but—”

Barrett shoved him. “Don’t ruin it.”

“Too late,” Ilya said dryly, wiping the champagne off his face. That was enough to set off a whole new round of celebration.

Noise surged back in all at once—sticks hitting the floor, voices rising, laughter cutting through everything. Someone yelled something incoherent that didn’t matter. Hands hit shoulders, guys pulling each other into rough, half-formed hugs that turned into real ones.

Shane barely had time to stand before he was dragged into it—Haas first, then Wyatt, then Barrett, the momentum pulling him into the center of it.

“You see that pass?” Wyatt was saying near his ear. “That was because of me. I inspired that —”

“No you didn’t,” Shane laughed.

“Hey, yes I fucking I did—”

“Shut up, Hazy.”

Across the room, Ilya got pulled into it too, Boodram dragging him into a rough embrace while someone else shoved at his back. His eyes met Shane’s across the room, his grin wide, and completely unguarded. He pointed at Shane like he was staking a claim.

“I’m in the fucking playoffs with Shane fucking Hollander. That is my fiancé!” he yelled gleefully.

“Yeah, we know!” Wyatt shouted back.

The room lost it again as everyone, now a little drunk, started laughing and ribbing the two of them. Shane couldn’t remember a celebration quite like this one, and he’d won the cup three times.

When Ilya dropped back down beside Shane, their shoulders brushing, he couldn’t help but take a minute to plant a kiss right on his mouth.

“...we did it together,” Shane said quietly.

Ilya glanced at him, something softer settling into his expression as his eyes traced every single detail of Shane’s face.

“And it was exactly what I wanted it to be, my love.” he answered.

The arena was never really empty. The quiet happened in layers, the way it always had. Voices faded first, loud and bright and sharp with celebration, softening into smaller conversations that scattered through the concourse. Laughter carried for a while longer, echoing up into the rafters before thinning out. The movement came next—the sounds of

people filing out, the slow shuffle of coats and footsteps replacing the roar that had filled the building not long ago.

The energy lingered here like it always did. Even in the now empty stands it stayed behind in the bones of the place, caught in the glass and the steel and the ice below. Something that didn't disappear so much as settle.

By the time it quieted into something close to silence, most of the lights had dimmed to something softer, an almost dark that felt comfortable and quiet.

Shane sat a few rows up from the glass, elbows resting loosely on his knees, his water bottle hanging forgotten between his hands. His workout shirt clung faintly to his back, sleeves pushed up past his elbows, hair still damp where it curled slightly at the edges. He hadn't bothered to fix it.

He hadn't bothered to move much at all.

Beside him, Ilya stretched his legs out into the row ahead, one arm draped across the back of the seats behind Shane, the other resting warm and steady against his side.

They hadn't said much since coming up here.

They didn't need to.

The ice below them still carried the marks of the game. Cuts and lines crisscrossed the surface, faint grooves catching the light where skates had carved through it, where plays had been made and battles had been fought. It would all be gone by morning. Smoothed out, reset, ready for the next one.

But right now—

it was still there.

Proof.

Shane let out a slow breath, his gaze drifting across it without really tracking anything specific. The quiet was soothing to him in that moment, just sitting there with Ilya letting the events of the day sink into their skin.

"Hey," Ilya said softly, not loud enough to carry beyond the two of them, his hand silding through Shane's hair.

Shane hummed in response, barely moving.

"You good?"

It wasn't sharp or concerned. There was no edge of expectation in it, no sense that the answer needed to be anything other than what it was, a man checking in with the man he loved.

Shane nodded once, the movement small but certain. "Yeah. Yeah I'm good."

A second passed before he turned his head slightly. “You?”

Ilya’s hand shifted where it rested, settling more fully against the base of his neck, his thumb brushing once in a slow, absent arc that sent shivers down Shane’s spine.

“Yes,” he said. “We are both good.”

There was something steady in the way he said it. Certain.

Shane leaned into him without thinking, the contact easy, familiar in a way that still felt new sometimes. Ilya’s arm came around his shoulders in response, not pulling, not holding him in place—just closing the space between them until there wasn’t any left.

Below them, a door shut somewhere down the tunnel, the sound carrying briefly through the emptying arena before fading back into the quiet. Shane tipped his head back slightly, letting it rest for a second before his eyes drifted closed.

He could still feel it.

The game. The pace of it. The way the building had felt when it was full, when the noise had pressed in from every direction and settled somewhere under his skin. The way it had carried him forward instead of knocking him off balance.

Ilya’s thumb moved again, slow and steady as it traced patterns along his arm, not asking anything of him, not pulling him out of anything—just there. Just something real to anchor to.

“...we did it,” Shane said softly, the words almost like he was testing them out loud. “Together.”

Ilya didn’t answer right away.

Shane felt the shift instead, the way his arm tightened just slightly around his shoulders, the way he leaned in just a fraction more to remove space that just didn’t exist.

“Yes,” he said finally, the word carrying more emotion than it should. One word that held everything – not just the game, not just the series. It held so much more.

Shane swallowed lightly, something warm settling in his chest in a way that didn’t feel overwhelming. He turned his head just enough that his temple brushed against Ilya’s jaw, the contact grounding in a way that didn’t feel like it was holding him together, but was just holding him.

Ilya leaned into it without hesitation, pressing his forehead briefly against his. Shane breathed in slowly, the air cool in his lungs, then let it out just as steady.

For so long, he’d been waiting for the moment where everything fell apart, where he was back to losing everything that he loved and the ground felt like quicksand. But it didn’t. Not here. Not with this man he loved to an impossible degree.

His hand shifted where it rested, fingers brushing against Ilya's before settling there properly, easy and certain. In this quiet space where the ice below them still held the marks of what they had done and the arena above them held the support of everyone around them, somewhere in the space they had carved out for themselves and somehow kept, Shane let himself feel everything for the first time.

The way they moved together on the ice without thinking. The way no one looked away anymore. The way it didn't have to be hidden.

All of it.

Everything they had never quite let themselves believe they would get. It was here. It was real.

And it was holding.

Shane turned to face Ilya properly and put all of that into a kiss. His water bottle forgotten as he cupped Ilya's face and told him everything he was thinking and feeling without words. It was the kind of kiss people wrote stories about.

In the player's tunnel nearby, Harris smiled as he leaned his head on Troy's shoulder and took a quick picture. They'd come this way to look for them and invite them out for coffee the next morning. Instead, they had become witness to something beautiful.

"You know, given how this all started, someone might find that creepy" Troy said with amused affection.

"Maybe. But I feel like this is one they're gonna want to keep." Harris answered. "Let's go home. We'll text them in the morning."

Chapter End Notes

As I mentioned at the start of this chapter, this is where we head into the HEA portion of the program. (And yes, I'm going to acknowledge I'm playing fast and loose with playoffs structure - but just like in real world hockey, the rules in the playoffs just get made up as we go along.)

This isn't a HEA in a "everything is magically perfect forever" kind of way—but in the way that matters. The kind where they've fought for something, held onto it, and now they actually get to live in it for a while.

We've only got three chapters left (I know, I know), and from here we're heading into the rest of a playoff run that actually lets them enjoy the game again, some well-earned softness (with chaos, obviously), a bit of a mystery surrounding Sidney Crosby, and a wedding that I promise will be exactly as unhinged and perfect as you're hoping for.

Also—quick reminder that the Controlled Chaos (Allegedly) – If This Is It Universe one-shots are still a thing and I am absolutely open to ideas for more. This group chat energy is not going anywhere.

Thank you for being here, for reading, and for letting me tell this story the way it wanted to be told.

We're almost there.

Chapter 28: Ours For The Taking

Chapter Summary

Ottawa's not fighting to survive anymore.

They're dictating the game, the narrative, and everything that comes after it.

As the Eastern Conference Final unfolds, the Centaurs don't just win—they become something inevitable. The room settles. The noise changes. The future starts to look real in a way it never has before.

And somewhere between playoff hockey, wedding plans, and a captain who refuses to let go, Shane starts to realize that wanting something this much might be the scariest part of all.

Chapter Notes

Hi friends, loons, random passers-by, and people who followed a threads link, and welcome back.

Previously, on Ottawa Is Becoming Everyone's Problem...

The noise around the Centaurs changed. They weren't surviving the pressure anymore; they were becoming the team everyone else had to figure out how to stop. Shane started letting himself settle into Ottawa in ways that felt good and terrifying in equal measure, Brad Marchand continued his hostile takeover of the wedding planning process, and Sidney Crosby remained extremely suspicious in a way that absolutely no one is going to ignore.

Now, the Eastern Conference Final is here, New York is fast, Scott Hunter is dangerous, and Ottawa has something no one else does: Shane and Ilya playing together like the universe handed them cheat codes and forgot to patch the glitch.

Buckle up gang, we're almost to the finals. In hockey, and in this particular story.

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

The attention around Ottawa didn't disappear. If anything, it got bigger, and changed shape. For the first time in weeks, the conversation underneath everything wasn't about whether they could survive the noise around them. It wasn't about distraction, scandal, pressure, or

whether everything they're been though would finally catch up to them at the worst possible time.

Now, people were asking a different question: Could anyone actually stop them?

By the time the Eastern Conference Final against New York officially arrived, the coverage had shifted into something sharper and cleaner, more focused on the game itself than everything surrounding it. Analysts were talking about structure again. Depth. Goaltending. Matchups. Chemistry. They were talking about the way Ottawa moved through games now, not like a team trying to hold itself together, but like one that knew exactly how strong it had become.

They were talking about Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov playing together in the playoffs for the first time in their careers like a problem no one had figured out how to solve, and that, more than anything, felt refreshing.

"New York has speed," one panellist said, footage from Ottawa's last series rolling behind him. "They have experience. They have Scott Hunter, which matters. You don't get this far by accident. But Ottawa right now? Ottawa looks like a team that finally knows exactly who it is."

Another analyst nodded. "They're not chasing games anymore. They're dictating them. That's the difference."

The screen cut to Shane and Ilya on the ice during practice, moving through a drill with the kind of timing that looked impossible until you remembered who they were. Ilya drove through the middle with defenders closing in, pulling pressure toward him like gravity. Shane slid into the space that opened around it, took the pass without breaking stride, and sent it back before anyone else had caught up.

"You give those two space," the analyst continued, "and they punish you. You take space away, and somehow Hollander finds more. That's the problem."

"And Rozanov finishes," the host added.

"Exactly. You can defend one part of it, maybe. You can possibly slow one of them down for a shift, maybe even for a period. But once they start reading the game together, once they're on the same line, and once the rest of that Ottawa group starts moving with them, it becomes a much bigger issue."

The host leaned back slightly, looking between the panellists. "So how does New York beat them?"

For a moment, no one answered.

Then the analyst laughed under his breath, not dismissive, just honest.

"Very carefully."

Practice stayed loose. There was nothing soft about the way they moved on the ice or handled the puck, nothing careless or unfocused, nothing that suggested they had taken their foot off the gas. But the pressure had changed. It wasn't pressing down on them the same way anymore like something waiting to crack through the smallest mistake.

It was something they carried together as a team now.

The locker room reflected that shift. It had settled into its own rhythm, one that didn't need to be forced. Music played low in the background, not loud enough to compete with conversation, just there. Tape tore in steady, familiar pulls. Gear shifted and clattered in the same patterns it always had, but without the edge that had been there earlier in the season.

Wyatt was still talking too much. Barrett was pretending not to listen and failing in ways that made it obvious he was following every word. Haas was organizing everything within reach like the world might tilt off its axis if something sat out of line for too long out of nerves.

It felt lived-in and warm, like something that belonged to them.

And Hayden was still there, standing at the edge of things while working through his rehab, never feeling separated from the team. Often right in the room with them, cane resting lightly against his leg and chirping like he had already found his new home. It wasn't official on paper yet, but it was official to them.

"You know," Wyatt said after a minute, glancing over at him with a wicked grin, "you're here a lot for a guy who doesn't play here."

Pike's mouth twitched, just slightly. "You know, you talk a lot for a guy people are forced to listen to."

Barrett snorted under his breath.

Wyatt pointed at him immediately, like that proved something. "See? Fits perfectly."

"Management should be worried about how persuasive you think you are," Pike said, pushing himself off the wall just enough to shift his weight.

"Management loves me."

"No they don't," Haas said quietly, not looking up from what he was doing.

Wyatt turned to him, visibly offended. "Rookie. Betrayal."

Haas blinked, expression completely earnest. "It was just accurate."

That broke them. Shane laughed before he could stop himself, the sound slipping out easily, without the hesitation that used to follow things like that. Pike's grin widened immediately, like that had been the entire point.

Across the room, Ilya looked over from where he stood with Wiebe, mid-conversation. He caught the sound of it, caught Shane smiling, and something in his expression shifted without

warning. He smiled back, loving seeing the light in Shane's eyes again and the love for him just bubbling up in his chest.

Not subtle. Not guarded. Just there in a way he couldn't help and didn't want to. Shane's smile just did something to him. Every. Time.

The wedding planning invaded after practice.

Shane was sitting in the player lounge, legs stretched out in front of him, trying to answer a text from Yuna about guest list numbers when his phone buzzed again.

Then again.

Then again.

He looked down.

Brad Marchand:

alright boys

important update

i have finalized the backyard flow

Shane stared at the screen.

Ilya leaned over his shoulder. "Brad?"

"Brad."

Ilya nodded solemnly. "This will be good."

"This will be terrifying."

"no, sweetheart. Trust him. He's not as bad as you think."

Shane looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

"Okay, he's not always as bad as you think."

Brad:

first of all

you're welcome

Shane:

for what

Brad:

for saving your wedding from being boring as shit. obviously

Ilya:

I appreciate you

Shane:

do not encourage him

Brad:

too late

he understands vision

Shane:

I understand that you're a menace

Brad:

*a menace with a spreadsheet that even your mother approves of, Hollander.
which is the best kind*

Ilya:

He has tabs

Brad:

I HAVE MANY TABS

Shane:

why are you yelling

Brad Marchand:

because you need to understand the level of organization happening here

Shane closed his eyes, as Ilya giggled – actually GIGGLED – and looked delighted.

“You are not helping” Shane muttered, glancing at him and trying to hide his smile.

Ilya just kept that ridiculous grin on his face and waggled his phone at Shane. He sighed and looked back at his.

Brad:

ceremony stays backyard

sunset timing

soft burgundy

cream

black accents

no bright white because i'm not letting this look like a hotel conference room wedding

Ilya:

you are my favourite pet rat.

