cinnamon in my teeth

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/81822136.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV), Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationships:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov, Shane Hollander & Hayden Pike, Shane Hollander & Hayden Pike & Jackie Pike, Shane Hollander & Rose Landry, Ilya Rozanov & Svetlana Vetrova
Characters:	Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov, Hayden Pike, Jackie Pike, Rose Landry, Yuna Hollander
Additional Tags:	Russian Mafia, Bratva Ilya Rozanov, College | University Student Shane Hollander, Protective Ilya Rozanov, Anxious Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov is Obsessed With Shane Hollander, Shane Hollander is a Mess, Hurt/Comfort, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Angst with a Happy Ending, Sugar Daddy Ilya Rozanov, Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander, Shane Hollander Loves Ilya Rozanov, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Minor Violence, Light Dom/sub, Dom Ilya Rozanov, Sub Shane Hollander, Masturbation, Author hates AI, Under-negotiated Kink, Shane Hollander & Rose Landry Friendship
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-03-25 Completed: 2026-08-24 Words: 65,745 Chapters: 15/15

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by JeanElaineGrey

Summary

Grad student Shane starts working the late night shift at a 24 hr convenience store... smack in the middle of Russian mob territory. Ilya notices him.

Notes

I haven't written in AGES but saw a story about mafia Ilya and I can't get him and normie Shane out of my head.

Just a note to make it super clear -
I never use AI for any part of my writing. Not for ideas, not for grammar help, not for editing, nothing. I hate AI. Get it out of fandom spaces.
Also, I'm going to try to just note when characters are speaking in Russian. If there's Russian in the text, it's google translated so I apologise for the inaccuracies!

Chapter 1

Everyone who found out about Shane's job usually gave him a look. A "you're crazy" look. A "I could not deal with that nonsense" look. A "when are you gonna sleep though?" look. But really, working the late-night shift at the dinky 7/11 was boring, easy. A perfect time to get reading for class done. Sure, occasionally some drunk idiot came in and threw a fit over their particular brand of cigarette being out of stock. And yeah, on more than one occasion, Shane had to grab the bat from behind the counter to run some losers off. He'd only been held up once since he started a few weeks back, and the guy didn't even have a gun (Shane found out after the guy tripped out the door and a Pez dispenser popped out of his pocket.)

Shane knew that it wasn't the best neighborhood – smack in the middle of Brighton Beach. He'd seen plenty of weirdness outside the door of the shop, but whatever went on out there was frankly none of his business.

He'd seen the fancy cars with their dark tinted windows; men in suits stepping in to them after leaving innocuous looking restaurants or storefronts. But… that was none of his business. Shane *knew*. He knew that the Russian restaurant four blocks down never had real customers but had been open for decades. He knew that the laundromat on 14th was perpetually closed yet somehow never shut down. He could do the math. But he also knew that none of the dudes in suits ever bothered him. Never caused trouble when they popped in and bought dinky paper cups of bad coffee at 2am. So, Shane Hollander simply did not care that he worked in the dead center of what was no doubt Bratva territory.

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"Dude, you're falling asleep into your latte," Hayden's voice was a harsh whisper.

"No, I'm up. Sorry."

"When are you going to quit your weird ass job? It's barely been a semester, and it's obviously murdering your sleep schedule."

"No, what's murdering my sleep schedule is coming to this coffee shop with you every day after practice so you can pretend to not remember the pretty barista's name *instead* of getting a couple more hours of sleep."

Hayden immediately glanced over his shoulder at the petit blonde behind the counter before shushing Shane.

"Will you just ask her out already? It's getting pathetic, Hayd,"

"She's just so out of my league, you don't get it!"

"I don't get it?"

“No, you and your Bambi eyes and your jawline don’t get it.”

“Hayd, are you trying to ask *me* out?”

“Ugh, no, I just. You could get any guy you wanted and just choose not to – ”

“Yeah, because I have so much time for that.”

“Ok, maybe you could get any guy you wanted if you didn’t work at some shit ass convenience store all night.”

“Maybe I’m just meant to marry creepy Denis. He came in to ask for candy buttons again last night. Like it’s a 1950s soda shop. I don’t think he knows what year it actually is.”

“That’s because he’s not a creepy regular. He’s a time traveler. We just have to figure out his mission and then we can help him.”

“I’m not letting you hang out while I’m working anymore. You’ve got to stop coming up with backstories for the regulars. Creepy Denis literally just wants candy and cigarettes. That is his only mission.”

Shane was glad to laugh and start off on another story about the regulars at the store, but he knew Hayden could be right that working there was killing Shane’s sleep schedule. But grad school was expensive and NYU didn’t offer sports scholarships. He could’ve gone to a D1 school and maybe been better off. Shane didn’t want to admit it to anyone – not to Hayden, certainly not to his mom back in Longueuil – but he’d seen what injury and ultimately washing out of college sports had done to his dad. He wanted to be somewhere where he could still play hockey. He could even go see the Rangers from time to time. He just didn’t want to pin his entire future on the gamble that his body wouldn’t betray him before he turned 30. Really, maybe it was better this way – it was less pressure to be playing low level hockey as a grad student and focusing on school. It was better for him. It let him still love hockey.

So, NYU it was. And he told himself that even if he didn’t play hockey professionally, he was still on a path to be in sports in some way. He’d thought about going somewhere else after he’d finished his undergrad degree in biology, but the physical therapy faculty at NYU had ties with the athletic training staff at the Rangers. It seemed like a no brainer to stay there and work those connections. It would pay off. Shane worked too hard for it not to pay off.

“Did you hear a word I said, dude?”

“Sorry, Hayd. You’re probably right, I need more sleep. I’m gonna run and catch a couple hours before I have to go to work.”

“You’re insane, Hollander. But I’ll see you at practice tomorrow.”

He saw Hayden going up to the counter as Shane went for the door, and he tossed up a silent prayer that Hayden would find the courage to ask the girl out finally so he could stop hearing his pining.

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Shane knew the regulars. Knew creepy Denis who wanted outdated candy and weird cigarettes. Knew Margie who came in every night to buy the largest bottle of Voss water that the cooler held (it was for her ancient poodle). Knew which regulars were harmless and which ones needed him to be a little harsher. He didn't know who the guy he'd seen for the last couple weeks was. The guy was begging for someone to notice him – hanging out underneath the metal stairs just across the sidewalk from his front door that led up to the Brighton Beach station. The guy kept poking his head out from the shadow of the steps, glancing around, giving away that he didn't want anyone to notice him.

But Shane had.

The guy had never come in, had never given him any trouble. But it was still weird.

Shane knew that he was dealing. It wasn't hard to spot. There were plenty of dealers around – all of them had come in at one point or another, and none of them had bothered Shane so he left them alone. But this one was new, and he was nervous. And Shane knew that nervous people doing something they weren't supposed to meant trouble.

It had been about an hour since the guy slunk from below the stairs, heading east toward who knows what, when the chime on the door let out its pathetic jingling noise.

Shane's mouth went dry when he looked up. He'd seen plenty of the mysterious guys in suits, and they all looked pretty much the same – usually stocky, dark hair, usually some strange scars, but overall nondescript, not memorable.

The mysterious man in a suit who just walked through the doorway was anything but nondescript. Everything about the man from the obviously custom-tailored suit to the quietly luxurious watch was so *expensive*. He was all angles – sharp cheekbones and jaw, expensive fabric hiding hard muscle – cushioned by the softest dark blonde curls. Shane wanted to pitch a tent in his defined cupid's bow and camp there for a week.

"You're new."

He'd only said two words, but his heavy Russian accent wrapped around Shane like a snake making his breath catch a little bit.

Jesus, get it together, Hollander.

"I've been here a couple months."

"New," the man nodded.

"Fine, new. What do you need?"

The man didn't answer, instead strolling up and down the aisles of the tiny shop. He moved smoothly, silently. Shane briefly and ridiculously felt like he was watching a nature documentary – a sleek cat stalking its prey. But then he realized that would make *him* the

prey, wouldn't it? He glanced toward the door; a dark car was parked on the street right outside the door, one of the usual nondescript suited men leaning on the passenger door smoking.

"Is nice view."

"Subway stairs and a stack of trash that never gets taken? Sure." Shane tried not to show how startled the voice had made him. The man had made his way silently back to the counter while Shane had been looking outside.

"You see things from here."

It wasn't a question, but Shane could tell he expected some kind of answer.

"I don't see anything from here."

A smile crept onto the man's face, sharp just like the rest of him.

"Good boy," it was practically a purr, and Shane could feel his face turn red. "But I need for you to have working eyes. For this conversation."

"Look, I come here, I ring people out, I put sodas in the cooler. I don't want any trouble."

"Hm, you look like trouble though," his voice purred again.

"I'm not."

"We will see."

The man's eyes were boring a hole through Shane, and he needed the interaction to end.

"What do you want?"

"You see a man here." He jerked a thumb toward the door, toward the station stairs.

"I see a lot of people here."

"You know who I mean."

Shane did. Shane knew exactly who he meant.

"Are you a cop or something?" Shane knew it was a ridiculous question, but it brought another smile to the man's face, and he was willing to ask any number of ridiculous questions to see that sharp toothed smiled again.

"Ehh, no. But I would like to know what you see this man doing."

"Look, man, if you're having a problem with one of your dealers, I would love to be left out of it. It's none of my bus – "

"One of my dealers?"

“Look,” Shane sighed. “I’m not an idiot. You rocked up here in a suit, with your Russian accent, asking about the guy who’s under those stairs almost every night. I can put two and two together.”

“Wow, so good at math.” His voice was flat.

“I’m more than a pretty face.”

A smaller, gentler smile crept up for a moment before the man settled his face into something more neutral.

“This man is here every night?”

“Almost every night. Always Wednesdays and Thursdays. Not always Fridays, not ever weekends.”

“You’re helpful.”

“I didn’t say anything to you. Like I said – ”

“Yes, yes, not your business. Good trait to have.”

Shane didn’t have a chance to respond before the man swept out the door, motioning to the suit who immediately got in the driver’s side and took off as soon as the back door of the car had closed.

“What the fuck…”

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Shane didn’t see the man in the suit for the rest of the week, but the dealer he’d been asking about was back like clockwork. He briefly wondered what the issue was – was the guy not collecting on debts? Not meeting his quota? Did drug dealers have quotas? Shane shook his head. He minded his own business. Always. He wasn’t going to think about the man in the suit. He wasn’t going to remember his smile and feel warm from his ears down. He wasn’t going to think about how his name might sound in that accent.

Whatever fantasy world Shane was starting to drift toward disappeared in an instant when he heard yelling from outside. The dealer. It had to be.

Shane knew that he should just stay inside the store, mind his business, keep his head down, but the voices were so close, he worried the commotion was going to come inside. He left the worn wooden bat behind the counter but took a step outside.

The dealer was there – screaming in Russian at the man Shane had been daydreaming about. Two nondescript men stood by. Shane wasn’t a small man; he could hold his own, but he didn’t think that he’d be able to stay as motionless as the handsome man in the suit if someone was screaming in his face like that. It wasn’t threatening screams though – whatever

the man was shouting about, he seemed desperate, pleading. One of the suits moved as though he was going to grab the dealer's arm, pull him away, when the dealer noticed Shane had come out onto the darkened street.

"It was you, wasn't it? You fucking snitch, what did you say?"

His accent was as heavy as his breathing. He got close enough to Shane to grab his upper arm before he was abruptly pulled away.

"Этого достаточно."

The voice was almost soft – certainly not as loud or as desperate as the dealer. It was a voice that knew its owner was perfectly in control of the situation. Shane didn't think the man's expensive suit had even crinkled when he'd moved fast to pull the dealer away from Shane.

He spoke quietly to one of the other men with him, shoved the dealer toward them, and turned away as they shoved the man in the back seat of a car and drove off.

Shane wanted to ask what the fuck that was, but he was torn between being annoyed at himself for coming outside in the first place and being glued to the spot by the stare of the handsome Russian man. There was something in it that he couldn't parse out. Not threatening, but not comforting in the least.

"I didn't see anything," the words fell out of Shane's mouth in a rush.

"No, you didn't."

Another car pulled up and the man got in the passenger seat – disappearing without another word to Shane.

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He'd been thinking about the man all damn night and into this morning, and it had eaten away at the precious few hours of sleep he needed to get before class today.

Class was a blur too. How was he supposed to focus on biophysical agents when he couldn't get that voice out of his head?

The man had said probably all of two dozen words to him both times Shane had seen him, but he was absolutely mesmerized. And also annoyed as hell. Where did that guy get the nerve, coming into Shane's job, asking him questions, making some drug dealer hold a grudge when Shane didn't want anything to do with the whole situation.

The guy was mesmerizing. Attractive as hell. And more trouble than Shane wanted to deal with, he was sure.

Shane stayed feeling like he was underwater through his classes, through lunch with Hayden and Jackie (the barista *did* have a name!), through practice, and through a sad dinner of microwave ramen noodles.

Shane was still in half a fog when he went back to work. At least putting candy bars on a shelf didn't require a lot of concentration or wherewithal. Maybe if he was less tired, the chime of the door would have registered. As it was, the voice behind him made him fall back on his ass when he heard it.

"You're jumpy."

"You're quiet."

"Door makes noise, you want me to blow trumpet too?"

"Do you need something or do you just enjoy making my life weirder?"

"I need a Coke."

The man walked away from Shane toward the coolers holding endless bottles of soda, plucked one out, and walked lithely toward the counter. Shane scrambled off the floor to get behind said counter.

"Who even are you?"

The Russian man raised a single eyebrow at him.

"What's your name, I mean."

"Ilya. And you're Shane."

His name sounded just as good in that accent as he'd imagined, but his annoyance wasn't completely erased.

"Why do you know my name?"

He froze as the man, *Ilya*, lifted a hand toward Shane. He lighted tapped Shane's chest, and he looked down confused. He was wearing a goddamn nametag. Of course.

"Ha, right. Just the soda then?"

"Keep the change," Ilya put a bill down, grabbing the soda, and retreating gracefully out the door. Shane noticed the chime this time.

He glanced down to see that Ilya had left a hundred-dollar bill on the counter.

What the fuck.

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"So, this dude has been in every night for a week?"

Hayden's voice was half muffled with the croissant that he was talking around.

"Hayden…"

“Sorry, Jacks.”

Shane had never seen his friend as whipped he had been in the couple weeks since he and Jackie finally went out. He loved it for Hayden. And it added another voice of reason to the conversation that Shane found himself having.

Because Ilya *had* been coming in every night for the last week. He never said much. A handful of words at most. Bought a Coke, paid with a hundred-dollar bill, and told Shane to keep the change.

He shouldn’t complain – he could certainly use the money. But he couldn’t deny that it was weird.

“Maybe he likes you,” Jackie spoke up. “You said he was young, didn’t you?”

“Not like… young young. Maybe 35?”

“And you’re 25? That’s dateable,” she nodded her head decidedly.

“If he likes me, he’s doing a piss poor job of showing it. I think he just likes fucking with me.”

“I wish someone would consistently give me almost a hundred bucks to fuck with me,” Hayden snorted.

Shane grimaced a little.

“What if he decides he needs like… a return on his investment?”

“You think that’s the goal? It sounds like the guy has more money than he knows what to do with to me. I’ve gotta get back behind the counter now though. You boys behave.”

Maybe Jackie was right. It was clear that the man had more money than god – constantly pulling up in different equally expensive cars, never wearing the same custom suit twice, with watches and jewelry that screamed money. Maybe he just had so much money that he really didn’t think twice about blowing almost a thousand bucks in a week on some convenience store clerk. Shane hoped that was the case anyway.

“Maybe he feels bad about the weird dealer thing.”

Shane wished Hayden hadn’t said anything. Or maybe more accurately, he wished he hadn’t told Hayden.

“I told you not to say anything about that.”

“Oh my god, Shane, the Russian mafia is not camped out in Chelsea spying on you, relax.”

“I don’t know that he’s in the Russian mafia! Or that that dealer is either.”

“Yes, the impossibly wealthy and handsome Russian man in a custom suit who ordered a drug dealer to be disappeared is totally not in the Russian mafia.”