Shane:

why are you both like this

Brad:

*because we care about you
keep up*

That gave Shane pause for a moment.

Shane:

wait. you talked to my mother again? you said she approves?

Brad:

*obviously
she's sensible*

Ilya:

I agree with Brad

Shane:

that is becoming a problem

Brad:

also crosby confirmed plus one, just so we're all tracking

Shane:

what

Ilya:

what

Brad:

don't worry about it, that's just for your overall numbers.

Shane:

that makes me worry more

Brad:

*good
stay alert
anyway flowers are handled
haas is helping pick up and arrange because apparently the baby has actual artistic talent
rose has tuxes handled, and yuna and I found the perfect place for her to get them from.
svetlana confirmed
yuna approved everything
i am a genius*

Ilya:

You are doing very good job, marchy

Brad:

THANK YOU

finally some respect

Shane:

I am going to ask mom if this is a mistake

Brad:

*she'll say no
because she has taste*

Ilya:

And she likes him too

Shane:

that is also becoming a problem

Brad:

*listen
just shut up and let me cook. i'm just keeping you in the loop.*

Shane stared at the message longer than he meant to, the words sitting with him in a way that caught him off guard. The player lounge buzzed around them—voices overlapping, laughter breaking through, the low hum of everything continuing without pause—but for a moment, it all softened at the edges. Ilya's shoulder pressed lightly against his, grounding and easy, and when he spoke, it was quiet enough that it felt like it belonged only to them.

“See? He's going to do a good job.”

Shane let out a slow breath that almost turned into a laugh, almost into something else entirely, and nodded once. “Yeah,” he said. “Maybe.”

Shane found Yuna ten minutes later in one of the quieter rooms off the family area, a space that felt removed from the rest of the building without being entirely isolated from it. She often worked from here to keep him and Ilya closer for deal opportunities, but also to make sure Shane was okay. That was probably more for her than him, not that she'd ever tell him that.

The noise from the hallway carried faintly through the walls—distant enough to soften into background rather than interruption. She sat with her phone in one hand and a coffee in the other, composed in a way that never seemed like effort. It was simply how she existed, steady and grounded in a way Shane had never quite managed himself.

She looked up before he spoke. “Brad?”

Shane paused in the doorway, one hand still resting against the frame. “Is it that obvious?”

“Yes.” She said with a laugh.

That pulled a quiet breath out of him, something just shy of his own laugh, as he stepped inside and let the door fall closed behind him. He dragged a hand over the back of his neck, trying to gather his thoughts into something coherent. “He says you approved everything.”

“I did.”

“He has a spreadsheet?”

“I’ve seen it. It’s shared with me, actually.”

“It has tabs?”

“It has many tabs.”

Shane stopped in front of her, studying her for a second like he might find a crack in that certainty if he looked hard enough. “And we’re okay with that?”

Yuna’s expression softened, though only slightly. “Yes, we really are.”

He let that answer settle before dropping into the chair across from her, leaning forward with his elbows braced on his knees. “I know he’s joking half the time.”

“Less than half, actually,” she said.

That surprised a real laugh out of him, brief but genuine, the sound loosening something in his chest that had been sitting tight since he opened the messages. Yuna watched him without interrupting, letting the moment pass naturally before continuing.

“He cares,” she said, her tone even and unforced. “More than he wants anyone to notice. And he’s good at this.”

“Brad Marchand,” Shane repeated, as if saying it out loud might make it easier to accept.

“Yes.”

“Is good at wedding planning.”

“Yes.”

He leaned back slowly, dragging his hand over his face, the tension there not sharp enough to hurt but present enough that he couldn’t ignore it. “That feels like something I should be worried about.”

“You can trust him,” Yuna said. “I wouldn’t have agreed otherwise.”

He sighed, and let it go. Not because it was comforting in the way most reassurances tried to be, but because it wasn’t. Yuna didn’t soften things to make them easier. She didn’t say something unless she meant it. If she said Brad had it handled, then Brad had it handled. There wasn’t any space in that for doubt, not the kind Shane was used to holding onto.

He nodded once, quieter now. “Okay.”

Yuna studied him for a moment longer, her gaze steady in a way that didn’t push but didn’t let him look away from himself either.

“And Shane,” she added, “you’re allowed to enjoy this part.”

His chest tightened—not sharply, not painfully, but enough that he felt it settle there, heavy and unfamiliar. For a moment, he didn’t answer. His eyes dropped to his hands, fingers loosely laced together as he drew in a slow breath, trying to sort through what that actually meant.

“I am,” he said eventually. “I just... don’t always know how.”

Yuna didn’t interrupt. She didn’t try to guide him through it. She simply waited, giving him the space to keep going if he needed to.

“It still feels like something I’m supposed to be waiting on,” he admitted, his voice quieter now, more deliberate. “Like if I get too comfortable, if I let it be this good, that’s when something shifts. That’s when it goes.”

He shook his head slightly, a small, frustrated motion that didn’t carry much force behind it but said enough on its own.

“I’ve had good things before,” he continued. “Not like this, but enough to know how quickly they can change. Hockey, teams, people. It doesn’t take much for things to... turn.”

The words slowed as he reached for them, not because they were hard to say but because he wanted them to be right.

“And this isn’t about hockey,” he added. “Or at least not just about hockey. It’s everything.”

The quiet in the room held around them, steady and unintrusive as she watched him steadily.

“I’m excited,” he said, almost like he needed to ground himself in that first. “I want this. I want to marry him. I want the house, the wedding, all of it—even planned by Brad fucking Marchand, which is insane.”

Yuna’s mouth curved faintly at that, but she didn’t interrupt.

“But I keep thinking...”

Shane’s voice didn’t falter this time, but it slowed, like he wasn’t trying to stop the thoughts anymore—just letting them come as they were. He leaned forward, forearms braced against his knees, hands loosely clasped as his gaze dropped for a moment before lifting again.

“What if something else comes out? What if the league shifts again? What if everything we just fought through—the crash, the investigations, everything that came after—it doesn’t actually stay behind us the way it’s supposed to?”

He exhaled, not sharp, just tired of holding it in.

“I keep waiting for it to feel settled,” he went on. “Like we’ve crossed some line where it’s just ours now. The team, the game, him... all of it. But it still feels fragile sometimes. Like it’s holding, but only because nothing’s hit it hard enough again yet.”

His mouth pressed slightly, then eased as he pushed through the rest of it.

“And I know that’s not fair,” he said. “I know that’s not what’s actually happening. I know how much has changed. I know what we’ve built here, what he’s built, what the team is now. I can see it. I can feel it when we’re on the ice, when we’re in the room. It’s real. It’s solid.”

He shook his head faintly, a small, almost self-aware motion.

“But that doesn’t stop the part of me that remembers how fast everything can fall apart,” he admitted. “How quickly people turn. Teammates, staff, the league itself. People you think are in your corner until they’re not. And it doesn’t take much. One shift. One decision. One headline.”

His fingers tightened briefly against each other before loosening again.

“And this time it wouldn’t just be hockey,” he said, quieter now. “It would be him. It would be us. Everything we’ve actually let ourselves have now.”

He paused again, trying to collect all the thoughts bouncing around in his head.

“And I think that’s the part that scares me the most,” Shane continued, his voice steady but softer. “Not losing games. Not losing a season. Losing this. Losing the way things are now, the way he looks at me like there’s no question in it. Like there never has been.”

Something in his expression shifted, not breaking, but opening.

“He’s so sure,” he said. “About me. About us. About everything. And I don’t think he even realizes how rare that is. How much it matters. He just... is. He doesn’t hesitate. He doesn’t second-guess it. He never makes me feel like I have to earn it or prove it or keep up with him.”

A quiet breath left him, almost a laugh but not quite.

“And I do keep up,” he added. “I know I do. I’m not... less than him. Not in the ways that matter. I know that. I just don’t always feel it the same way he does.”

He looked down briefly, then back up again.

“But I love him more than anything,” Shane said. “More than hockey. More than anything I’ve built, anything I thought I was supposed to want before this. Before him.”

That part didn’t come with uncertainty. He could feel it in every part of his soul.

“I want this,” he went on. “All of it. The house, the wedding, the team, the life we’re building. The part where it’s not hidden. Where I don’t have to look over my shoulder or measure what I say or how I stand next to him.”

His voice softened, but the certainty in it didn’t.

“I want to marry him,” he said. “I want to wake up next to him and not think twice about it. I want to play with him, win with him, lose with him, all of it, without it feeling like something we’re getting away with.”

He paused again.

“And I didn’t think I’d ever get that,” he admitted. “Not like this. Not openly. Not with people actually supporting it. Not with a team that feels like this—like home, like it’s ours in a way I didn’t know was possible before.”

He let out a slow breath, the weight of everything settling instead of pressing.

“And now I do,” he said quietly. “And it’s everything I’ve ever wanted in ways I didn’t even know how to ask for.”

Yuna watched him steadily, a soft smile on her face and tears in her eyes.

“And yeah,” he added, almost under his breath now, “that scares the hell out of me. Because I don’t want to be the reason it breaks. I don’t want to be the one thing that isn’t enough to keep it standing.”

Yuna didn’t answer right away. She held his gaze, steady and unwavering, letting everything he’d just said settle between them instead of rushing to smooth it over. There was no discomfort in the silence, no urgency to fix it. Just the quiet understanding of someone who had listened to every word and taken it seriously.

“You won’t, sweetheart,” she said at last.

There was no softness to the statement, not in the sense of cushioning it. It wasn’t meant to soothe him into believing something easier. It was simple, direct, and certain in a way that left very little room for doubt.

“You’re not the same person you were before all of this,” she continued, her tone even and grounded. “And neither is he. What you’re standing in right now didn’t happen by accident. You didn’t fall into it, and it didn’t survive on its own. You built it. The two of you did. With intention. With choices. With people who showed up and stayed.”

She leaned forward slightly as she spoke, closing the distance just enough to make sure he didn’t drift away from it, her hand coming to rest over his. The contact was gentle, but deliberate—an anchor more than a comfort.

“And the things you’re worried about,” she said, “they don’t mean something is wrong. They don’t mean you’re missing something, or that this is fragile in the way you’re afraid it is. They mean you understand what you have. They mean you know it’s worth protecting.”

Her thumb brushed lightly across his hand, a small, grounding motion that held him there.

“That’s not weakness,” she added quietly. “That’s care.”

She sat back after a moment, letting her hand fall away as naturally as it had come, reaching for her coffee again without breaking the rhythm of the conversation.

“And for what it’s worth,” she continued casually, “he carries the same fears.”

That caught Shane off guard. He blinked, something shifting in his expression. “He does?”

“Yes, Shane. He does.”

There was no hesitation in it, no room for argument.

“He just doesn’t express them the way you do,” she said. “He doesn’t sit with them. He moves through them. He gets louder. More certain. More... himself.”

A small, knowing smile touched her mouth.

“It doesn’t mean he isn’t afraid,” she added. “It means he chooses not to let that be the part of him you see. It also means he’s had help in carrying them. Help that you haven’t had.”

Shane let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding, something loosening in his chest as the tension shifted into something he could actually hold without it pressing back.

“Yeah,” he said quietly, a faint, surprised laugh following it. “That tracks.”

Yuna watched him for another moment, taking in the way his shoulders had eased, the way the weight hadn’t disappeared but had settled into something steadier.

“So,” she said, letting the tone lighten just enough, “we’ll trust Brad.”

Shane huffed a quiet breath, the corner of his mouth lifting despite himself.

“...we’ll trust Brad,” he repeated, the hesitation still there but softened now, less resistance and more acceptance.

Yuna’s expression warmed, just slightly.

“And you do deserve this,” she said. “All of it. The life you’ve built. The people who chose you. The love you didn’t think you’d get to keep.”

Shane shook his head faintly, something rueful and a little overwhelmed flickering across his face.

“I’m working on learning that,” he admitted.

“I know,” Yuna said gently, reaching out to pat his hand once more.

Sid was around again.

That was the thing Shane noticed, once he actually started paying attention to it. Not in a way that stood out immediately, but in the kind of quiet, accumulating way that eventually stopped feeling accidental. At first, it had been easy to dismiss—players crossed paths all the time, especially in the postseason, where there was more free time. Especially after being eliminated. Guys trained together, stopped in, and spent time with friends when their own schedules opened up.

Except Sid didn't need to be here. Pittsburgh was out. His season was done. He had every reason to be somewhere else—home, off the ice, out of the spotlight for a few weeks before summer started creeping in.

Instead, he was in Ottawa.

He showed up after practice one afternoon, leaning against the boards like it was the most normal thing in the world while Wiebe walked Barrett and Haas through video. He didn't take over, didn't make a show of it, but when Wiebe asked a question, Sid answered like he'd been part of the room the whole time. Calm. Precise. Just enough detail that Haas blinked at him like he'd just been handed a cheat code.

The next day, he was back. Not on the ice this time, but in the hallway with a coffee, talking to staff, lingering without hovering. Someone handed him a tablet at one point, and ten minutes later he was standing beside Wiebe again, quietly walking through positioning on a neutral zone regroup like he'd just... slotted himself into the coaching staff for the afternoon.

No one stopped him. No one questioned it. Because it was Sidney Crosby, and he never did anything without intent.

But still.

By the fourth time it happened—this time at morning skate, stepping in to help run a drill when one of the assistants got pulled away—it stopped feeling like a coincidence entirely, and started to feel like a choice.

Wyatt said something first, because of course he did.

"You're here a lot," he said, skating in closer with all the subtlety of a freight train, blocker tucked under one arm and absolutely no intention of minding his own business.

Sid didn't even look up right away, just adjusted the pucks along the boards like he hadn't heard him. When he did glance over, it was with that same neutral, completely unreadable expression.

"Am I?"

Wyatt stared at him. "Yes."

Sid considered that for a second, like he might actually be doing the math. "Huh."

“That’s not an answer.”

“It wasn’t meant to be.”

Wyatt shifted his stance, narrowing his eyes like this had now become a situation requiring investigation. “That’s suspicious.”

Sid picked up a puck and flipped it lightly onto his stick. “You think everything is suspicious.”

“Because I’m usually right.”

“No, you are not,” Sid said, calm and immediate, not even glancing at him this time.

A couple guys nearby snorted.

Wyatt ignored them completely. “You are voluntarily helping another team during playoffs.”

“I am standing on ice,” Sid replied.

“In Ottawa.”

“That is where the ice is currently.”