“Ok, when you put it like that…”

“Look, he at least seems like he’s not doing much of anything besides being annoying and leaving you money. Just be careful and hope it stays that way.”

Shane didn’t say it out loud, but part of his problem was that it had only been a week and he was starting to look forward to Ilya coming in. And that was something he had to be careful of.

Chapter 2: Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

I think I've forgotten how to write chapter summaries.

Shane has a confrontation. Ilya gets annoyingly protective.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane didn't work Sunday or Monday nights. He probably could've if he wanted to. The manager at the store seemed so disinterested in actually writing the schedule that usually Shane and the two other guys that worked there would just work thing out amongst themselves. But even Shane knew that working seven nights a week would be a death wish on top of class and hockey and trying to have some semblance of a social life. Hayden would probably murder him if he worked seven nights a week. By the time Tuesday rolled around, he had *almost* caught up on the sleep deficit that he accumulated throughout the week.

"Some weird Russian dude's been looking for you the last couple nights," the other clerk, Jake, told him as he wandered in around 10pm. "He's come here late… like really late."

Ilya. It had to be. What other weird Russian men would be looking for Shane? He tried to keep a smile from forming on his face. He didn't *like* that Ilya was here looking for him. That would be ridiculous. He'd only known Ilya existed for like two weeks. Ilya was strange. And annoying. And sure, maybe his money was nice. And his face was nice. And his ass was – Shane shook the thought from his head.

"Oh, yeah, don't worry about it," he tried to keep his voice casual, but Jake was still giving him a weird look.

"I mean, I'm about to be off work so I'm not worried about it, but I think you should be."

Shane wasn't worried about it. He got it. Ilya looked like a scary dude. Ilya probably was a scary dude. But Shane didn't have any reason to be scared of him.

He spent the first couple hours of his shift jumping at every chime of the door – hoping that it was Ilya but not admitting that he hoped it was Ilya. Eventually, the nerves wore away. He was starting to think that maybe Ilya wouldn't even come tonight. That Ilya was disappointed that Shane hadn't been there the last couple nights, and he'd decided coming around to some seedy convenience store just to see Shane was too much effort. The nerves had calmed to nothing around 2am, and he wasn't thinking about the Russian man anymore when the door chimed while his back was turned, hands mindlessly putting snacks and candy in their prescribed positions on the cold metal. Which meant Shane didn't notice who had come

through the door until the man already had his hands grabbing Shane's shirt and whipping him around.

"I know you say something to him, you fucker."

The dealer's face was a mottled painting of purples and yellows of healing bruises. His voice was rough.

"Look, man – "

Shane didn't have a chance to finish the sentence before he was being jerked forward and then pushed back hard into the shelves he'd been stocking. The metal bit into his back and knocked the breath out of him. If he hadn't been caught off guard, he could have easily taken the guy down. But now he was desperately trying to catch his breath and couldn't before he was thrown to the floor and a scuffed boot was connecting with his ribs, denying him air again.

"Fuck, dude, I didn't say anything. I don't know anything."

Shane coughed it out and tried to shuffle away. If he could just get to his feet… but the man's boot connected with him again, sending him onto his back with another gasp.

"You ruin my life!"

"I don't even know who you are!"

It was the wrong thing to say; he could see the rage that flashed across the man's face. But Shane was pissed off now too. This was exactly what he didn't want to happen. This is why he minded his business, why he should have just kept his mouth shut. He remembered the intense look in Ilya's face when he first came around asking after this guy – he wondered if keeping his mouth shut would have just changed *who* the beating was coming from.

Shane had scrambled up to his knees when the man grabbed his wrist and jerked him the rest of the way up then roughly shoved him toward the front of the store. A candy display went flying as he caught himself on the counter, and Shane's brain had the audacity to register annoyance knowing that he'd have to clean that up later.

"You say something to him! Now he knows! Now I have to crawl to Aleksandr! I have to beg him!"

Shane had no idea what the man was talking about, or who Aleksandr was or who knew what but the rant was making the guy emotional and sloppy and that would make things easier for Shane. The man landed a single punch, his ring catching Shane's mouth, and the tangy copper taste of his own blood spread across his tongue. But now Shane was upright, *he* wasn't emotional, he was just pissed.

He got a grip on the man's collar, his fist cocked back to return a hit, but before he could do anything the man was ripped from his hand. The dealer clutched at where his collar tightened around his neck – the back of it bunched in the white knuckled grip of Ilya now. Shane hadn't

even heard the door. Hadn't heard Ilya or the other two men with him. He tossed the man toward the door where one of the other guys, this one not in a suit for once, caught him and held his arms still behind his back. The fight had gone out of the bruised drug dealer.

For a minute, Shane felt like the blind rage on Ilya's face was directed at him, but his hand only barely brushed the corner of Shane's mouth – lightly wiping the smear of blood there. It was a shockingly gentle touch; his index and middle finger lingered near the corner of Shane's mouth.

"You are hurt."

He said it quietly, as a matter of fact. He was standing so close now, and Shane's lungs were setting an erratic pattern that had nothing to do with recovering from the wind being knocked out of them a couple times. Ilya's eyes were a confusing medley of blues and greens – a color that seemed to shift as his expression moved from rage to concern. It had to just be a trick of the light. Or a trick of Shane's own state of mind. Whatever the case, he was mesmerized and took a little too long to respond.

"I'm fine."

"You're bleeding."

"It happens."

"No."

Ilya pulled his hand away and turned quickly to where the dealer was still being held. It's not like Shane would know what he was saying even if the words came out of his mouth slowly, but he was almost dizzy with the rapid paced Russian that spilled out of Ilya's lips. He caught the name that the dealer had said earlier. *Aleksandr*. Part of him wanted to ask who the hell that was and what it had to do with him, with any of this. The other part of him knew he wasn't going to ask a single question. He already knew too much about whatever this was for his own liking.

Ilya ended whatever he was saying with a snap and a dismissive wave of his hand, and then they were in the dingy shop alone.

"Close the shop. Go home," Ilya said with finality.

"What? No, I'm fine. And I can't do that. I'm not like a manager or whatever, that's not my call, I'm just – "

"You don't look fine," Ilya interrupted.

"I play hockey, I can take a fucking hit."

"You wear pads on ice, no?"

"Are you suggesting I need to start wearing them to work?"

A smirk played across Ilya's face, but his eyes were still looking intently at Shane.

"I'm suggesting you go put ice on your ribs, so you feel well enough to go wear pads and play hockey tomorrow."

"Ok, well, your suggestion is noted but not needed."

Shane knelt down to start picking up the candy that had flown everywhere when he'd hit the front counter.

"You are not going to go home?"

"Obviously not."

Ilya let out a frustrated sigh and waved his hand at someone who must have been watching from the sidewalk. One of the two flunkies he'd had with him came back in.

"Nikolai will stay."

"Uh, Nikolai will not stay. That's weird as hell."

"Are you always this fucking stubborn?"

Shane didn't think he'd heard Ilya raise his voice before – even when he was reprimanding the drug dealer, he'd let the dealer do all the screaming. He was a picture of control always and his voice was part of that control. So, the slight crack in his voice when he asked Shane, exasperated, was very notable. And Shane did note it. It made his heart jump a little bit.

"Yes. I am."

"Отлично."

"I don't know what that means," Shane deadpanned.

"It means I will be back later."

Ilya and Nikolai turned and left without another word.

The rest of the night passed with as little fanfare as most nights at the 7/11. But true to his word, Ilya was waiting outside, pacing on the sidewalk, when Shane finally left the store.

"You weren't kidding."

"About?"

"Being back later."

"No, I meant that."

"What do you want?" Shane asked after a moment of hesitation, worried about the answer.

“Right now? To make sure you get home ok.”

Ilya nodded toward a car with tinted windows parked near the corner.

“Yeah, I’m just going to take the bus," Shane pointed toward the other end of the sidewalk, "Like normal… Because I’m fine and will get home fine.”

With that declaration, Shane turned on his heel and started walking toward his stop. He didn’t turn around, but he knew, he just *knew*, that Ilya would follow him. And he was rewarded with the clipped sound of Ilya’s dress shoes walking quickly to catch up with him.