“That is not how that works.”

Sid shrugged slightly, like this was all very straightforward from his perspective. “I had time.”

Wyatt blinked at him. “You had... time.”

“Yes.”

“That’s your explanation?”

“It’s accurate.”

“It’s not helpful.”

“I wasn’t aiming for helpful.”

That should have ended it. It didn’t, but it should have. Shane watched from a few feet away, not stepping in, not interrupting, just letting the shape of it settle into something clearer. Sid wasn’t just passing through. He wasn’t just killing time.

He was actively choosing this. *Interesting.*

Then his phone buzzed. It was subtle—just a quick vibration—but Shane caught it. Saw the moment Sid pulled it out of his pocket and glanced down, thumb moving across the screen in that quick, practiced way.

And there it was again.

Not a smile, not exactly, just a shift. A softening, maybe. Something small and private that lasted half a second before it disappeared again. Even Shane noticed. Wyatt froze before pointing an accusing finger at Sid.

“Oh my god,” Wyatt said excitedly like he’d just uncovered a crime. “It’s a person.”

Sid didn’t look up. “What is?”

“That face.”

“It’s my face, and I am a person, so that tracks. Excellent observation skills as ever, Hazy.”

“You do not,” Wyatt said, already fully committed. “That is a different face. That is a face that is reacting to a specific individual. I make that face when Lisa texts me.”

Sid slipped his phone back into his pocket, slow and deliberate. “You’re all very invested in something that has nothing to do with you.”

“That is inaccurate,” Wyatt shot back. “This has everything to do with me now. I’m on the case. I am Detective Pikachu.”

“It does not. And of course you’d go Pokémon. Dork.”

“You are in our rink,” Wyatt continued, ignoring the comment and gesturing broadly. “During our playoffs. Helping our coach. Smiling at your phone. This is now a team issue.”

“It is not a team issue.”

“It is absolutely a team issue.”

Sid just shook his head slightly, like he’d accepted this was happening and wasn’t going to waste energy fighting it. Behind Shane, Ilya stepped in close, his presence registering without needing to turn. His voice dropped low, pitched just for Shane.

“He is definitely seeing someone.”

Shane glanced sideways. “You think?”

Ilya didn’t even entertain it. Just gave him a look that made it clear this wasn’t a theory.

“I know.”

Shane glanced back toward Sid, who had already stepped cleanly out of the conversation and back into the drill, like none of it had happened, like he hadn’t just been publicly accused of having a secret life in the middle of someone else’s practice. The transition was seamless enough to be almost impressive—the way he picked up a puck, the way he nodded at something Wiebe was saying, the way his focus snapped into place with practiced ease. If Shane hadn’t been watching for it, he might have believed it.

Almost.

Because there was just enough effort in it now to give him away. Just enough intention behind the way Sid kept his attention fixed on the drill, like he was choosing it, deliberately, over the conversation he'd just walked out of. It wasn't avoidance in a messy way. It was controlled. Intentional. Which, if anything, made it more obvious.

Shane felt his mouth curve slightly, something quiet and amused settling in as the realization clicked fully into place. Sid Crosby did not accidentally spend this much time in Ottawa, and he definitely wasn't here just to help run drills and drink coffee with the coaching staff.

Whatever this was—it was on purpose.

And the fact that he wasn't saying anything about it, that he was very carefully not saying anything about it, only made it more interesting.

Ottawa didn't need more than four this time.

New York came in exactly the way everyone expected them to—fast, structured, disciplined through the neutral zone and dangerous off the rush. They didn't try to slow Ottawa down or drag the game into something heavy. They pushed pace from the opening shift, forcing everything forward, trying to turn the series into something reactive instead of controlled.

For a few minutes in Game One, it looked like that might be enough.

Scott Hunter opened the scoring early, slipping into space just as it appeared and finishing clean before Hayes could fully set his angle. It wasn't flashy—his game never was—but it didn't need to be. The goal came from timing and awareness, from knowing exactly where to be and trusting the play to arrive there.

Shane caught his eye on the next draw, and something flickered between them—quick, familiar, and impossible to mistake. Then the puck dropped again, and whatever had passed between them folded back into the flow of the game.

Ottawa didn't chase the moment or try to force an answer right away. They let the pace settle, let the structure of the game reveal itself, and once it did, they stepped into it with a kind of quiet control that didn't draw attention to itself but steadily reshaped everything underneath.

What happened when Shane and Ilya were on the ice together was difficult to define, even as it became impossible to ignore. It lived in the details and in the timing. Shane held the puck just long enough to draw coverage without ever looking like he was waiting, while Ilya moved into space that hadn't fully opened yet, trusting it would be there when the puck arrived. They weren't reacting to each other so much as arriving at the same solution at the same time, and the effect was immediate.

The ice opened around them. Passing lanes appeared where there hadn't been any a second before, and plays developed with a kind of clarity that made everything feel just a step ahead

of the defense. When they were apart, that rhythm didn't disappear. Shane still shaped the play around him, pulling defenders out of position and creating space for whoever he shared the ice with, while Ilya drove through pressure in a way that forced coverage to collapse and reset.

Around them, the rest of the team held the structure without overcomplicating it. Haas played with a calm that didn't match his experience, making reads that held up even when the pressure closed in. Barrett kept everything grounded, steady regardless of how quickly the pace tried to tilt. Boodram worked underneath it all, extending shifts and turning effort into momentum that carried forward.

By the end of Game One, Ottawa had taken control without ever looking rushed.

Game Two tightened as New York adjusted, pushing harder through the neutral zone and closing gaps faster, forcing Ottawa to earn every clean entry. The space shrank, the time disappeared, and the game settled into something more deliberate, where patience mattered as much as execution.

When the opening came, it did so quietly. Shane carried the puck in, held it just long enough to pull pressure toward him, and slipped it away in a direction that only made sense once Ilya was already there. The shot followed immediately, quick and precise, leaving no room for recovery.

That moment was enough to carry the game, and Ottawa extended their lead in the series.

By Game Three, New York was still pushing, and Scott made sure of that. He drove play every shift he was on the ice, forced turnovers, and created chances out of nothing, refusing to let the pace drop for even a moment. For stretches, it felt like he might be able to shift the momentum on his own.

But Ottawa held.

Hayes anchored everything behind the play, composed and sharp, tracking cleanly and limiting second chances. In front of him, the structure stayed intact, and when opportunities came the other way, they were finished.

Shane passed the postseason points record midway through the game, and it arrived without spectacle, in the same way everything else had throughout the series. A controlled entry, a delayed read, a pass that arrived just before it could be taken away, and a play that resolved exactly the way it was meant to. The significance followed after the fact, settling in once the moment had already passed.

Ilya remained close behind him in the numbers, building his own pace with the same steady consistency. Every shift added something, and every touch contributed to a larger pattern that had been building since the start of the series.

By then, the outcome no longer felt uncertain so much as steadily unfolding.

Game Four followed the same pattern, even as New York continued to push and search for a way to disrupt it. They didn't back off or simplify their approach, but each adjustment met a response that held just long enough to matter. Ottawa absorbed the pressure, maintained their structure, and waited for the moments that would tilt the game back in their favor.

When the final horn sounded, it didn't feel chaotic or dramatic. It felt complete, the result of everything that had built over the course of the series.

Ottawa had taken the game, the series, and the East, not with a single defining moment but through a sustained control that never fully slipped out of their hands.

The handshake line carried that weight in a quieter way. The noise of the building softened into something more contained as players moved through with the kind of respect that only came at the end of something hard-fought.

Scott found Shane partway through.

For a moment, the noise around them faded into that familiar, exhausted quiet. Scott didn't settle for a handshake. He pulled Shane into a quick, solid hug, the kind that said more than the words ever could.

"Hell of a series," Shane said.

Scott let out a rough breath against his shoulder. "Yeah. Fuck you."

Shane laughed, the sound easier now.

Scott pulled back, his hand still resting on Shane's arm for a second longer than necessary. "I mean it," he said, quieter now. "If it wasn't us..."

He didn't finish.

He didn't have to.

Shane nodded.

Scott's gaze flicked past him, catching briefly on Ilya before returning. There was something different in his expression now, something lighter, almost amused.

"You two are ridiculous," he said. "I don't think that's fixable."

"Probably not," Shane said.

Scott huffed a laugh, then added, more casually than he quite managed, "Kip and I are coming out for the next round."

Shane blinked. "As what?"

"Fans," Scott said. "And friends. We want to see it from the other side for once. See how it looks when it's not us trying to stop it."

Something about that landed deeper than Shane expected.

“Yeah,” he said. “You should.”

Scott nodded once, satisfied. “Good. Don’t make me regret it.”

“I’ll try.”

Scott’s grin came back easily. He bumped Shane’s shoulder and started to move on, tossing, “Go win it,” over his shoulder as he went.

Shane watched him go for a second before the line carried him forward again.

Ilya stepped in beside him not long after, shoulder brushing his in that easy, unconscious way that had become second nature. He followed Scott’s path for a moment, thoughtful, before looking back at Shane.

“He’s a good friend,” Ilya said.

“Yeah,” Shane answered quietly. “He is.”

By the time they reached the end of the line, the energy had already started to shift. The weight of the series gave way to something lighter, louder, the team gathering as the reality of what they had just done settled in.

The celebration spilled everywhere.

The locker room first, obviously. Champagne, towels, shouting, someone slipping and almost taking out a trainer, Wyatt yelling that the East had been personally conquered by his glove hand, and Barrett telling him that if he said “glove hand” one more time, someone was going to duct tape it shut.

Then a private room at a local bar some swore had been booked for team purposes, which simply seemed to mean loud music, drinks, and absolutely no one making objectively good decisions.

Shane didn’t mind, though. That was new too. He stood in the middle of it for a while, smiling when he wanted to, laughing when Wyatt shouted something truly stupid, letting himself get dragged into hugs and clapped on the back and pulled into photos he would probably see online later with captions that made no sense.

It felt good.

Easy.

Real.

Montreal had never felt like this, and he had one them three cups.

Ilya found him half listening to Boodram explain why he should be in charge of all future celebrations, standing close enough that Shane felt him before he saw him.

“Time to go,” Ilya said.

Shane blinked. “What?”

“Home.”

“We’re celebrating, captain.”

Ilya’s eyes darkened as he sucked in a breath between his teeth. “Yes,” he said. “Now we go celebrate at home.”

Shane stared at him, before a mischievous smile spread over his face.

Ilya stared back, and muttered something under his breath that sounded like “fuck.”

Then his hand settled at Shane’s side, firm and familiar, and he started walking. Shane stumbled half a step, laughing despite himself. “Are you seriously dragging me out of our conference win party...captain?”

That was all it took.

Ilya made a low sound under his breath—something rough, half a growl, half a word in Russian that Shane didn’t quite catch—but Wyatt did, apparently, because the grin that spread across his face was immediate and completely out of control.

“Oh, that’s it,” Wyatt announced, loud enough for half the room to hear as he pointed in their direction. “Say good night to Cap, boys. He’s taking his man home.”

There was a chorus of reactions, none of them subtle.

“About time,” Barrett said, glancing over with a grin.

Boodram lifted his glass in their direction in quiet approval, while Haas, red-faced and entirely sincere, called out, “Have a good night!”

Shane dragged a hand down his face. “Haas, no.”

Haas blinked. “What?”

“You’re too nice for this room.”

That only made Wyatt laugh harder. “Text us when you get there!”

“We are not doing that,” Ilya said, already steering Shane toward the door without looking back.

“Rude!” Wyatt called after them.

“We only care about your safety,” Troy added with a smile.

The door closed behind them on a burst of laughter, cutting the noise off all at once.

The hallway outside felt cooler, quieter, the music reduced to a dull pulse through the walls. Shane exhaled, the edge of a smile still lingering as he let himself be pulled along, Ilya’s hand steady at his side as they moved toward the exit.

“You kidnapped me,” Shane said.

“Yes.”

“From a celebration with our team.”

“Yes.”

Shane glanced over at him, something amused still threading through it. “You’re very bossy tonight.”

Ilya looked back, his mouth curving slightly. “I am captain.”

They kept walking, the rhythm of it unchanged on the surface, but something underneath had shifted—tightened, drawn a little closer, the space between them holding more than it had a moment before.

Outside, the night air hit cool against Shane’s skin. A car had been called, but it wasn’t there yet, leaving them tucked near the side entrance with the city moving distantly around them.

For a few seconds, neither of them said anything. Then Shane leaned back against the brick, looked up at him, and smiled.

“You played a hell of a series, captain.”

Ilya stilled. “...say it again,” he said roughly.

Shane’s smile widened. “Say what? Captain?”

Ilya stepped in immediately. One hand came up to the back of Shane’s neck, the other catching at his waist as he closed the space between them and kissed him.

It was not gentle.

It was not careful.

It was heat and pressure and victory still humming under both their skins, the kind of kiss that made Shane’s breath catch before he leaned into it fully, one hand gripping Ilya’s jacket, the other pressing against his chest like he needed proof that this was real.

Ilya kissed him like he had been waiting all night. Like he had made himself wait through the final horn, the handshake line, the champagne, the shouting, the team, the celebration.

Like he was done waiting now.

Shane made a soft sound against his mouth, half laugh, half something else, and Ilya's grip tightened at his waist.

When they finally broke apart, it wasn't by much. Shane's eyes stayed half-lidded, his breath uneven as he looked up at him.

"...okay," he said.

Ilya's smile was slow and smug and far too pleased with itself.

"You started it," he said.

"I said one word."

"Yes."

Shane huffed a laugh. "Apparently it was a good word."

Ilya leaned in again, mouth brushing his jaw this time, voice low enough that it barely existed outside the space between them.

"Coming from your mouth, it is a very good word."

The car pulled up to the curb and politely honked. Neither of them moved right away.

Shane looked at him, still smiling, still a little breathless, and let himself say it one more time.

"Take me home, Captain."

Ilya's eyes darkened.

"Careful," he murmured.

Shane reached for the car door, sending a flirty little look over his shoulder.

"Make me."

Ilya laughed then, low and delighted, already following him into the car so they could go home.

Chapter End Notes

Next time, on *This Was Supposed to Be About Hockey*...

Ottawa has the pennant, the Cup is right there, and the room knows it. Scott and Kip are coming back as fans and friends, Sid is definitely not beating the suspicious behaviour allegations, and Shane and Ilya are heading into the biggest series of their lives with a team behind them, a wedding ahead of them, and absolutely no chill between them.