****

“You are infuriating.”

Shane couldn’t help but smirk at how out of place Ilya seemed in his fancy ass suit and shiny ass shoes sitting with overly stiff posture next to him on the bus. He was trying very hard not to notice how Ilya’s thigh pressed into his.

“They used to put my desk in the hallway in elementary school.”

Ilya’s eyebrows furrowed for a moment.

“I do not know what that means, Shane.”

“I was agreeing with you. I am infuriating.”

“We could have been to your house in minutes if you let me drive.”

“You know where I live?”

“No.”

Shane had a sneaking suspicion that that was a lie. He thought that this man not only *could* figure out exactly where he lived but probably already had. The thought should be a little more discomforting than it was. He still wasn’t scared of Ilya.

It was 23 stops to the stop nearest Shane’s place. Half an hour of sitting in heavy silence while he tried to think about anything except Ilya’s leg pressed into his, Ilya’s arm occasionally brushing his, Ilya's altogether unignorable presence so close to him. Shane could still feel the pressure from the man’s limbs beside his almost branded onto his own skin when he finally got off the bus and started walking down 20th Ave.

Shane lived in a lower-level studio, no more than 400 square feet, but it worked for him. Sure, it took roughly an hour to get to the rink at Chelsea Piers or to school, but the place was a two-minute walk to the D train so getting into the city was uncomplicated, and more importantly, it was the cheapest place he could find.

He had classmates whose rich parents got them gorgeous places in Midtown or who had to deal with 3 or 4 roommates. For Shane, the commute was worth the price and the privacy. His landlord lived in the apartment above him. A quiet, older woman who he saw maybe once a month if that. Sometimes she left herbs that she grew in a window box for him though, so it was an amenable landlord-tenant relationship.

He shoved his key into the flimsy doorknob lock as Ilya stood close behind him. Shane sent up a quick thanks to his obsessive need to keep things neat as he opened the door. It's not like he brought a lot of people back here, but he didn't need to worry about clothes left on the floor or dirty dishes in the tiny sink as he let Ilya in.

"This is where you live?"

"I don't like the implication of your tone."

"Implication?"

"You sound judgy. I like living here."

"It's certainly... cozy."

"There's only one of me."

"So, your girlfriend doesn't get a drawer in dresser, hm?"

"I don't have a girlfriend," Shane tried to keep his voice even. "Or boyfriend."

Ilya didn't respond – just continued his slow walk around the perimeter of the tiny apartment and ended by leaning against the small section of kitchen counter that Shane was thankful to have.

"I don't know if I have ever been to Bensonhurst."

Ilya hadn't lost any of the judginess in his tone.

"I like it. It's quiet. And cheap."

"Is it safe?"

"It's quiet."

"Hm."

"I've lived here a hot minute. I'm safe. I'm fine."

"Okay."

Ilya didn't say anything more. Didn't wish him a goodnight (or good morning?) or even a goodbye before he walked back toward the front door. He paused with his hand on the

doorknob and turned to look at Shane one more time. He gave a slight nod before walking out.

“What the fuck,” Shane sighed. “Whatever.”

****

For a brief moment when he woke up, Shane had forgotten about how he’d spent one of the weirdest shifts of his life. And then he moved to roll over, and his ribs immediately reminded him. He had taken Ilya’s advice before he fell asleep and iced them, but he still felt stiff, achey. He glanced at the alarm clock beside his bed and then shot upright – no longer caring about the pain that pulsing at his side. He’d slept through his first class. He was going to miss his second class if he didn’t leave….14 minutes ago.

“Fuck,” he said to no one in particular.

Part of him thought about just skipping practice too, but he knew that would be stupid. He had a meeting on campus between his last class and practice anyway, and he could still be on time to that.

He begrudgingly took a shower and threw clothes on, every part of him wishing he could just stay in his bed. As he stepped out the front door, Shane stopped short. A dark car, Shane was pretty sure the same one that Ilya had motioned for him to get into last night, was parked on his street. The guy that Ilya had tried to have stay at the store was leaning against it.

Shane decided to take the bull by the horns and walked directly to him.

“What are you doing here?”

“I am Nikolai,” the man’s accent was thicker than Ilya’s.

“Hi, Nikolai. What are you doing here?”

“He asked me to be here.”

“Ok. Uh, I’m asking you not to be here.”

Nikolai smiled a little.

“I do not work for you. I work for him.”

“Why does he want you to be here?”

“For safety.”

“I don’t need you here for my safety.”

Shane didn’t let him respond before he set off toward the station. He was going to be even later if he continued to engage with this absolutely ridiculous nonsense.

****

He shouldn't have been surprised – walking out of the east building after his meeting – to see the same car. Shane knew Nikolai must be behind the driver's seat; waiting for Shane to make an appearance. It was infuriating. If Ilya was trying to make a contest over which of them was more infuriating, then Ilya was also winning that contest.

He tried to ignore it as he headed to meet Hayden.

"Are you being chased, dude?"

Shane must not have been as nonchalant as he was trying to be as he sat down across the small, square table from his friend. His neck craned back as he tried to catch a glimpse outside.

"No, just… I don't know, man."

Hayden stares at him, not pressing for information, just knowing his friend well enough to know that if *he* doesn't fill the silence, Shane and his anxiety will spill the story in an effort to fill it. He gives Hayden an abbreviated version of the story – lessening the extent of the physical fight, leaving out the name Aleksandr.

"Shane, that's insane. Now this guy is having you followed? You need to go to the cops, man."

"He's not…having me followed."

"You literally just told me his minion was outside school waiting for you. He was outside your *house*," Hayden practically hissed the last word.

"It's not like he's trying to off me, Hayd. It feels like a weird protective thing."

"You've got the weird part right."

"If I ignore it, it'll go away. He'll forget about being worried about some random guy from 7/11."

"I think you're unknowingly staring in a horror movie. And I do not know if you're final girl material, Shane."

"I didn't tell you because I wanted advice or whatever it is you think you're doing. It's weird. I get it. I don't know. I'm not like… scared of the guy or anything though. He's harmless."

"He. Beat. Up. A. Man. In. Front. Of. You."

“Technically, he just kind of threw a man across a room in front of me.”

“Holy shit, Hollander.”

“Look. I’m not worried. I’m just annoyed. Can we please caffeinate and then go to practice, please?”

Hayden held up his hands in surrender.

****

It was crossing a line. So many lines had already been crossed. But having Nikolai come *inside* Chelsea Piers and sit by the rink while NYU was practicing was too much for Shane. He got through practice as best he could – between the pain in his ribs and the constant glances toward where Nikolai lurked by a doorway. His coach noticed how distracted he was, and Shane paid for it in extra bag skates. By the time he was finished, Ilya had joined his… minion, as Hayden called him.

“Dude, is that *him*?”

Shane was half draped over the boards catching his breath, Hayden already changed and sitting on the bench in front of him. He just nodded.

“Ok, I’m straight, but… I wouldn’t be scared of that either, *damn*. I mean, I'd be a little scared of getting split in half, but... probably worth it.”

“Jesus Christ, Hayd. I don't think you can start a sentence like that with 'I'm straight'.”

“I mean, I still don’t like any of this for you, but… I'm just saying, DAMN.”

He said it loud enough that it echoed a little around the now empty rink.

“Oh my god, I can’t stand you right now, I’m going to shower.”

Shane knew Ilya would be there when he left the locker room – still standing near the exit. Nikolai was no longer with him. Shane made a straight line directly for him.

“Shane – ”

“I’m annoyed as hell and I’m tired as fuck. You’re giving me a ride home.”

If Shane were less pissed, he may have paused to think about what a bad idea it was to get into the car of a practical stranger. Ilya had been coming around for barely a couple weeks. He knew nothing about him except that he was in charge of drug dealers, had an army of cars, and apparently an army of men who would do things like follow Shane if Ilya said the word.

It was a long drive, but Shane didn't say a thing, and Ilya didn't attempt to break the silence. It turned out that Nikolai hadn't left, and he was now behind the steering wheel of the car, carefully guiding them through traffic. If he thought the silence between his boss and Shane was unbearable, he made no sign of it and made no attempt to fill it.