Maybe there's more karaoke? Maybe a rehearsal dinner one shot? Fuck if I know, the characters are in control, and I'm just doing their bidding.

We like it that way - and nobody is ready. Not really.

As always, your comments, guesses, theories, even just screaming at me (respectfully) in the comments is not only welcome but encouraged.

Chapter 29: No One Left to Beat

Chapter Summary

They did it.

After everything—the crash, the fallout, the scrutiny, the fight to exist out loud—Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov don't just make it to the Final. They don't just survive it.

They win.

Game Five ends the only way it ever could: with an impossible play, a record-breaking goal, and a moment that belongs just as much to the crowd as it does to the ice. The arena answers back in colour, in noise, in something bigger than hockey.

And when the Cup is finally lifted, Ilya doesn't take it alone.

Chapter Notes

Hi friends, wolfbirds, random passerby and folks who followed a Threads link:

Surprise! Chapter up early. Yep, I'm a little nuts. It's okay. You'll still have to wait a couple of days for the next one. But lets get to it!

Previously on these two refusing to have a normal life:

We survived a plane crash. We survived the media losing its collective mind. We survived a court case that absolutely tried it. We got through trades, pressure, expectations, and about twelve different moments where everything could have gone very, very wrong.

And somehow—

they made it here.

This chapter is the payoff. Not just the hockey (though yes, the hockey is very much hockey-ing), but everything underneath it. What it means to fight that hard for something and then, finally, get to stand in it without it being taken away.

So yeah.

This one's big. Stay with me folks.

The next round started the way everything seemed to lately—fast, sharp, and already tilting Ottawa’s way.

Not immediately. Minnesota didn’t allow that, of course. They came in structured and patient, closing lanes early, forcing Ottawa to work for every clean entry. For stretches in Game One, it held. The pace slowed. The ice felt tighter than it had in weeks, the neutral zone crowded, every touch contested before it could become anything more.

For a while, it looked like Minnesota might be the team that finally dragged Ottawa back into something heavier. Something harder to control.

It didn’t last.

Ottawa didn’t chase the pace anymore. They created it. The shift came quietly—a better read here, a longer possession there, a line change that tilted the ice just enough. Shane stopped forcing entries and started bending the structure around him instead, pulling defenders into places they didn’t want to be, stretching Minnesota’s shape just far enough that something always opened a second later.

And like always, Ilya was already there. The first goal came that way. Then another. Not explosive or chaotic, just clean and precise. The kind of goals that didn’t look like much until you tried to explain how they’d happened and realized you couldn’t quite do it.

Hockey Night In Canada PANEL — POSTGAME

“Minnesota’s doing everything right structurally. They’re tight, they’re disciplined, they’re not overcommitting.”

“And Ottawa is just... solving it. Faster than Minnesota can adjust.”

“That’s the scary part. This isn’t breaking down. It’s being *taken apart*. I think we all anticipated things would change with Hollander and Rozanov playing on the same team, but I don’t think ANY of us realized just how much”

SPORTSNET CENTRAL

“You can see the moment it changes,” one analyst said, replaying the same sequence for the third time. “Right here. Hollander holds the puck half a second longer than he should, draws both defenders, flips the puck through his skates without looking directly to Rozanov and suddenly the structure Minnesota relies on is just... gone.”

“And Rozanov doesn’t hesitate. The second that puck hit his tape it was a done deal.”

“He never does. It’s what makes him dangerous.”

Game Two tightened into something heavier and fiercer. Playoff hockey always followed its own set of rules, and Minnesota leaned into it, forcing Ottawa along the boards, taking away time and space wherever they could. The game slowed, compressed into smaller areas of ice, the kind of hockey that punished impatience and rewarded discipline.

They led late, and for a while, it looked like they might hold it.

@WildNorthWatch

this is the blueprint. slow them down. suffocate the middle. don’t let 81 and 24 breathe.

@NeutralZonePod

this is the first time ottawa actually looks human

@CentaurFaithful

relax guys. It’s not over and they’re not panicking. They’re planning. Just watch. Hollandov will wreck some shit.

The Wild held it until they didn’t. A long shift. A puck battle that should have ended the play. A line that stayed out just long enough to turn pressure into something else entirely when the puck found Shane. Another pass to Ilya, who fed it back to him right in front of the net and he sent it home. Tie game.

TSN COMMENTARY

“You can do everything right for forty seconds. They needed one.”

“And they don’t force it. That’s what makes it so difficult to defend. They’re almost psychically connected.”

@HockeyNightLive

Hollander ties it late on a Rozanov assist. Again.
This pairing is absurd.

@WildFaithful88

how do you defend a pass that isn't there until it is??? isn't there some sort of rule for having these two on the same line? there should be! it's so unfair!

@NumbersNHL

Since the start of playoffs this season:

Hollander: 24 points

Rozanov: 21 points

It's only the third series, and it is not over. This is record-breaking stuff.

Ottawa took game two in overtime. Haas sniped a point shot over the shoulder of Gustavsson just before the horn, and Ottawa was up 2-0 in the series.

Game Three followed the same pattern, but it didn't feel the same.

Minnesota pushed early, harder than they had in the first two games, like they understood exactly where the line was now and how close they were to losing it completely. They came through the neutral zone with more pace, closed faster on entries, and finished their checks with just a little more intent. It wasn't reckless. It was controlled urgency, the special kind that came from knowing this was the moment to change something before it slipped too far.

Ottawa spent more time in their own end than they had in games before, forced into tighter decisions, shorter outlets, less room to breathe. The puck didn't move as cleanly. The rhythm wasn't as obvious, but it never broke.

Hayes held everything at bay, steady in a way that never felt dramatic but always mattered. He tracked pucks clean through traffic, absorbed shots without giving anything back, and reset the play over and over again until Minnesota's push stopped building and started repeating. He was an absolute wall that let nothing through, and in front of him Ottawa didn't panic. They didn't scramble. They simply absorbed the pressure and took command.

The chances didn't come often, but then again, they didn't need to. Shane picked one up just inside the line midway through the second, pressure already closing around him, and instead of forcing the play wide, he held it just long enough to pull the coverage inward. The lane wasn't there when he looked for it.

It was there when he didn't look for it too, and the pass slipped through. Ilya sent it home.

Goal.

SPORTSNET BROADCAST

“And there it is again. Hollander doesn’t beat you with speed there—he beats you with patience. His ability to read the ice is second to none. This playoff run has been the best hockey he’s played in a career of highlight reels and achievements. ”

“And Rozanov is already moving before that lane opens. That’s not reaction. That’s anticipation. We’re watching history be made in real time.”

Minnesota answered with one in the second when a push late in the period finally broke through. Just a bad rebound Hayes couldn’t quite seal, and for a moment the building shifted as the home team’s energy came back and the game tightened back up.

It didn’t last.

Ottawa didn’t try to take it back all at once, and by the time the third period settled in, the game belonged to them again.

THE ATHLETIC — LIVE UPDATE

Minnesota is executing their system that has won them games all season perfectly. Ottawa is simply solving it faster than they can adjust. Heading into the third we are all tied up at one goal each.

@AnalyticsHockey

expected goals say this should be closer

actual game says it won’t be.

make of that what you will #RozanovForHallOfFame

The second goal came off pressure, not flash. A turnover forced below the goal line. A quick touch to the slot. A finish that didn’t need time to develop because the work had already been done. Barrett reading the play and taking full advantage.

But the third goal was all them. Shane again carried the puck through the neutral zone with space closing around him fast. Two defenders stepped up to challenge him before he hit Minnesota’s zone. He didn’t try to beat them with speed; instead, he slowed slightly, turned his body, and feathered a pass through an invisible crack in their defence as they closed around him and hit him into the boards.

Ilya was right there, and off to the races on his own. Shane untangled and chased him down, lightly tapping his stick on the ice when he was clear. It never should have worked from this angle, but the pass came to him anyway and he went top corner glove side like it was easy.

Goal.

TSN COMMENTARY

“That’s another point for Hollander—”

“Twenty-eight now.”

“And Rozanov—”

“Twenty-four. These numbers are getting—this isn’t normal. This is extraordinary.”

@NHLWatch

Hollander: 28 points

Rozanov: 24 points

Game Three still in progress.

@NeutralFan88

ok i was joking before but what are we actually watching right now

@WildFaithful88

we’re not even playing bad. that’s the worst part. HOW ARE THEY EVEN HUMAN.

Minnesota didn’t quit, and they certainly didn’t collapse. They forced chances, drove the net, and tried to pull the game back into something they could control. Wyatt held the line, Shane added another goal on a power play, and when the final horn sounded, they now held the series in their hands.

FINAL — GAME THREE

Ottawa 4

Minnesota 1

@HockeyNightLive

Hollander finishes with 29 points so far this postseason.

Rozanov at 24.

Three games into this series. They’re both chasing the record books.

By Game Four, Minnesota had nothing left in the tank. They tried to make it a fight. They came out with speed, with structure, with just enough edge to suggest they still believed there was something left to push for. There were flashes of it, too—the kind of clean entries and disciplined coverage that had carried them this far, the kind of hockey that should have made this harder.

It didn't.

The game never fully tipped in their favour. It never even settled into something balanced. Every time Minnesota found a moment, Shane personally dismantled it.

Not loudly. Not recklessly. Not in a way that felt like chasing something. He just took the game apart, piece by piece, until there was nothing left of it that belonged to Minnesota at all.

By the end, it wasn't just dominance or skill. It wasn't even just a high hockey IQ.

It was one of the best games of his career.

And everyone watching knew it while it was happening.

The first goal came early, and it didn't feel like a breakthrough so much as confirmation. Shane carried through the neutral zone under pressure, two defenders stepping up before he could even fully enter the offensive end. He didn't try to beat them wide. Didn't force the play.

He just waited, and then the pass slipped through, low and precise, finding Ilya already moving into the space. The finish was immediate.

1–0.

SPORTSNET BROADCAST

“You do everything right there, and it still doesn't matter. That's the difference right now. There are 39 other players in between the two benches, and then there is Shane Hollander.”

Minnesota tried desperately to push back because they had to. And for a few shifts, they found something close to their game again—but Hayes shut it down.

Barrett stepped into a loose puck at the line and held it under pressure instead of clearing, turning a defensive moment into possession. The puck cycled once, then again, stretching Minnesota just enough.

Haas found the space.

2–0.

TSN COMMENTARY

“What a beauty from the young winger! That’s a rookie who knows exactly what’s happening around him.”

“And that comes from the leadership on and off the bench as much as it does from talent and skill. That comes from them.”

Minnesota never recovered. They kept playing. They kept pushing. But something had shifted beneath it—fatigue, maybe, or the weight of chasing a game that never slowed down for them. The reads came just a fraction late. The gaps closed just a fraction slower.

Shane saw it, and took full advantage.

The third goal came off a turnover that didn’t exist until he created it, lifting a stick along the boards and stepping through the loose puck in the same motion. He drove into open ice, forcing the defender to commit, and then moved it across.

Barrett finished it.

3–0.

Hockey Night In Canada PANEL — LIVE CUT-IN

“This is where it goes. You can feel it. Minnesota’s still playing their system, but they’re not dictating anything anymore. We are truly watching history here.”

“Can Hollander continue his historic run? Is it possible to get even better?”

The fourth goal came before the period ended.

This one was all Shane.

A controlled entry. A delayed read. A shot placed just far enough off angle that the goalie couldn’t quite square in time.

4–0.

@NHLWatch

Hollander: 31 points

Rozanov: 27 points
Still first period.

@NeutralFan88

ok this is getting stupid now

@WildFaithful88

we're not even playing bad. that's the worst part.

Minnesota came out for the second like the game was still within reach, trying to get their momentum back. It wasn't, of course. The pace hadn't changed. Ottawa hadn't slowed. And Minnesota didn't have anything left to pull it back.

Shane scored again early in the period. Ilya found him this time, threading a pass through a space that shouldn't have even existed, and Shane finished it without even breaking stride.

5-0.

SPORTSNET

"We are now in a hat trick watch, ladies and gentlemen, and we're barely halfway through."

"And he doesn't look like he's chasing it at all. He looks like he's just out there having fun."

"That's exactly it. He's making everyone else on the ice look like they're standing still. We've said all along he's a generational player, but this goes beyond even that. He might be the best that ever played the game."

The assists started to stack up for Shane after that. One off a clean cycle that ended with Haas easily getting the second. One in transition that split Minnesota's defence wide open before they could reset.

Ilya added another goal of his own midway through the period, stepping into open ice off a delayed entry and finishing with the same quiet certainty that had followed him all postseason.

6-0.

Then another came on a rebound, in the middle of a mess in front of the Minnesota net, bouncing off Boodram's skate.

7-0.

TSN COMMENTARY

“I don’t know what you say anymore. There are no stats for something like this.”

“You don’t analyze a game like this. You just enjoy it as a fan.”

By the time Shane completed the hat trick, the building had accepted the home team’s defeat, and were all just cheering on whatever was happening on the ice. The tension was gone. The resistance was gone. The only thing left was reaction to what Ottawa – and Shane – were doing out there.

The hat trick came off pressure he created himself, driving the net, pulling defenders with him, and finishing the rebound before anyone else could recover. The horn blew.

8-0.

@NHLWatch

Hollander: 33 points

Rozanov: 29 points

Game Four. Series win.

Ottawa is going to the finals.

@AnalyticsHockey

this is beyond outlier territory now

@OldSchoolHockey

there’s no way this is sustainable. something’s off here.

@CentaurFaithful -> @OldSchoolHockey

or maybe you’re just watching greatness???

@HarrisCentaursMedia

He’s exactly what you think he is. We are lucky to have him.

@SidneyCrosby87

...yeah. okay. Take the points record why don’t you.

Just incredible. Congratulations, Ottawa.

@BradMarchand63

i've seen enough. give them the cup now. this is embarrassing.

@NathanMacKinnon29

this isn't real. I know it is, but come on guys. you're making the rest of us look bad.

@ConnorMcDavid97

how do you even defend against that? I don't think I've ever been happy to not be in the playoffs before.

@Hollanov4Life

guys actual MLH players are losing their minds over what is happening. Just how special is this? I'm new to hockey...

@HaydenPike

THAT IS MY BEST FRIEND. #ForeverMyCap #NotSorryRozy

FINAL — GAME FOUR

Ottawa 8

Minnesota 0

By the time the Final was set—Ottawa against Colorado—the conversation had sharpened into something cleaner, almost stripped down to its bones. It wasn't about whether Ottawa could win anymore, or whether they belonged on this stage, or even how far they could push it. All of that had already been answered. What was left hung heavier, quieter, carrying a different kind of weight—the kind that settled in once everything else had been proven. The question wasn't about them anymore. It was about everyone else.

Because who, exactly, was going to stop them?

Colorado tried; they really did.

They didn't come in cautiously, and they didn't try to slow Ottawa down the way Minnesota had. They pushed pace from the opening puck drop of Game One, driving through the neutral zone with speed and forcing decisions early, testing every layer of Ottawa's structure to see where it might bend. For stretches, it worked. Game One stayed tight. Game Two stretched into overtime, the kind of game that felt like it might tip on a single mistake. Game Three carried that same tension until it didn't, until Ottawa found just enough space, just enough time, and took control in a way that had started to feel familiar.

On the broadcast, the conversation had already begun to shift.

"Colorado is doing everything right," one analyst said, breaking down a sequence that, on its own, should have been enough. "Their structure is good, their pace is there, they're not

giving up easy entries.”

“And it’s still not enough,” the other replied.

“They’re not losing because they’re worse. They’re losing because Ottawa is ahead of them. Every read, every play, it’s just faster.”

There was a pause before the next thought landed, quieter but heavier. “At some point, you stop asking what Colorado needs to change and start asking if there’s anything left to change.”

The series didn’t explode so much as it tilted, gradually at first and then in a way that was harder to ignore. By Game Four, Colorado wasn’t breaking, but they weren’t stopping it either. Every adjustment they made was met with something equal on the other side, every push answered before it could settle into momentum. They squeaked out a win in the second game sent to overtime. But even with that, by the time Game Five arrived, the question wasn’t whether Ottawa could close it out. It was how the ending would come.

The building in Ottawa carried that understanding before warmups even began. The noise never fully settled, rolling through the arena in waves that felt less like excitement and more like something gathering, something waiting. People had come prepared to witness it, not just hopeful but certain in a way that didn’t need to be spoken out loud.

What changed the atmosphere wasn’t the volume. It was the colour.

It appeared gradually at first, the way things do when no one is directing them. A jersey along the glass. Another a few rows up. Then more, scattered through the stands until the pattern became impossible to miss. Shane noticed it without meaning to, catching the repetition in the periphery before he really looked at it. When he did, it shifted from something incidental into something deliberate.

Rainbow jerseys filled the building in layers, woven through Ottawa colours, through Colorado colours, through sections that had nothing else in common except the choice to be part of it. There was no announcement, no coordination that anyone could point to. It was quieter than that. It was people deciding, one by one, to show up and be seen.

For a moment, the noise around him softened. Not completely, but enough that something else could come through with it. He thought of everything that had come before this—how loud it had been in a different way, how heavy. The crash, the aftermath, the questions that never seemed to stop, the courtroom where everything had been pulled apart and examined under a different kind of light. There had been a time when none of this felt secure, when even standing side by side had felt like something that could be taken.

Beside him, Ilya followed his gaze and went still in the same quiet way. He didn’t say anything, but Shane felt it anyway—that steady presence that had never wavered, even when everything else had. They were still here. And so was this.

When Shane looked closer, faces in the crowd came into focus. Sidney Crosby was down by the glass, leaning forward with the same intent focus he always carried, wearing his jersey

from the photo shoot. Next to him, Scott and Kip stood together, Scott already talking with his hands, energy spilling out of him even before the puck dropped, while Kip laughed beside him. Next to them, Brad Marchand was waving at someone in a way that suggested he'd decided this moment belonged to him too, entirely at ease in a building that wasn't his and proudly wearing the number 81.

It grounded something in Shane, that they were here, that all of it had led to this moment in a way that felt complete.

The game itself began without any real ceremony. It moved the way hockey always did, fast and structured, both teams playing with the understanding of what was at stake. Colorado pushed early, trying to establish something before the building could settle into the rhythm of it, and Ottawa answered without forcing anything that didn't need to be forced. The play stayed tight, deliberate, shifting back and forth without opening up in a way that suggested it might break.

That held for most of the night.

It didn't feel inevitable in the beginning. It felt earned, every inch of ice contested, every shift carrying weight. The difference came slowly, in the way the game began to narrow. The space tightened, the time between decisions shortened, and everything started to move a fraction faster.

Late in the game, with the clock pressing down on everything, Colorado pushed once more. They drove through the neutral zone, forced the entry, and collapsed Ottawa back into their end. The shot came high through traffic, and Hayes tracked it clean, absorbing it without giving anything back. There was no scramble, no second chance. Just control. And the reset came quickly.

Barrett took the outlet under pressure and turned just enough to protect it, sending it forward along the boards. Boodram extended the play by refusing to let it die, taking contact and still managing to push it deeper, turning what should have ended the sequence into something that continued. The puck bounced loose between bodies, shifting unpredictably but never fully leaving Ottawa's control.

Shane picked it up just inside the blue line, and that was all it took.

There wasn't space, not in any obvious sense. Colorado closed immediately, sticks down, lanes covered before they could form. From the outside, it looked like the play had nowhere to go.

But it didn't seem to make a difference to Shane at all. He let the pressure collapse around him, drawing everything tighter until it seemed impossible that anything could come from it. And then the puck slipped free, moving not because the lane was there but because it was about to be.

Ilya was already moving into that space.

The pass shouldn't have worked. It threaded through bodies and sticks in a way that didn't hold up under analysis, the kind of play that only made sense in the instant it existed. Shane didn't hesitate. He had already committed to the movement, arriving exactly as the puck did, taking it clean without needing to look. Ilya took it and fired it to Haas, who sent it back to Shane where he was moving in from the right.

The goalie shifted too late.

The shot came immediately.

The net snapped.

For a fraction of a second, the building seemed to hold its breath, as if it needed to catch up to what had just happened. Then the reaction came all at once, the sound rising so fast and so completely that it felt like it pushed outward beyond the arena itself.

The broadcast voices tried to keep up, one of them already pointing out the numbers climbing again, the record that had just been broken, the assist that had made it possible. But on the ice, Shane wasn't looking at the scoreboard. He turned just in time to get crushed into the boards by the team, Ilya the first to reach him.

The horn came moments later, right after the final face off – cutting through the noise in a way that made it final. There was no ambiguity in it, no delay. It was done.

Ottawa had won the Cup.

The reaction on the ice was immediate. The bench emptied in a rush, bodies colliding in celebration as everything that had been building for weeks—months—finally broke loose all at once. Gloves hit the ice, sticks scattered, voices rose into something uncontained.

But for a moment, Shane and Ilya didn't move.

They stayed where they were, the reality of it settling in without needing to be shouted over the noise. Everything they had carried was still there in that space—the crash, the scrutiny, the way the world had turned on them and demanded answers they hadn't been ready to give, the courtroom, the quiet fear that this might never be something they were allowed to keep.

And now it was.

Ilya closed the distance first, not with urgency but with intention, his hand coming up to Shane's face in a way that grounded the moment instead of rushing it. Shane leaned into it without thinking, his hand catching in the front of Ilya's jersey as though it anchored him there, something solid to hold onto in the middle of everything that had just shifted.

The kiss that followed wasn't planned, but it felt inevitable. It was steady and certain, carrying everything they had fought through without needing to prove anything else. Around them, the noise didn't fracture the moment. It held it. The crowd rose with them instead of pulling away, the energy changing shape into something warmer, something that felt like recognition instead of spectacle.

The rainbow jerseys in the stands didn't disappear into the background. They stayed visible, threaded through the movement and the light, part of the moment in a way that made it larger than the game itself. It wasn't just about the win. It was about being seen, about everything that had once felt fragile now standing in the open, undeniable.

They weren't alone in it.

They never had been in the way it had felt.

By the time the rest of the team reached them, pulling them into the chaos of celebration, the moment didn't disappear. It stayed with them, carried forward through the noise and the movement, through the realization of what they had just done.

A new points record. The Cup.

And a team that had gone through everything that could have broken them, and come out the other side still together—and now, finally, champions.

The ice didn't stay still for long. The celebration folded inward, laughter and shouting rising again as bodies pressed close, hands catching at shoulders and helmets and jerseys. Someone was yelling about the Cup, someone else already halfway over the boards, the energy shifting from release into something sharper as the moment began to take on its next shape.

It happened gradually, almost without anyone calling for it. Officials cleared space at centre ice, the broadcast voices settling into something more formal as the presentation approached. The noise didn't drop, but it focused, anticipation building again in a different way. Svetlana stood on the ice next to the cup, her face lit up in a way that was probably not as professional as it should have been.

"And now, it is my honour to present the Stanley Cup to the captain of the Ottawa Centaurs, Ilya Rozanov!" she said

Ilya didn't move right away, though. He turned first, his gaze finding Shane with the same quiet certainty it always had, though now it carried something deeper, something final.

"Come with me," he said, low enough that it didn't carry beyond them.

Shane hesitated for a fraction of a second. "Ilya—"

"Come with me."

There was no hesitation in it, no room for doubt. What else could Shane do in that moment? He went to his fiancé.

"What are you doing?" he asked softly.

"This is as much yours as it is mine. We do this together. Like we do everything together." Ilya answered him, planting a kiss on his cheek quickly.

The shift in the crowd was immediate. The sound rose again, sharper this time, recognition moving through the building as they stepped forward together. It didn't need to be explained. It was understood.

Svetlana was beaming as she handed them the Cup, the silver catching the arena lights as it was brought forward. The weight of it settled between them, solid and real in a way that nothing else had been until that moment. Shane's hand came up instinctively, gripping the edge, steadying it without thinking, and for a second, they didn't move at all. They just stood there, holding it, letting it exist exactly as it was.

The building answered them, louder and warmer, the sound rolling through the arena like something alive. The colour in the stands caught the light again, visible through everything, part of the moment in a way that made it feel shared rather than observed.

When Ilya lifted the Cup higher, Shane moved with him without thinking, the motion seamless, natural, like it had always been meant to happen that way.

The celebration surged again after that, pulling them back into motion, the Cup moving from player to player, laughter and shouting rising into something wild and uncontained once more. But the moment didn't disappear. It stayed threaded through everything that followed, carried in the way they moved, the way they looked at each other, the way the team gathered around them.

Even as it stretched on, even as the noise settled into something steadier, Shane found Ilya again without needing to search, drawn back to him in the middle of everything.

A hand came to rest at his back, steady and familiar, grounding in a way that cut through the last of the adrenaline.

"We did it," Shane said quietly, the words almost lost under the noise but no less certain for it.

Ilya let out a breath that softened into something like a laugh. "Yes," he said. "We did."

Shane lifted his gaze toward the stands, toward the colour still spread through the crowd, and then back to Ilya.

Everything they had fought for was still here, and now it wasn't something they had to hold onto with both hands just to keep it from slipping away.

Instead, it felt like something they were allowed to keep.

Together.

Next time on I cannot believe we're actually here:

The noise fades. The suits come out. Brad Marchand's terrifyingly competent wedding planning reaches its final form.

There will be vows. There will be tears. There will be an answer to the question, 'Who the hell has Sid's attention?'

There will be at least one moment where someone absolutely loses it (me. it's me).

And after all of that? We have love.

We've got one chapter left. Let's stick the landing. Together.

See you in the comments.

Chapter 30: Exactly As It Was Meant To Be

Chapter Summary

They win the Cup.

They get the wedding.

They get the quiet morning after.

After everything—the crash, the fallout, the fight to be seen and to stay—Shane and Ilya finally get to keep what matters.

Chapter Notes

Hi friends, loons, random passerby and folks who followed a Threads link.

So... this is it.

This is the last chapter of this story (at least, as far as I know). And I'm not going to lie—I've been sitting with this one for a while, trying to figure out how to do it justice.

This story started with hockey, sure. But it was never just about hockey. It became about survival, about love under pressure, about what it means to choose someone when the world is actively trying to make that choice harder. It became about family—found and built—and about what it means to be seen fully and still be held onto.

And this chapter?

This is the payoff. For me and hopefully for you.

The wedding. The quiet after.

Everything they fought for—everything they almost lost—they get to keep.

Thank you for being here for all of it. Truly.

(Also yes, we are absolutely circling back for a rehearsal dinner one-shot because I know what you're all here for. I did not forget. it's going live at the same time as this. Choose wisely.)

Morning came in slowly, light slipping through the curtains in thin, quiet lines that stretched across the bed and settled there as if they had nowhere else to be. The house held that particular stillness that only existed early in the day, before anything had a chance to begin, before anything asked something of them.

Shane didn't move right away.

He was awake—had been for a minute or two—but he stayed where he was, half-buried in the warmth of the blankets, aware in a distant way of how his body felt. There was a heaviness to it, the kind that came after adrenaline had finally burned off, leaving behind the ache of effort and the quiet exhaustion of everything that had been carried for too long.

Underneath that, something lighter had settled.

The memories came back gradually, not sharp or overwhelming, but softened at the edges, like something he could finally hold without it slipping through his hands. Not the game itself or the rush of the final moments, but what came after—the part that had felt almost unreal in a different way.

The room had been loud and bright, music bleeding into laughter, voices layering over one another until it all became something alive. Teammates pulled him into it from every direction, hands on his shoulders, arms around him, the kind of celebration that was half chaos and half something deeper, something that had been built slowly and then arrived all at once.

His parents had been there later, drawn into the middle of it like they had always belonged. His mom still teary, his dad laughing in that way people did when they didn't know what else to do with that much feeling, both of them holding onto him like they weren't quite ready to let go.

And Ilya—

That was the part that stayed the clearest.

Not standing apart, not unsure, but right there in it, caught in a hug that had started with his mom and folded into something broader. His dad's hand steady on Ilya's shoulder, proudly talking about *his sons* like there had never been any other way to say it. His family all together, fitting in a way that felt simple and right.

Svetlana and Rose had slipped in after, having escaped the press long enough to join them. Without the cameras, without the expectations, they were softer, easier. Rose wrapped them both up in a hug with unapologetic pride, already admitting she had worn Shane's jersey to the game anyway, because while Svetlana might not be allowed favourites, she certainly was. Ilya had looked deeply offended by that, which had only made it better.

No cameras. No press.

Just family and friends celebrating something that mattered.

The details blurred when he tried to follow them too closely, but the feeling stayed.

They had won.

And more than that—they had kept everything that mattered.