Shane kept his silence until he'd unlocked his front door – Ilya mirroring their positions from last night and following him inside. He dropped his backpack with a sigh.

"I don't want some weird guy in a Mercedes following me everywhere, Ilya."

Ilya paused for a minute before speaking.

"Is an Audi."

"It can be a rickshaw for all I care; I don't want it or him following me."

"I wanted to make sure you were safe."

"Why?"

The question seemed to catch Ilya off guard. He was normally so quick to fire back at Shane, but he stayed silent.

"You've known me for all of like two weeks. Why do you care if I'm safe or not?"

Shane had stepped closer to him – their faces inches from each other. He was breathing hard, unsure if it was from how close he was to Ilya or how annoyed he was at this intrusion into his life and routine.

"Is my fault you were hurt."

His tone was flippant, it was clearly an excuse.

"I say this with due respect, but you don't strike me as someone overly concerned with feeling guilty," Ilya smirked a little at Shane's words. "So tell me the actual reason why."

Ilya paused again, swallowing hard, his smirk gone.

"You make me curious."

Neither of them said anything. Shane couldn't help the glance at Ilya's lips that he stole.

"Do I make you curious?"

Shane wanted to purr at how the word 'curious' sounded in Ilya's Russian accent. Something about the word fell into a warm puddle directly behind his ribs. They were close enough now that he was sure Ilya *felt* the sharp exhale he let out when the Russian man softly asked the question.

"I thought it was better for me to not be curious."

He *knew* it was better to not be curious. To not ask questions. To not get involved with whatever this mysterious ass man was involved in. He stared as Ilya ran his tongue along his own lower lip before answering Shane.

“Better for you, yes, but less fun for me.”

“Ok, well, maybe I’m curious.”

Shane was sure that time stopped quite a while ago; maybe the moment that they’d stepped into his apartment. He felt like hours must have passed as they stood close, eyes studying each other, Shane’s breathing irregular. Ilya raised a hand, his fingers lightly tracing over Shane’s bottom lip and Shane's lips parted – his jagged breath caressing Ilya’s hand.

Ilya’s hand fell loosely back to his side, and he took a step away from Shane.

“I will tell Nikolai to stop tailing you. If that is what you want.”

It wasn’t what Shane expected to come out of his mouth next. Right now, he wanted a lot of things. He wasn't sure he knew how to vocalize half of them.

“Thank you,” Shane wished he sounded less breathless when he said it.

They were beside the front door still, and Ilya turned, grabbing the doorknob.

“See you tonight, Shane.”

Chapter End Notes

As always - I do not use AI to write aaaaanything. I come by these em dashes by virture of being in the fan fic world since the year of our lord 2007. I am old.

Thank you so much for reading. I really have zero plan or outline or plotted direction for this, I'm going on vibes and vibes alone so your kudos, comments, bookmarks, subscriptions, etc. are so lovely for me and put air directly into my lungs.

Also, my word, the HR fan fic community has been in such upheaval lately - I'm literally just here to have fun and maybe, hopefully reignite some of my love for writing. It's been a long time since a little spark took me anywhere near writing a fic. Stay nice to each other out there, guys.

Chapter 3: POV: Ilya

Chapter Summary

A glimpse into Ilya's life and his thoughts about Shane.

Chapter Notes

Things to note -
1. I don't speak Russian (I may have mentioned). So conversations in Russian are indicated by quotes and italics. I've also tried to indicate in the writing when people have switched between Russian and English. My apologies for any confusion - again, we're running on viiiiibes only here!
2. There's a touch of violence in this chapter. Nothing graphic or gratuitous, but be aware that it's there please! I have updated the tags to reflect this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You didn't even fuck him, what the fuck?" Svetlana's frustration dripped from her Russian words.

"I need to not involve him in my bullshit, Sveta."

"Ok, so fuck him and then ghost him. Who cares?"

"Sveta, no, I can't do this."

"Why not?"

Ilya didn't know why he felt the need to shift to English when he was annoyed at her. Maybe it gave him a level of separation from his feelings – a shield to hide behind. Because if they kept talking in Russian then he might let slip that he didn't *want* to ghost this guy. That even though he'd fucked and forgotten plenty of people, countless people, Shane was sticking in his brain in a way no one had before. And he hadn't even touched the man. He didn't even understand it himself; he had no words in English or Russian to try and explain it to Svetlana.

Svetlana was sitting on Ilya's kitchen counter. His extremely expensive kitchen counter that he should be more annoyed about her sitting on, but he didn't care. Svetlana had been his friend since childhood – her own father had worked for Ilya's father back in Russia, and after he'd moved to New York and set up shop for himself, she had followed close behind.

He'd never asked her to work for him though. He liked that she'd escaped from their world. That she never had to deal with midnight meetings or cleaning blood splatter out of linen shirts or any of the other thousand heinous things that were now thoroughly mundane to Ilya. Part of him wished *he'd* escaped too, but the opportunity for that was long gone. Now, he just resigned himself to the endeavor of at least not being as bad as his father was.

"Ilyusha, you have been telling me about how pretty this boy is for ages – "

"Ok, a couple weeks is not ages – "

"AGES," Svetlana cut him off. "And then you have him practically drooling in your hand, begging for your cock – "

"Sveta, that is not what happened – "

"And you do nothing? You leave?" She continued despite his interruption. "Did you get taken by aliens?"

Ilya didn't answer, instead busying himself with shuffling things around in the kitchen – ostensibly, he was about to cook dinner for the both of them.

"Ilya."

"You never call me 'Ilya'."

He was stalling, deflecting.

"Well, *you're* being weird so I thought *I* should start being weird as well."

"Svetochka," he sighed.

"No, no, no 'Svetochka' for you. Tell me what this is. Why you are like this."

"I don't fucking know! There's something about him. I don't know. I don't understand myself so how can I tell you?" Ilya knew he was rambling, but he truly didn't know how to explain any of it. After a moment's pause, he spoke again.

"He looks at me like I'm a person."

"You are a person."

"He looks at me like I'm a person who hasn't done bad things."

Ilya hadn't realized it was something he'd noticed, something he'd *liked,* until it came out of his own mouth. Svetlana didn't have a snappy comeback for that right away. She slid off the counter and came to stand behind Ilya – wrapping her arms around his waist and leaning her temple against his shoulder blade.

"Ilyusha, you aren't a bad person."

“You don’t need to lie to me. I know what I am.”

“You know what you *do*, but that’s not who you *are*.”

“*It is one and the same, Sveta.”*

His voice was quieter as he slipped back into his mother tongue.

The truth was most of the time he didn’t care. He did what needed to be done. There were too many people who depended on him now for him to do anything else. People who needed him and all this to survive. Did people wind up hurt? Sometimes. But Ilya felt that was usually *their* own fault. Most of the time. Probably. But there were times late in the night, as he nursed his bruised knuckles after a confrontation with someone not falling in line, that he wondered what the hell he was doing. That wondered if there was any way for him to leave any of this behind.

He knew there wasn’t.

His father would have called him soft. Not just for the feelings that crept in, but for his whole operation in general. Ilya didn’t *like* hurting anyone. He didn’t *want* to ruin lives. He did everything in his power to keep his human collateral to a minimum. He didn’t target little old ladies running small businesses with protection schemes – that was reserved for men who could afford his protection prices. He didn’t get poor college kids hooked on drugs or prey on their downfalls, but he couldn’t be responsible for every rich NYU kid looking to spend daddy’s money on some party drugs, could he? And ok, maybe he ran some sports gambling rings…

But fuck, in general, he was practically a just a run of the mill white-collar criminal, wasn’t he? Almost respectable. Apart from some territorial bullshit between him and Aleksandr, the blood on his hands wasn’t *that* overwhelming. That’s what he told himself anyway. And he felt some measure of pride that he didn’t think he was as cruel as his Italian counterparts. And Ilya *knew* he was nowhere as cruel as his father, no matter how much he feared that.

It was a spiral of justification that he’d taken himself down many times. But at the end of the day, Ilya knew full well that he was no saint. And he knew there were no number of prayers that would make him one. And even if the blood on his hands washed off easily – they would never stay clean for long.