Shane exhaled slowly as he turned his head just enough to look beside him, where Ilya was still asleep. Sprawled in that loose, unguarded way he rarely allowed himself anywhere else, one arm thrown across Shane's waist as though it had settled there sometime in the night and never needed to move again. His hair was a mess, curls catching the morning light where it filtered through the window, softening him in a way that didn't quite feel real.

Shane let himself look.

Really look.

His eyes traced over every detail—the line of his jaw, the faint shadow along it, the way his mouth softened in sleep, the steady rise and fall of his breathing. The warmth of him, solid and close and so fucking beautiful.

It struck him then, with quiet certainty, just how much he loved this man.

This is my person.

He reached out slowly, letting his hand slide along Ilya's back, fingers tracing a familiar path without needing to think about it. The touch was light at first, almost absent, and then just deliberate enough to mean something.

Ilya stirred almost immediately.

Not fully awake, not yet, but aware enough that his arm tightened around Shane, pulling him closer without opening his eyes.

"Mm," he murmured, voice rough with sleep. "Don't start something you won't finish."

Shane huffed a quiet laugh, softer than he meant it to be. "Good morning to you too."

One eye cracked open, just enough for Ilya to look at him, expression still blurred at the edges.

"Is it?"

"Pretty sure," Shane said. "Sun's up. That's usually how it works."

Ilya didn't look convinced. He shifted instead, closing the space between them completely, his hand sliding higher along Shane's side now with more intention behind it.

"That seems unnecessary," he said after a moment, his voice still low, before adding more quietly, "We were busy last night."

Shane's mouth curved. "We won the Cup."

"I know," Ilya said, like that didn't contradict anything. "And then we were busy."

Shane laughed properly at that, soft but real, and let his forehead rest briefly against Ilya's. The closeness was easy now, natural in a way that no longer felt fragile, and he traced absent patterns along Ilya's skin, smiling when he felt the faint shiver that followed.

Ilya leaned in again, slower this time, pressing a kiss that lingered, unhurried and warm. Shane leaned into it without hesitation, his hand settling against him, holding him there like there was nowhere else either of them needed to be. Ilya made a low sound in his throat and shifted, rolling them so he settled over Shane, nuzzling into his neck like he intended to stay there.

"Careful," Shane murmured, though there wasn't much warning in it.

Ilya's answer was quiet and certain. "No."

It was just about to get interesting when a loud, aggressive knock hit the front door, sharp enough to cut straight through the moment. It came again a second later, louder, followed immediately by—

"HELLO, YOU UNGRATEFUL GREMLINS, OPEN THE DOOR, I HAVE A TIMELINE."

Shane stilled, then let his forehead drop briefly against Ilya's shoulder, laughter slipping out under his breath.

Ilya didn't move at first. He stayed exactly where he was for a second longer, eyes closed like he could simply refuse to acknowledge the interruption into nonexistence.

"Go away," he called, voice flat.

"ABSOLUTELY NOT," came the immediate reply. "WE ARE ON A SCHEDULE AND YOU ARE BOTH ALREADY BEHIND."

Shane huffed another laugh. "You told him where we live."

"I regret everything," Ilya muttered.

Another knock landed, even more insistent this time.

"I CAN HEAR YOU BEING INSUFFERABLY HAPPY IN THERE, IT'S DISGUSTING AND ALSO WE DON'T HAVE TIME FOR IT."

That did it. Shane laughed properly, the sound breaking through as he pushed himself up, dragging a hand through his hair while he tried to get himself together.

"You should probably get that."

“No,” Ilya said immediately, finally sitting up with a long-suffering expression. “If we ignore him, maybe he leaves.”

“Brad Marchand does not leave.”

“Then we move.”

“Bit late for that, babe.”

Ilya exhaled slowly, then swung his legs off the bed and reached down for the first pair of pants he could find, pulling them on without ceremony. He grabbed another pair and tossed them back toward Shane without looking.

“Clothes,” he said, already heading for the door.

Shane caught them with another quiet laugh. “Wow. Romance.”

“You had your chance,” Ilya shot back.

Another knock echoed through the house.

“I HAVE A CLIPBOARD AND AUTHORITY, I AM NOT ABOVE LETTING MYSELF IN.”

“I am coming,” Ilya called, louder now as he moved into the kitchen, flicking on the coffee maker out of habit before continuing toward the front door.

Shane pulled on the pants, still smiling as he followed at a slower pace, the warmth of the morning not entirely gone, just... postponed.

“Remember,” he called lightly after him, “you invited this into our lives.”

“I did not,” Ilya replied, reaching for the handle. “He invited himself.”

The door barely had time to open before Brad Marchand pushed his way inside like he owned the place.

“I am so glad you finally decided to rejoin society,” he announced, already stepping past Ilya without waiting to be invited further in. He had a coffee in one hand, a travel bag slung over his shoulder, and—just like he’d promised—a clipboard tucked under his arm like it was an extension of his personality.

He made it two steps into the entryway before stopping to take them in properly. His gaze moved over the general state of them—rumped, barely awake, very obviously not prepared for whatever he had planned—before he nodded once, deeply satisfied.

“Yep,” he said. “That tracks.”

Ilya closed the door slowly behind him, already looking like this had been a mistake of catastrophic proportions. “You have been inside this house for three seconds,” he said flatly. “What exactly tracks?”

“That you are already behind schedule because you two lovebirds can’t keep your hands off each other,” Brad shot back, turning on his heel and heading straight for the kitchen like he had been there a hundred times before. “You make me and Kat look like slackers in that department, and we have three kids, so really take a moment with that.”

He didn’t slow down as he kept going, voice carrying easily through the house.

“We’ve got a full day. Rehearsal timing, seating confirmations, final vendor checks, and I need both of you at least partially functional before ten.”

Shane lingered just long enough to watch him disappear around the corner, still smiling in that helpless, slightly disbelieving way that had become familiar whenever Brad decided to exist at full volume.

“He broke in,” he said mildly.

“I let him in once after I moved here,” Ilya replied, already following after him like he was being pulled into battle. “This is my punishment.”

By the time they reached the kitchen, Brad had already taken over the counter. The clipboard was down, his phone was unlocked, and what looked like three separate lists were somehow visible at once, like he had been preparing for this moment for weeks.

He clapped his hands together once, sharp and efficient.

“Okay. Let’s start with the important things. Hydration, caffeine, breakfast, and the understanding that I am the only thing standing between you and a deeply mediocre wedding.”

Shane reached for the coffee maker just as it finished, pouring himself a cup like this was the only part of the situation he intended to engage with immediately.

“You wound me,” he said. “I would never let the wedding be mediocre.”

“You should be wounded,” Brad replied without missing a beat. “Do you know what happens when two athletes with no sense of aesthetic planning try to organize an event?”

Ilya didn’t hesitate. “We win.”

Brad pointed at him immediately, vindicated. “This is exactly the problem.”

Shane laughed into his coffee, shaking his head as he leaned back against the counter, watching the two of them with the kind of fond exasperation that came easily now.

“You’re enjoying this,” he said.

“I am thriving,” Brad corrected. “Also, your mother actually set this schedule, so that’s where we’re at.”

Shane paused mid-sip, lowering the mug slowly. “...you talked to my mother again.”

“Obviously,” Brad said, already flipping a page on the clipboard. “She has opinions. Good ones. We’re aligned.”

“That’s concerning,” Shane muttered.

“Only to you,” Brad shot back, before adding casually, without even looking up, “Also, Crosby confirmed he’s bringing his plus one to the rehearsal dinner.”

Shane blinked. “Sid confirmed what?”

“He’s apparently very excited for you all to meet them,” Brad said, as if this were completely normal information to drop into conversation. “The extra plate is already accounted for, don’t worry about it.”

Ilya’s head snapped up. “What.”

Brad waved a hand like it was nothing. “Irrelevant to your current responsibilities. Stay focused.”

Shane looked over at Ilya, who appeared about two seconds away from demanding answers, then back at Brad, who had already moved on like he hadn’t just dropped something deeply suspicious into the middle of the room.

“You’re a problem,” Shane said, laughter creeping back in.

“I am a solution, Hollander,” Brad corrected again. Then he tapped the clipboard with the back of his pen, sharp and decisive. “Now—we have exactly one day before this becomes official, and I refuse to let either of you show up to your own wedding unprepared.”

Ilya leaned back against the counter, arms crossed, studying him with a look that hovered somewhere between unimpressed and resigned.

“We just won the Cup last night, Brad.”

“Yes,” Brad agreed immediately. “Which means expectations are higher. Keep up.”

That earned another quiet huff of laughter from Shane, who pushed himself off the counter and set his coffee aside, finally giving in to the inevitable.

“Okay,” he said. “What do you need from us?”

Brad’s grin sharpened instantly, like he had been waiting for that exact question all morning.

“Excellent,” he said, flipping the clipboard around toward them. “Let me walk you through the next twelve hours.”

Ilya made a low, resigned sound under his breath.

Shane just smiled.

Brad had just begun what sounded like an unnecessarily detailed explanation of seating placement—something about sightlines, symmetry, and “the emotional geometry of a ceremony”—when the front door opened again.

This time, it wasn’t chaos that entered; it was purpose.

Rose stepped in first, already mid-sentence, a garment bag draped carefully over one arm and another balanced across her shoulder like she trusted no one else on the planet to handle them correctly. “I swear to god, if either of you wrinkle these before I say you can, I will personally—”

She stopped short just inside the entryway.

Her gaze swept across the room, taking in Brad at the counter with his clipboard, Ilya standing there like he was reconsidering every life decision that had led him to this exact moment, and Shane halfway through a second cup of coffee he clearly intended to use as a shield.

Rose blinked once.

“...oh,” she said, and then a grin spread across her face, bright and immediate. “Oh, I like this.”

Behind her, Svetlana stepped inside and closed the door with a quiet efficiency that shifted the room without demanding attention. She took in the scene in a single glance, her gaze lingering just long enough on Brad to understand precisely what kind of energy had already taken hold.

“I see we are in capable hands,” she said mildly, strolling over and giving Ilya and then Shane a kiss on the cheek. “Is there more coffee?”

Shane reached into the cupboard, grabbed a mug, handed it to her, and pointed her towards the coffee maker.

Brad didn’t look up. “Finally, someone here understands that.”

“I hate this,” Ilya muttered.

Rose ignored him entirely, already moving deeper into the house as she adjusted the garment bags with careful precision. “Boys,” she said, her tone sharp but not unkind, “if either of you so much as touch these before I give permission, I will revoke your wedding privileges.”

“You can’t revoke our wedding privileges,” Shane said. “We’re the grooms.”

Rose didn't even pause. "Try me."

There was enough threat in those two words that Shane didn't bother arguing. He went back to sipping his coffee.

The door opened again before anyone could settle, and this time the shift was quieter but no less significant. Yuna Hollander stepped inside with her usual composed presence, her attention moving quickly through the room as though she were cataloguing everything at once. Beside her, Luca Haas followed more carefully, arms full of bundled stems and small wrapped groupings that he handled with instinctive care.

"We're on time," Yuna said, glancing briefly at her watch before lifting her gaze fully. "Good."

Brad finally looked up.

For the first time since he'd arrived, he paused.

"Oh," he said. "You're actually early."

"I'm punctual," Yuna corrected.

Shane shifted slightly, leaning back against the counter as he glanced toward Ilya.

"Oh no," he said under his breath.

"This will be a problem," Ilya replied, entirely serious.

It was, of course. Not loudly, not dramatically, but within moments, Brad had turned the clipboard toward her, and Yuna had stepped in beside him, the two of them settling into a conversation that was calm in tone and utterly immovable in substance. They spoke over the kitchen island like two people accustomed to being right, neither raising their voice, neither interrupting, but neither conceding ground.

"The natural light falls off here," Brad was saying, tapping the page with the back of his pen. "If we don't account for that, you lose warmth in the back half of the ceremony. This is outside, we need to plan for that shift."

"The lighting company has already mapped the space," Yuna replied evenly. "They've accounted for seasonal angles."

"They've accounted for average conditions," Brad said. "We are not planning for average."

Yuna looked at him sharply. Brad held her gaze like it wasn't even close to intimidating. The room quieted—not completely, but enough that the shift was noticeable.

After a moment, Yuna exhaled. "...fine," she said. "You're right."

Shane blinked. "I'm sorry," he said. "What just happened?"

“I am right,” Brad replied, already moving on.

“I hate that too,” Ilya muttered, though there was something almost impressed beneath it.

Across the room, Luca had already slipped into his own quiet orbit. He didn’t come with full arrangements—not yet—but with careful bundles, loose stems, and a shallow box lined with labeled samples. There were colour swatches tucked between them, ribbon lengths, and a folded sheet with quick sketches that looked more functional than decorative. Next to him was a detailed map of the backyard.

He set everything down with deliberate care, moving pieces into place as though he were building something only he could fully see. A stem shifted here, another turned slightly to catch the light differently. He paused often, checking how one tone sat against another, how a softer colour changed when it rested beside something deeper.

Rose drifted over, watching for a moment before stepping closer, her expression shifting into something more focused.

“Oh,” she said softly. “You’re not just helping. You’re building it from scratch.”

Luca glanced up, a little startled by the attention, before offering a small, almost shy smile. “Just making sure it fits,” he said. “Brad has a very specific plan.”

“It does,” she replied immediately. Then, after a beat, “It’s going to be beautiful.”

Luca dipped his head, blushing as he returned to his work with a quiet confidence that hadn’t been there a moment before. Still at the counter, Yuna spoke again without looking up. “Final arrangements arrive tomorrow morning. Today is confirmation. If anything feels off now, this is when we fix it.”

Brad hummed as he stepped over to inspect the layout. “Nothing feels off,” he said. Then, after a pause, “Which is suspicious, but I’ll accept it. Good work, rook.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Luca said dryly.

“You should,” Brad replied.

Shane and Ilya had retreated to the couch in the living room to observe all the chaos around them when a soft throat clearing got their attention.

“Hey boys.”

The voice didn’t cut through the room so much as slip into it. Shane looked up first, then followed the line of attention to where Ilya had already turned, spotting his dad leaning against the wall. His posture was easy, but his expression carried something else. He looked at Ilya.

“Can I steal you for a minute?” he asked.

Ilya didn’t hesitate. “Of course.”

They stepped out together, the shift subtle but unmistakable as the door closed behind them, taking a small portion of the noise with it.

Shane watched them go, a soft, stupid smile on his face. Rose nudged him gently.

“Come here,” she said.

“That sounds dangerous,” he replied, but let her haul him back to his feet anyway.

“It is,” she said brightly. “Now go try this on since he can’t see you at the moment.”

He obeyed, mostly because she looked like she would enforce it otherwise, and changed into the suit that felt so soft and breathable he actually doubted it was a suit at all. He let her move around him, adjusting the lapel, smoothing fabric that didn’t need smoothing, and inspecting him from all angles.

“You okay?” she asked after a moment, quieter now.

The shift in her tone caught him off guard.

“Yeah,” he said. “I think so.”

She studied him briefly, then nodded once as a smile spread across her face.

“Good,” she said. “Now tell me—are you emotionally prepared to be married to a very intense Russian man for the rest of your life?”

Shane laughed softly. “I’ve had some practice.”

“Not like this,” she said. “This is permanent.”

“Yeah,” he said, just as quietly. “That’s kind of the point to all this, isn’t it?”

Something in her expression softened.

“Okay,” she said. “We’re best friends now.”

Shane blinked. “That was fast.”

“I don’t make bad decisions,” she said. Then, with a small grin, “Except for the ones I absolutely do, but this isn’t one of them.”

He smiled back, easy and real.

“Okay,” he said with a laugh. “Best friends it is.”

The office settled into a quieter rhythm the moment the door closed behind them, the noise from the kitchen softening into something distant and warm—laughter, voices overlapping, the steady hum of people moving through a space that was alive and full. It carried through

the walls just enough to remind them that everything was continuing, that joy was happening a few feet away.

Ilya leaned back against the wall, shoulders loose, posture open in a way it rarely was outside of the ice or Shane's presence. He didn't fill the silence. He didn't press for words. He gave David the space to find his way through it, watching him with that steady, attentive focus that had always defined him—present, unflinching, ready for whatever came next.

David hesitated. Not dramatically, but in a small human way that mattered—the shift of his weight, the way his hand hovered at his side before curling loosely into his palm, the breath that caught halfway to a laugh and didn't quite make it there. When he finally spoke, it wasn't with the polished confidence Yuna and Shane carried so easily in other spaces. It was quieter. Realer.

"I had something planned," he admitted, glancing at the door for a moment before returning to Ilya. "Something that made sense when I was thinking about it earlier."

There was a faint, almost self-conscious edge to the words, like he already knew that version of this conversation wasn't going to survive contact with reality.

Ilya's mouth curved slightly, the smallest hint of warmth threading through his expression. "That sounds ambitious."

David huffed a breath that edged into a smile, though it didn't quite settle. "Yeah," he said. "That's one word for it."

He drew in a deeper breath, slower this time, like he was bracing himself—not for conflict, not for resistance, but for the weight of what he needed to say.

"You told us," he said finally, his voice steadying as he committed to it. "About the two of you. You sat at our table and said it out loud, like it was something you were still getting used to hearing yourselves. And Shane kept looking at you like he was waiting for something to go wrong, like maybe the room would shift under his feet if he stayed still too long."

The memory lingered between them, quiet and vivid.

"And it didn't," David said. "Nothing shifted. You stayed. You came back the next week. And the week after that. You learned where everything was in the kitchen before I realized you were doing it. You argued about nothing, and then you showed up again like it had never mattered. The perfect brat of a son-in-law."

His mouth softened into something warmer, more certain. "It became normal," he said. "You became normal."

Ilya didn't interrupt, but something in his posture eased, something almost imperceptible loosening in his shoulders as he listened.

"We knew you loved him," David went on. "That part was never in question. Not for a second." He paused there, letting the truth of it settle fully. "I just didn't understand how

much.”

David’s gaze dropped briefly, his hand coming up to the back of his neck as if grounding himself in the memory before lifting again.

“I thought I had the full picture,” he admitted. “I’d seen the way you looked at him, the way you paid attention when he spoke, the way you stayed close without making it a performance. I thought... yeah, I know what this is. I know what I’m seeing.”

A faint shake of his head followed, not dismissive, just honest. “But I didn’t,” he said. “And then the crash happened.”

Ilya’s stillness sharpened, the memory hitting somewhere deep and immediate.

David didn’t look away. “I remember that hallway,” he said, his voice quieter now, closer to the moment itself. “The way everything felt like it was moving too fast and not at all at the same time. The way nobody had answers yet, but everyone was already bracing for them.”

He swallowed, the image clearly intact. “And I remember seeing you before I even stepped into the room. I saw you through the doorway. I saw you sitting there with him like the rest of the world didn’t exist. Like there was no version of anything where you weren’t exactly where you were.”

Ilya’s jaw tightened slightly, tears in his eyes.

“You weren’t pacing,” David said. “You weren’t asking questions. You weren’t trying to fix anything. You were just holding his hand. And it wasn’t... careful, it wasn’t polite. It wasn’t something you were doing because anyone was watching.” His voice softened further. “It was like letting go wasn’t even a possibility.”

The silence that followed wasn’t empty, as the tears started to slip down Ilya’s face.

“I watched you try to keep it together,” David went on. “For him. For us. For anyone who walked into that room. Like if you stayed steady, maybe everything else would hold. And then I watched you lose that fight.” He paused again, his eyes holding tears now. “I saw you cry over him.”

The truth of it sat between them, unfiltered and unsoftened.

“Not quietly. Not controlled. Not something you could pull back once it started. Just completely. And that’s when I understood.”

Ilya’s breathing had changed now, subtle but undeniable.

“That’s when I understood,” David said, his voice steady even as the emotion beneath it deepened. “Not just that you loved him. I already knew that.” He shook his head slightly. “But just how far that love went. How much of you was already wrapped up in it. How much of you wasn’t going to survive losing him.”

He wiped the tears off his own face. "I've never seen anything like that," he admitted. "That kind of certainty. That kind of... there's no version of this where I walk away from him, no matter what happens next."

Ilya lowered his head, trying to hold back the rush of emotions.

"And then everything went public," David continued, his voice firming again. "The press, the questions, the way people decided they had a right to your lives, to your answers, to your pain."

There was something sharper in him now, protective in a way that didn't need to be raised to be felt.

"I watched you stand there in front of all of it," he said. "And you didn't hesitate. You didn't soften it. You didn't hide."

He reached over and lifted Ilya's chin, his gaze held steady. "You just said it. You said you loved him like it was the simplest truth in the world. And after what I'd seen in that hospital room, I knew exactly what that meant."

He took another breath, keeping his eyes on Ilya's, making sure he was listening.

"All I've ever wanted for him," David said after a moment, quieter now, "was for someone to love him like that. Not just for the player, or the name, or the version of him that people build up and tear down, depending on the day. I wanted someone to love him for him. The one who carries too much, who questions everything. The one who doesn't always believe he gets to keep the good things when they show up."

Ilya's gaze didn't waver, but something in it had opened, something unguarded in a way it rarely was.

"And I see you love that version of him," David continued. "Every part of him. Not just the easy ones. Not just the parts that make sense." His voice caught, but he didn't stop. "I saw it in that hospital room. I saw it when everything went public. I've seen it every time since when it would have been easier to step back, and you didn't."

Another breath.

"And I saw it last night." This time, when he smiled, it stayed, softer but fuller. "Watching you both out there," he said. "Watching you win that together. Watching the way you found each other like nothing else mattered..."

He shook his head, emotion finally overtaking the edges of his voice.

"I have never been prouder," he said quietly, "of either of you. My boys. Yuna and I could only have one child. I was content with that. Until you."

The words settled.

And then, softer still, but unshakable—

“And now I have two sons.”

David let out a breath like something inside him had finally been allowed to land. “I needed you to hear that,” he said. “That I see you. That I know what you are to him. What you’ve given him. And I need you to know that before there was any sort of ceremony or piece of paper. You are already family, Ilya. And we are blessed because of it.”

He stepped forward then, not with certainty, not with practiced ease, but with intention. His arms lifted slightly—awkward, open, an offering more than a gesture. And Ilya didn’t hesitate. He crossed the space between them in a single step, and when he folded into him, it wasn’t controlled. It wasn’t measured. It was immediate, solid, like something that had been held together through sheer force finally gave way under the weight of being seen.

David’s arms came around him without thinking, one hand firm between his shoulders, the other cradling the back of his neck, anchoring him there.

For a moment, Ilya tried to hold back the emotions again, but he couldn’t. The breath that left him wasn’t steady/ It broke against David’s shoulder, uneven and raw, and his grip tightened as something deeper surfaced. Something he had carried though fear, through scrutiny, through the constant tension of holding on to something that felt too important to lose.

He didn’t fall apart. But he let go. Just enough for it to hurt in the right way.

David didn’t speak or try to fix anything. He just held him, steady and certain, like there was nowhere else he needed to be and he had no plans on going anywhere anyway. And for the first time in longer than he cared to remember, Ilya let himself feel exactly what that meant.

Not conditional. Not temporary. Not something he had to prove or protect or brace himself to lose. He was part of it, he was wanted, he was loved. He was family.

He stayed there longer than he meant to, breathing unevenly, letting that truth settle into something real before he finally pulled back just enough to breathe again.

David didn’t let go right away. His hand lingered at the back of Ilya’s neck for a second longer before falling away.

They looked at each other, something quieter and steadier now sitting between them, something that didn’t need words to hold.

From the kitchen, laughter rose again, bright and alive, pulling them gently back into the world waiting for them.

But something had shifted in his heart, and settled there bright and shiny and steady.

And he got to keep it.

The quiet between them didn’t break so much as soften, the edges of it easing as the world outside the office began to press gently back in. The sound of laughter seemed clearer now,

closer, the rhythm of voices and movement threading its way back into the space they'd stepped out of.

David was the one who shifted first, not pulling away abruptly, just enough to let the moment settle into something that could be carried instead of held. His hand lingered briefly where it had been at the back of Ilya's neck before falling away, his expression steady in a way that said everything that needed to be said had already landed.

Then David's phone buzzed. It wasn't loud, just a soft, insistent vibration in his pocket, but it cut cleanly through the quiet. He glanced down, pulling it out more out of habit than urgency, his thumb brushing the screen as he read.

A small, helpless smile broke across his face almost immediately. "Well," he said, the word warm with quiet amusement as he angled the phone slightly, not quite showing it yet. "That didn't take long."

Ilya blinked, the emotional haze still sitting heavy but no longer overwhelming, his breath finally beginning to even out. "What?"

David turned the screen toward him just enough to share it.

Shane:

*have you seen my fiancé or did you kidnap him
rose and svetlana are here and apparently have "plans"
if you don't return him in the next five minutes i'm being told the wedding is off and honestly i
think they might mean it*

Ilya stared at the screen for half a second. Then he laughed.

"...they would not cancel the wedding," he said, voice still a little rough but threaded through now with something lighter.

David snorted under his breath. "How sure of that are you right now?"

Another buzz. David glanced down again.

Shane:

*also i miss him which feels unfair since he was literally just here
so this is now a personal problem as well as a logistical one
please return him. Brad is talking about something I don't want to try and understand that
involves texture.*

The smile that broke across Ilya's face this time was real, unguarded in a way that hadn't been there even minutes ago, something soft and certain settling into place where everything had been raw. David watched it happen, something quiet and satisfied in his expression, like he'd been waiting for exactly that.

"You'd best get out there, son. A man shouldn't keep his fiancé waiting. Or leave him alone with his best friend and her wife, whom he only met a few weeks ago."

Ilya laughed again as he scrubbed a hand briefly over his face, grounding himself in the present again. When he dropped it, there was still emotion there—there would be for a while—but it no longer felt like something he had to hold back. He took a deep breath.

“Come on,” David added after a moment, tipping his head toward the door. “Let’s go save your wedding.”

Ilya shook his head faintly, but he pushed off the wall, following him without hesitation.

When the door opened, the noise of the house rushed back in fully—voices, laughter, movement—and in the middle of it all, Shane turned immediately. Like he’d sensed him. Like he’d been waiting.

His eyes landed on Ilya first, sharp and searching for half a second, taking in everything that mattered without needing to ask for it. And then, just as quickly, it softened, something in him easing as he stepped forward without thinking and slid an arm around his waist.

“There you are,” he said, the words quiet but immediate, like the rest of the room didn’t exist for that moment.

Ilya didn’t answer right away. He let himself stay there for a second, in the simple, instinctive way Shane reached for him, before leaning in and pressing a light kiss to his cheek.

“Okay, sweetheart,” he murmured, voice low and steady now, “which one of these monsters is bullying you the day before our wedding?”

Shane huffed a breath that turned into a quiet laugh, his grip tightening just slightly at Ilya’s side as he angled his head toward the kitchen. “All of them,” he said. “Collectively. I think they’ve unionized.”

From somewhere deeper in the house, Brad’s voice cut through everything. “I heard that, and yes, we have.”

Rose followed it immediately. “You don’t get to have opinions today, Hollander, you get to be dressed.”

“I am dressed,” Shane called back.

“That is not what I meant,” she returned, already moving toward them with purpose.

Svetlana followed at a more measured pace, her expression composed, though the faintest hint of amusement sat just at the edge of it. “We have a timeline,” she added calmly. “You are currently behind it.”

“I just got my kidnapped fiancé back,” Shane protested, gesturing loosely at David.

David held up both hands. “I returned him on time. This is not my fault.”

“Barely,” Shane shot back, though there was no heat in it, just warmth threaded through everything now.

The rest of the afternoon unfolded the way things had a habit of doing around them lately—fast, loud, and somehow still held together by something stronger than the chaos it looked like on the surface.

Rose moved through the space with sharp focus, directing, adjusting, stepping in and out of conversations with the kind of certainty that made it clear she had already planned three steps ahead of everyone else. Svetlana anchored it, quieter but no less precise, occasionally stepping in with a single comment that shifted the entire direction of things without raising her voice.

Yuna and Brad disappeared into a corner at one point with a notebook and a phone and re-emerged twenty minutes later, having completely rearranged something about lighting placement that neither Shane nor Ilya understood, but both were informed was now “correct.”

Luca had been there through all of it, steady and attentive, moving in and out of conversations without interrupting them, adjusting small details with the kind of quiet care that made it clear he’d been thinking about this long before today. It was only when the room shifted into something louder—Brad excitedly yelling, Svetlana countering, voices overlapping—that Shane noticed him slip away.

Just a quiet movement at the edge of the room, a glance at his phone and a low, half-muttered, “just need to confirm something with the florist,” before he was already heading for the door. Shane watched him go for a second, something soft pulling at the corner of his mouth.

“He’s been doing that all day,” he said quietly.