And he knew whatever Shane Hollander was, he was good. Shane’s hands were clean. They’d stay clean forever. And part of Ilya wanted him to stay pristine. But the uglier part of Ilya wanted to dirty him beyond cleansing.

“I’m going to the terrace. You will call when dinner is ready?”

Ilya nodded at her. He glanced up as she walked out, leaving the glass door ajar behind her. It was a nice fall evening, and he didn’t mind the breeze coming in. He didn’t always stay in the Oceana Dr condo out here by the beach, but Svetlana preferred it to any of his properties in the city, so he let her use it whenever she was in town. He forgot how much he liked it here – liked hearing the people on the boardwalk, liked the breeze that came in from the water. Ilya

was careful to never conduct business here, not only worried about Sveta walking in on something, but worried about disturbing the peace that seemed to always settle on him here.

He found himself wondering if Shane would like it. If he would sit on the terrace and drink coffee in the morning. Or maybe Shane didn't drink coffee, maybe Ilya should buy tea.

Fuck, he's not ever going to be here so no I don't need to buy tea.

He shook the thoughts from his head and focused on making dinner.

*****

"*I don't want to do things the hard way, you know that, Evgeni.* "

Ilya was pacing in front of where the man was slumped on his knees. Nikolai had one hand on his shoulder – not keeping him down, just making him aware of the presence beside him. A trickle of blood was finding its way from the man's split lip and running down his chin. Bruises were already scattering his face – and his body even if those weren't instantly visible.

"*Rozanov, please, I –* "

"*No, the time for 'please' is long past, my old friend."*

Ilya had been in this situation plenty of times – a man, a defect, in his operation kneeling in front of him. He'd taken care of plenty of those *defects* permanently. He was still mad about the fucking drug dealer. Fedor. That fucking snake. He knew better than to go behind Ilya's back, knew better than to steal from him, knew better than to be selling to desperate people in *their* community, *their* neighborhood, but he did it anyway. And when Ilya showed him mercy, he repaid him by running to Aleksandr and then attacking Shane.

"How long did you know Fedor had been stealing from me? Cooking the books? Did he give you a good cut?"

"I swear, I did not know."

"You know, I might hate liars even more than I hate thieves."

Ilya brought the back of his hand down across the man's face again, his silver rings becoming tarnished with blood.

"Tell me. Tell me when it started. And tell me who else knew. Who else was getting a cut."

Evgeni was trembling slightly – knowing his fate would be the same whether he talked or not. Ilya crouched down to get eye level with him.

"*Evgeni,"* Ilya's hand came up to touch the man's face again – more gently, taking his chin and tilting his face toward Ilya's own. His voice was quieter now, almost soothing. *"I know he was your brother."*

The man shuddered at the past tense.

"Am I not your brother, too, Evgeni? Do you not owe me loyalty?"

Evgeni nodded.

"I will show you kindness. I will send you back to Moscow – "

"No, please!"

"I will send you back to Moscow instead of to the bottom of the East River."

He knew none of them wanted to go back to Russia. But if the choice was go back or die, Ilya knew which one Evgeni would pick. The man spoke rapidly – telling Ilya two more men who were in on the double cross, swearing on his life and his dead mother that he was telling Ilya everything. When he was finally done speaking, a sob escaped his lips. Ilya just nodded at Nikolai.

*****

"You should have just killed him."

Nikolai was never scared of voicing his opinion to Ilya. They'd worked together since Ilya was no more than 18 trying to establish himself in a world full of elders and history.

"What would that have done?"

"What does sending him to Russia do?"

"Gets him out of my hair."

Ilya was sitting in the back seat, not glancing up at Nikolai but knowing that the man was rolling his eyes at Ilya in the rearview mirror.

"I could've done it."

"Yes, I know, Nikolai. And if I wanted it done, I would've asked you," Ilya sighed. "Evgeni is in his 60s. He would have been begging to be let go and…*retire* soon enough anyway. Now he can figure out life in the motherland."

"You don't think he'll come back? That he'll just get over his brother?"

"I think that he'll wind up in the streets of Moscow with no way to return and no future in sight."

Ilya's frustration burst out of him. He didn't care about this idiot. He already knew Evgeni had no family in Russia, had no ties left to the dying empire of Ilya's father, had no resources to come and visit hell on Ilya in revenge. It was a fate worse than death. And it galled Ilya to be spoken to like he was soft when in reality it would have been far more kind to put Evgeni out of his misery.

“Just fucking drive, please.”

Nikolai didn’t respond – only half shrugged a shoulder and stayed quiet. Ilya glanced down. There was blood on his ring still.

*****

“Ilyusha, you don’t come see me for so long!”

Tatyana Morozova had been running a tiny restaurant in Brighton Beach for almost fifty years. Ilya thought she would probably be the same age as his own grandmother, but he’d never met that woman – on either side of his family.

“Baba Tanya, I saw you last week!” Ilya laughed.

“No, it must be longer. You look too thin – you would not look thin if I had seen you recently! But come, I fix.”

Ilya knew it must look ridiculous. He was roughly six foot three, roughly 220 pounds, and he was being pushed by a tiny Russian grandmother toward a table in the corner of the small restaurant.

This was one of the business owners that Ilya had thought of the other day. If this was his father’s operation, Grigori would have taken every penny from Tatyana that he would wring out. He would not have cared how long she’d been there. He would not have cared who may be depending on her. He wouldn’t have cared about anything except what he could get from her. As it was, Ilya made sure no one bothered her – not street thugs, or Aleksandr, or anyone. Tatyana must believe New York to be the safest city in the world with the way Ilya looked out for her.

When Ilya had moved to New York, Tatyana had been one of the first people he’d met. She had taken one look at him, tsked, and insisted he was too skinny as she shoved pelmeni at him until he burst. The affection was so foreign to him that he had gotten back to his apartment and sobbed on the bathroom floor – the first time he’d cried since his mother died. He went back to Tatyana’s restaurant at least once a week since that first meeting. More if he could spare the time.

He wasn’t sure if Tatyana knew that he owned the building now. He had kept the property manager on the payroll – easier for someone to manage the upkeep of the restaurant and the apartments above it that included Tatyana’s apartment. He told Ilya every time rent was late. It was late every month. And Ilya would quietly write him a check and send him on his way.

“Ilyusha, why you don’t bring anyone special to meet me? I see in your eyes you are lonely.”

“How could I be lonely when I have you, baba?”

Tatyana made a show of pretending to blush and shush him. But her face turned serious.

“You need someone, Ilyushenka. It is not good for you to be so alone.”

He couldn’t help that his thoughts turned to Shane. It was ridiculous. Thinking about a practical stranger. Thinking about a man who could never, would never, be someone special to him. Someone who would never want Ilya in that way.

“I’m not alone, baba. I promise.”

He knew she could see the lie. It was the worst crime he ever committed against her, but it couldn’t be helped.

*****

“Perhaps the Panthère de Cartier, sir? As you can see, it has pavè diamonds, onyx, and emerald set in white gold in the shape of – ”

The associate in the Cartier showroom was annoying him. Ilya knew that they just wanted the biggest sale they could get out of him. He’d been here enough and spent enough money that they knew he could lay down some serious cash.

“No, no, is all wrong.”

The gaudy necklace wasn’t something Shane would ever wear.

“Mr. Rozanov, I’m sorry, I must have misunderstood.”

“Yes, you did.”

He knew he was being an asshole. He just didn’t care.

“It needs to be… I don’t know, not simple, but – ”

“Understated,” the associate, Claire (according to her name tag), supplied. “Elegant.”

“Exactly.”

“Give me one moment, I’ll bring some options.”

Nikolai scoffed somewhere over Ilya’s shoulder.

“You have opinions, Nika?”

“Have you even seen this man wear jewelry?”

No, of course he hadn’t. Ilya had really only seen him at the fucking convenience store, and it’s not like Shane would be wearing chains of diamonds there. But he wanted to do something. To give him… *something.*

Ilya was going insane thinking about him. He’d avoided going to the store the last couple nights – the memories of Evgeni lingering as long as the blood in the grooves of his own

Cartier ring had lasted. But he knew that he couldn't stay away forever. And he didn't want to go see Shane empty handed.