Ilya followed his gaze, his expression thoughtful in that steady, observant way of his.

“He cares,” he said simply. “He’s a good kid.”

Shane huffed a breath that felt suspiciously close to something heavier, something warmer. “Yeah,” he said. “He does. And he is.”

By the time they were finally ushered out the door and into a waiting car, the shift from noise to quiet came almost as a relief. The air outside felt cooler, steadier; the energy that had been swirling around all day finally faded away just a little.

Shane leaned back into the seat as the door closed, exhaling slowly, the weight of the day catching up to him all at once. Ilya reached for his hand without thinking, his thumb brushing once across Shane’s knuckles like it belonged there.

“You are very quiet,” he murmured.

Shane glanced at him, something soft and slightly overwhelmed still sitting just under the surface. “Just thinking.”

“That is dangerous,” Ilya said with a sparkle in his eyes.

Shane huffed a quiet laugh. “Yeah. I’ve been told. By you, actually.”

The rehearsal dinner didn't follow a straight line. It unfolded the way everything else had—layered, overlapping, full of moments that didn't wait their turn before becoming something that mattered.

There were speeches, some planned, some absolutely not. Wyatt started something that was meant to be a joke and ended somewhere far more sincere than he'd intended. Troy and Harris followed it with something shorter, sharper, but no less meaningful. Luca spoke briefly, steady despite the way his hands tightened slightly at the edge of the table, and said something about family that stayed long after he sat down.

Rose cried. Svetlana didn't, but her hand didn't leave Rose's once.

Yuna spoke last out of the ones who had clearly planned to, her voice calm and measured as always, but softer now, something deeper threading through it that Shane felt more than heard.

Conversations broke apart and reformed. Teammates moved between tables, drifting toward family, toward friends, toward whoever pulled them into the next story. Laughter rose and carried, weaving through everything without asking permission.

At one point, Shane caught sight of Sid across the room, leaning slightly closer to someone seated beside him, his attention narrowed in a way that didn't invite interruption. There was something different there—quieter, more contained—and Shane looked away before it could turn into anything he'd need to understand tonight.

Time moved anyway.

Too fast.

Or maybe not fast enough.

By the time the night began to wind down, it did so in pieces. People lingered. Conversations stretched. No one seemed particularly interested in being the first to leave. Eventually, someone—Yuna, almost certainly—made the decision for them.

"You're done," she said, appearing at Shane's side with the kind of calm authority that didn't invite argument. "Both of you. Out."

Shane blinked. "We're not—"

"You are," she said. "And you're going to a hotel, and you're going to sleep, and you're going to show up tomorrow without looking like you've been run over by your own wedding."

Ilya didn't argue, just collected their coats and things and reached for Shane's hand.

"See?" Yuna added, glancing at Shane. "One of you understands instructions."

“This feels like a betrayal of some kind,” Shane muttered, even as he stood.

“Get used to it,” Brad called from somewhere behind them. “Marriage is full of those.”

That earned a chorus of protests and at least one thrown napkin. Probably from Katrina.

They were ushered out not long after, pulled through hugs and goodbyes and last-minute instructions that Shane was fairly certain he wouldn’t remember in the morning. The air outside felt cooler, quieter, the shift from the warmth of the room settling something in his chest he hadn’t realized had been tight.

For a moment, they stood there. Shane exhaled slowly, glancing over at Ilya, something soft and steady settling into place as he did.

“Tomorrow,” he said.

Ilya looked back at him, just as calm, just as certain.

“Tomorrow,” he agreed. “And then for the rest of our lives.”

Morning arrived with a rush of tangled emotions. Not with urgency or noise, but with warmth—sunlight spilling clean and bright through the windows, catching on quiet things and turning them soft. It was one of those rare spring days that felt almost deliberate, like spring in Canada had decided, just this once, to behave. The sky stretched clear and endless, the air warm without weight, a breeze moving just enough to stir the edges of the world without disturbing it.

By the time they were separated—they both protested and were ignored entirely—it was already clear that everything outside was going to be perfect.

Brad had made sure of that in a way that actually surprised and touched Shane. The backyard had been transformed, but not in a way that erased it. It still felt like a place people lived in, still carried the shape of something real, only now it had been softened into something intentional. Low tables dotted the lawn, surrounded by layered seating—bamboo and cotton blend blankets, padded and inviting, in deep burgundy and cream with touches of black woven through. Nothing was rigid. Nothing felt staged.

It felt like something you could settle into.

Luca’s work held the center of it all. The arch rose at the far end of the space, curved and alive with eucalyptus and roses woven together so seamlessly it looked like it had grown there. White and red blooms threaded through the greenery in careful balance, soft against the deeper tones, with the occasional black rose tucked in—not overwhelming, just enough to ground it, to anchor it in something that belonged to them.

Guests arrived in waves, the space filling not with noise so much as presence. Teammates, family, friends—people who had walked through different parts of this story and somehow all ended up here at the same time.

Hayden stood off to the side with Jackie, steady as ever, their kids already moving at the edges of things, curious and bright in a way that made everything feel more real. The Centaurs filled in around them, familiar and loud and warm. The captains gathered naturally, not formally—Scott and Kip, Nate, Connor, Carey—all slipping into the same orbit without needing to think about it.

There was a subtle shift near the entrance then, not loud or distracting but attention catching in a way that felt instinctive. Sid stepped into the yard, with Catherine on his arm. Sid glanced down at her, something softer than his usual composure slipping through for half a second, and she answered it with the smallest shift of her expression—private, amused, entirely unconcerned with anyone else noticing.

The moment passed, but Shane didn't miss the entirely too self-satisfied look on Brad's face as he nodded at Sid and Catherine, then turned and said something in Ilya's ear.

Shane didn't remember the exact moment he stepped forward. Later, he would remember pieces. The warmth of the sun on his shoulders. The way the breeze moved through the arch, stirring the eucalyptus just enough to make it feel alive. The sound of voices softening as attention shifted.

He remembered Hayden at his side, a steady hand landed on his shoulder, grounding, familiar.

"You ready?" Hayden asked, voice low, steady in the way that made it feel like a real question.

Shane let out a breath that wasn't entirely even. "Yeah."

Hayden studied him for half a second, then huffed quietly. "Good. Even if you're far too good for him."

And then, with a small, firm shove, "Go to your man."

Shane stumbled forward a step, laughing under his breath as he caught himself, the movement breaking whatever tension had been trying to build.

And then he looked at Ilya. Standing beneath the arch, the sunlight catching in his hair, picking out the darker strands and turning the edges of it warm. Brad stood at his side, composed and perfectly still for the first time ever, but there was no mistaking the way his posture angled just slightly toward Ilya—present, solid, exactly where he was meant to be.

Ilya's gaze found him immediately, steady and certain, like it always had been. No hesitation. No question. And then he smiled.

Shane's breath caught, just slightly, as he moved toward him, each step grounding him further into something real, something that no longer felt fragile. He's pretty sure his feet didn't touch the ground when he stepped up to him.

Brad shifted just enough to make space, his expression doing something dangerously close to soft before he masked it.

“Took you long enough,” he muttered with a smile. “I thought you were just going to keep staring.”

Ilya didn’t look away from Shane. “Brad? Shut up.”

Hayden stepped into place beside Shane, the movement easy, natural, like he had always been meant to stand there. He nodded at Ilya and patted Shane on the shoulder.

The ceremony was simple. The words spoken were simple. Clear. Intentional. They repeated what they should, held hands when they should, and when it came time for the vows, Shane didn’t even see anyone else with them.

“I didn’t think this was something I was allowed to have. Not like this. Not openly. Not in a way that felt real. I thought there was something wrong with me, something broken and I was just going to be alone.” He took a breath. “And then you showed up. You were 17, brash, cocky, and everything I never knew I needed – and everything I never knew I would want. And you promptly made it complicated.”

There were a few laughs at that. His hand tightened slightly in Ilya’s.

“We danced around our feelings for a long time. But when we got there, you never made me doubt. You stayed when it was easy. You stayed when it wasn’t. You stayed when everything around us made it clear it would be easier not to. And you’re still here.” He smiled.

“I don’t need anything more than that. Just you, Ilya. Just this. My husband. My partner. For the rest of my life.”

Ilya’s expression didn’t shift much, but his eyes did. He took a deep breath.

“You are my home,” he said softly. “I knew it before I understood it. Before I had the words for it. I knew it when you chose me without hesitation.”

His voice remained steady, but there was depth in it now, something that didn’t waver. “I will not leave you. Not when it is easy. Not when it is hard. Not when the world tries to take something from us. I choose you, Shane.”

His voice faltered just a little, emotion bleeding through and causing his accent to thicken. “I choose you,” he said. “Always. My husband. My heart. For the rest of my life.”

There were tears. Now. From both of them. From Rose, openly. Wyatt, doing a terrible job pretending he wasn’t affected. Brad staring very intently at a fixed point somewhere over Shane’s shoulder and sniffing. Hayden not even trying to hide it.

I now pronounce you, husband and husband. You may kiss your groom.

The kiss was soft. Certain. Entirely theirs. Pretty sure it was Ilya who slipped him the tongue, but he couldn’t be certain.

The crowd cheered anyway, bright and immediate, laughter and applause following close behind. The sound of it rising and carrying without restraint. It didn't feel like a spectacle; it just felt wholesome and celebratory.

The shift into evening came slowly, naturally, the light softening into gold as the sun dipped. Brad's string lights flickered on overhead, warm and steady, casting everything in a glow that felt intentional without being forced. Electric candles lined the tables, their light soft and constant.

Shane leaned on Ilya's shoulder as they chatted with their guests, when the opening notes of *Nothing Else Matters* began to carry through the space.

Shane huffed a quiet breath, something like a laugh slipping through. "Of course it's this."

"You like it," Ilya murmured, pulling him to his feet and holding him in his arms.

"I do."

They moved together easily, no performance, no hesitation—just the quiet understanding of where the other would be, the rhythm settling around them instead of pulling them into it.

Around them, people watched. Some joined. Some stayed back.

The night stretched around them in that easy, unhurried way that only happens when no one is ready for it to end. Laughter rose and fell in soft waves, music drifting from one song into the next without anyone really noticing the transition, the whole space held together by warmth—by people lingering just a little longer at tables, by conversations that kept finding new directions instead of stopping, by the quiet understanding that this was something worth staying in.

It didn't end so much as soften.

The edges blurred gently, the energy settling into something looser, more intimate, as the sky deepened and the lights overhead took over completely. The glow from Brad's careful planning wrapped around everything, steady and warm, turning the space into something that felt less like an event and more like a memory already forming.

At some point, without needing to say it out loud, Shane and Ilya shifted to the edges of things. The world around them continued exactly as it should, full and bright and alive, but something about the moment had already begun to narrow, to fold inward into something that belonged just to them. So when they finally slipped away, it wasn't an announcement.

It wasn't even a decision that needed to be made. It was just the natural next step—quiet, unspoken, inevitable. They moved through the space the same way they always had, easy and familiar, passing through conversation and laughter without disrupting either, their presence blending so seamlessly into the flow that no one marked the moment they were no longer there.

By the time the space behind them settled again, it was as though nothing had changed.

Except they were gone.

The cottage waited the way it always had—unchanged, familiar, holding itself steady at the edge of the water like it had all the time in the world.

Morning came slowly there, not with urgency or noise, but with light easing its way across the lake, soft at first, then brighter by degrees as the sun began to rise. The sky shifted through colour in quiet layers, reflected in the still surface below, the water barely moving except for the smallest ripples brushing against the dock.

They were already outside when it started.

Wrapped in a blanket that had clearly been meant for one of them and had been claimed, without discussion, by both. Coffee sat warm in their hands, the quiet between them easy in a way that didn't need to be filled. Shane sat with one knee drawn up, turned just slightly toward Ilya without thinking about it, like his body had already decided where it belonged. The events of the day before lingered at the edges of him—not overwhelming, not sharp, just present in a way that felt real. The ceremony, the voices, the feeling of standing there and meaning every word, all of it settled into something steady rather than something that needed to be held onto.

He let out a slow breath, watching it drift in the cooler morning air before it disappeared. “We did it,” he said quietly.

Ilya turned his head just enough to look at him, something warm and certain in his expression, something that had deepened overnight instead of fading. “Yes,” he said. “We did.”

The silence that followed stretched out comfortably between them, held in place by the quiet rhythm of the water and the gradual rise of the sun. There was no rush to move through it, no sense that anything needed to come next. Shane shifted a little closer, his shoulder brushing Ilya's, the contact instinctive and grounding, the blanket pulling tighter around them as it settled over both their laps.

Ilya set his coffee aside and reached for Shane's hand, his fingers threading through his with the same quiet certainty he had carried through everything, the kind that didn't falter when the rest of the world did. He held on, steady and present, like there had never been another option.

The lake moved gently beneath them as the light shifted across its surface, turning everything it touched into something brighter, something new. Behind them, the cottage stood still and familiar, and ahead of them the day stretched open without pressure or expectation, just possibility. The words didn't need to be spoken aloud to exist between them—husbands, champions, teammates—woven into everything they had already built and everything that would come next.

For the first time in a long time, nothing felt fragile. Nothing felt like it was waiting to be taken away. There was no edge to brace against, no moment they had to prepare to lose, only the quiet certainty of what they had chosen and what had chosen them in return.

Just this.

Just them.

And everything that was still to come.

Chapter End Notes

And that's the end. Or at least... the kind of ending that feels like a beginning.

I always knew this particular story would end here—not with the win, not even with the wedding, but with the quiet after. The moment where everything finally settles and nothing is about to be taken away. Where they get to sit in it and realize: this is ours now.

That's what this story has been building toward the whole time. Not just love—but love that survives everything thrown at it.

Not just success—but success that doesn't cost them who they are.

Not just being together—but getting to stay that way.

I'm not saying goodbye to them or this particular universe (I don't think I'm capable of that, honestly). There's absolutely room for more—epilogues, one-shots, moments we didn't get to see yet. And knowing me... I will probably be back in this universe sooner rather than later.

But for now, this is where we leave them:

happily married

Stanley Cup champions

still a problem for the rest of the league

and finally, finally allowed to keep everything they fought for

Thank you for reading. Thank you for caring. Thank you for yelling at me in the comments and loving these versions of them as much as I do. I hope you'll stick with me in my other stories, but if not thank you for being here. AND you can find me on Threads (@stacedemon) if you want to yell at me there too - respectfully, of course

Until the next one,

SD

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