"Ok, Mr. Rozanov, I think this would work much better – the Santos de Cartier chain – this is the medium model. I do also have it in small. As you can see, very understated link chain in 18k white gold. I have it in yellow gold as well."

"Yes, I like this one. Let's do it."

"You are not going to ask how much it is?" Nikolai spoke up behind him.

"This particular chain retails for just over thirteen thousand, Mr. Rozanov," Claire quickly answers. "I'm happy to get the exact amount – "

"I don't care."

Ilya slid a card toward her over the table where they'd been sitting for almost an hour while she trotted different jewelry out.

"I'll just box this for you."

*****

Ilya was clutching the red box in a sweaty palm as Nikolai pulled up outside the convenience store. It was ridiculous that he was nervous – like he was a teenager anxious to see his crush. He was 37 goddamn years old. He was Ilya Rozanov, for Christ's sake. There were men who would piss themselves with fear at that name. And here he was, leg impatiently bouncing up and down as he worked himself up to leave the car.

Shane was distracted when Ilya walked in. He didn't mind. It meant he could stand here for a minute and just watch him. Shane was sitting behind the counter – a textbook open and his hand moving quickly as he jotted notes on a pad of paper beside it.

Shane had made Ilya's heart stop the first time he laid eyes on him. His broad shoulders, his plush mouth, those *freckles*. And right now, he had a pair of black rimmed glasses resting against the slope of his nose now, cutting across the freckles that Ilya had become so obsessed with. It was practically pornographic.

"You wear glasses," Ilya finally spoke, and Shane half jumped out off the stool he was sitting on, yanking the glasses off his face.

"Jesus Christ."

"No, is just me."

"You're an asshole."

Shane rolled his eyes, and Ilya was doing everything in his considerable power to not melt over the way those eyes seemed to sparkle a golden brown even without the help of the sun.

“I brought gift.”

“A gift? For me?”

“No, for beer delivery man.”

“You brought a gift for Tyler?” Shane asked in genuine confusion.

“Jesus, Shane, no, it is obviously gift for you.”

A light blush spread across Shane’s cheeks. He was enchanted with the way the splash of color highlighted the lighter freckles on Shane’s face, the ones that Ilya hadn’t noticed right away but was committing to memory now.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did you buy me a gift?”

Because you fascinate me. Because I wanted to thank you for the privilege of touching your mouth even if only for a moment. Because I hoped it would make you blush. Because it’s the next best thing to dropping to my knees for you right here. Because you look at me like I’m a human being and not a monster.

“Because I wanted to.”

Ilya slid the red box across the counter and watched as Shane turned it, his mouth moving as he read the gold script etched across it.

“I really hope you just happened to have this box laying around.”

“I have many boxes laying around.”

Ilya didn’t even know what he meant by that. Shane’s thumb pressed into the tiny gold latch and tilted the lid up to reveal the white gold chain.

“What the fuck?”

It came out of Shane’s mouth in half a whisper. Ilya’s breath caught for a second. Shane hated it. He would have to take it back. He would try again, it would be fine.

“You do not like?”

“Ilya, how much did this cost?”

“I don’t remember.”

It wasn’t a lie. Ilya had barely paid attention when the woman told him a number.

“And this isn’t like… something that you got at Macy’s and put in this box that you just happened to have at your house.”

“Shane, I do not think Macy’s exists in New York anymore.”

“Of course, Macy’s exists – look that’s not the point.”

“What is point?”

“This is way too much.”

“Too much what?”

“Too much money? Too much… gold?”

“At least try on. If you don’t like, I will take back.”

Ilya took the box back, carefully freeing the chain from where it sat. He unclipped the clasp and gestured vaguely at Shane. The man was still looking at him with confusion as he walked around the counter and came to stand in front of Ilya.

“Turn around.”

Shane did it instantly, and Ilya tried not to gasp at what the unquestioning obedience did for him. He stepped closer – close enough to smell the shampoo that Shane used – and gently lifted the chain over his head. He fastened it carefully and before he could stop himself, he let his fingers brush over the back of Shane’s gorgeous neck before dragging them down the man’s shoulders before finally letting his hands drop to his sides.

“Let me see.”

Shane turned to face him, but Ilya didn’t step back out of his space. Shane’s eyes were darting everywhere – Ilya’s eyes, his chest, his *mouth*.

“Where am I even supposed to wear this, Ilya?” Shane’s voice was still so quiet.

“You can wear it to dinner with me.”

Ilya didn’t know he was going to say it before the words left his mouth. He was scrambling for a plan – he knew that his voice had sounded like he had a plan.

“Dinner with you?”

“Yes. You don’t work Sunday nights. Come to dinner with me.”

The silence was almost more than Ilya could bear. If Shane said no, that would be fine. He’d still come by. Still flirt to rile Shane up. But he would know that there would be nothing beyond that. He would keep his hands to himself. And he would silently die inside knowing that he would never get to touch this man.

“Ok. Dinner. I’ll come to dinner with you.”

Chapter End Notes

Mother of god, you guys are so so sweet in the comments, it's going to give me a cavity! Thank you so much for reading this silly little thing! Thank you so much for being delightful members in a fandom where I keep hearing tell of less than great fandom behaviour! You all make my heart so happy

Chapter 4: Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya have dinner. Ilya takes charge.

Chapter Notes

Rating and tags have been updated because the writing vibes have taken me in a spicy direction; a lightly dom/sub direction. I am very nervous about this particular chapter, I don't know how I feel about it.

But thank you for coming along for this ride!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Wait, why is it tucked under your shirt? Let me see!”

Jackie’s fingers moved toward the collar of his t-shirt as Shane leaned back in his chair, trying to dodge her grasp as the worn wooden legs squeaked in protest at the quick movement. Every part of the dive bar was worn, but Shane liked that. He liked the lived in feel, and he liked that he always knew what to expect here.

“No, of course I’m not wearing it!”

“Why the hell not?”

“Jackie, it was like thirteen thousand fucking dollars,” Shane hissed.

He was pretty sure no one in Doc Holliday’s could spell Cartier let alone recognize that that’s where the gold chain had come from, but Shane wasn’t about to take any chances with it. Besides, the chain had a purpose. He was wearing it to dinner. Not to some dive in the East Village.

“Yeah, it was thirteen thousand fucking dollars therefore it is definitely pretty, and I wanna see it!” Jackie’s face was an exaggerated pout.

“Well, right now it’s safely in the box, and that box is in a slightly larger box, and then tucked into my pillowcase under my pillow.”

“What a great place for an expensive, fabulous necklace to be,” Jackie rolled her eyes.

“Are you going to help me here at all, man?” Shane turned toward where Hayden had been sitting uncharacteristically silent.

“First off, I don’t argue with her – ”

Jackie planted an exaggeratedly loud kiss on her boyfriend’s cheek.

“And second, I want to see this insanely expensive necklace too.”

“Dude, I am not about to wear something that costs *that* much money just wherever. Definitely not to Doc fuckin’ Holliday’s.”

“What’s wrong with Doc Holliday’s? This is a fine establishment,” Hayden snorted into his beer after he spoke.

“Oh, please.”

“C’mon, Shane, I think we deserve to see what you’re selling your virginity for.”

“Jesus Christ, Hayden, I’m not selling – I’m not even a – oh, just fuck off!”

“Am I wrong? Jacks?”

Shane turned to Jackie expecting her to be on his side like she often was, but she only shifted her eyes to the side and took an abnormally long drink of her beer.

“Jackie, what the hell!”

“I mean, Hayden does have a point. I doubt the man just enjoys spending money on people he’s known for like a month. What does it even matter, didn’t you say he was hot?”

“He *is* hot,” Hayden interjected.

Shane nodded.

“Ok, then why are you so upset about selling your virginity to him?” Jackie could hardly contain her laughter.

“You,” he pointed an accusing finger at Hayden, “are a bad influence on her. She used to be nice.”

“I’m still nice!”

“You are nice, sweetie. To me,” Hayden grinned.

Shane couldn’t help the laugh that escaped. Hayden was entirely smitten, and he loved that for his friend. He had been teasing – the truth was Jackie had been the best influence on Hayden that Shane could imagine.

The conversation turned to other topics, but Shane was having trouble contributing to any of them. He’d been thinking nonstop about the upcoming dinner, and it was sneaking up on him

so fast. And he really wasn't sure what a thirteen-thousand-dollar gold chain was supposed to mean. What Ilya was expecting in exchange for the gift.

He hadn't realized he was slowly shredding the paper napkin in front of him until Jackie reached across the table and laid a gentle hand on top of his.

"Shane, I know we were joking around about it. But you do know that you don't *have* to agree to do anything with this guy? Even if he bought you an expensive gift. You can say no to anything. To everything."

Shane didn't know why he had the sudden overwhelming desire to burst into either laughter or tears.

"No, I mean, I *want* to go. I want to go to dinner. I want to do… whatever. I'm just…"

"Nervous?"

He didn't want to look up at either of them and just nodded.

"You like him, don't you? Like actually like him?"

"I barely know him, Jackie."

"You're allowed to want to know him though."

The sounds of the bar filled the silence between the three of them. Shane tried to focus on the clink of glasses around him, willing his face to be less red, his breathing to be more normal.

"Is that what you want, Shane?"

"What I want," he paused to drain the rest of his cheap beer, "is to beat the pants off Hayden now that the pool table is free."

*****

"You are excited?"

The question made him jump out of his skin; Shane didn't know how Ilya managed to move quiet than a fuckin' Prius every time he come in the shop.

"You have *got* to stop sneaking up on me."

"We have this same conversation eighteen times. Door makes same noise when I come in as anyone else. You're just jumpy."

"And you're an asshole."

"I think maybe you like that."

Ilya's mouth cocked up into half a grin as his elbows dropped so he was leaning on the front counter, face tipping closer to where Shane sat.

“You didn’t answer. Looking forward to dinner?”

“I’m looking forward to you not scaring the shit out of me at 3am.”

“Shane.”

“Yeah,” his voice came out breathier than he meant it to be. That tone of voice just did something to him. “Yeah, yes, I’m looking forward to dinner.”

“But you seem terrified too, yes?”

“No, not terrified.”

“Nervous then.”

“I just,” Shane took a deep breath, finding the grit to verbalize what he needed to have out in the open. “I just want to… lay some ground rules.”

“You have rules for ground? I would think 7/11 tiles would be cleaner in that case.”

“No, not for the literal ground. And I guess not even rules. I just want clear… expectations.”

“Expectations,” the world rumbled through Shane as Ilya repeated it.

“I don’t know what you expect from me. What you want from me. It makes me… uncomfortable.”

“I am making you uncomfortable.”

Ilya immediately stood upright, the quick movement bringing a waft of his cologne to Shane.

“You aren’t,” the words rushed out. “Not uncomfortable. I don’t know, it’s, I can’t explain. I don’t like feeling like I’m playing catch up. Like you’re three steps ahead of me. And I’m not in control.

“You need control.”

Ilya didn’t phrase it as a question, but it felt like one to Shane.

“I need all the information. In a situation. So that I can feel comfortable.”

“Ok. Expectation is I expect nothing.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t lie to you. Ask me anything.”

Something strange briefly crossed Ilya’s face as he said it that Shane couldn’t quite read.

“People don’t just buy thirteen-thousand-dollar gold chains for other people without expecting something in return.”

“Is that how much it cost?” Ilya’s sounded legitimately surprised.

“Ilya. You’re deflecting.”

“Shane,” Ilya reached out, laying his hand on Shane’s. His hands were warmer than Shane expected. Softer than he expected. He wanted to turn his hand over and lace his fingers between Ilya’s, but he resisted the truly insane urge.

“I expect nothing in return for gift. It was gift. I want nothing but to go to dinner with you. You need control? Be in control. Tell me where you want to go, and we go there. Tell me you want to take your shitty bus to get there, and we will take shitty bus. Tell me to stay eight feet away from you at all times, and I will bring tape measure.”

“It’s not a shitty – New York has a great transit – I don’t want you to stay away – I mean, *no*. No, that’s not what I want. None of that is what I want.”

Shane tripped over almost every word.

“You want *me* to be in control then? To be in charge?”

Something in the air felt fuzzy around Shane when Ilya asked it. He couldn’t tell what or why. Whatever air he was breathing in was far too thick because he felt like he couldn’t take a deep enough breath now.

He focused all his attention on Ilya’s hand – still covering his. The weight of it was solid, somehow comforting.

Shane was in control of everything. Always. He was in control of the puck on the ice. He was in control of his meager finances; spreadsheets meticulously filled out weekly. Schedule, managed down to the minute; schoolwork, never lacking, always turned in before the deadline. Every decision he made for himself, for his mom, made with precision and carefully weighing of all options.

And he was tired.

“Yes,” he finally took a full breath. “I want you to be in charge.”

*****

Shane didn’t have a whole lot of occasion to go to the Financial District. It was usually either overpopulated with finance bros – their backpacks that cost more than a month’s rent bouncing jauntily against their overpriced suits – or it was full of tourists clogging up the sidewalk as they craned their necks up at the high-rise buildings around them. Now, he tried not to crane his own neck up at the buildings around him as he stepped out of the Mercedes, smiling at Nikolai as the Russian man held the door open for him.

Luckily, Shane’s coach was old school in some ways – in way being that he still insisted his players show up in suits for game day. So, he at least had some nice clothes to wear to what was obviously an incredibly fancy restaurant. Shane had worn the nicest suit he owned, a well-tailored black one with a deep black button up. Jackie had said that all black would

make the Cartier chain, in her words, ‘pop.’ And he had noted how Ilya’s eyes were immediately drawn to the chain sitting against the base of his neck when he showed up to Shane’s place.

They stayed quiet as they went through a set of glass doors, and Ilya headed toward the elevator, hitting the button for the top floor.

“Sixty floors up?” Shane asked more so to try and break the silence.

“View is divine.”

Ilya wasn’t kidding. They stepped out of the elevator and were immediately greeted by floor to ceiling windows – the lights of the cities twinkling like a galaxy in front of them.

“Fuck me,” Shane couldn’t help the whisper he let out.

A professional looking blonde woman approached them.

“You must be Mr. Rozanov!” She gushed.

“Yes.”

“Please follow me, we’re right this way in the Whitman Ballroom.”

“Ballroom?” Shaned turned to Ilya, mouthing the word as they followed behind the woman.

She opened a set of double doors with a flourish, showing them into a large ballroom – a single table for two sat in one corner.

“Genevieve will be in shortly.”

As soon as the doors shut behind her, Shane wheeled around to stare at Ilya.

“This is insane. You get that, right?”

“What is insane?”

“This is a ballroom. Like an entire ballroom.”

“Yes, had best views. Other rooms were just ok.”

“How much did this cost?”

“You really like that question.”

Ilya moved closer to him, putting his hands on Shane’s waist.

“Don’t worry about cost. Ok?”

The door reopened and a petite brunette in a white button down and black skirt entered, quickly settling them at the table then pouring two glasses of champagne while spouting off

information about dishes and ingredients that Shane didn't pay any attention to.

Shane would never admit it; it was too mortifying, but he *had* spent some time Googling "best questions to ask on a first date" and "interesting questions to ask someone you're interested in." But before he had a chance to break out the ones he thought were winners, Ilya spoke.

"Tell me about you."

That hadn't been on any of the lists Shane had seen, and therefore, he had not practiced a good answer to it.

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything."

"I'm a grad student. I work at the 7/11, but you knew that. I play hockey."

"No, no, not Wikipedia facts. Tell me about *you*."

Shane took too large a sip of champagne and felt like the bubbles were settling directly beneath his skin.

"You didn't know 'ground rules,' but you know Wikipedia?"

"Is large website, Shane. With very helpful information."

Shane snorted.

"What do you want to know about me?"

"Why do you play hockey?"

"Well," Shane smiled – this was safe, this was familiar. "I'm from Canada. So, I guess partially it's in my blood. My dad played hockey like practically his whole life. He went to college on a hockey scholarship."

"He must be good."

"He was really good."

Ilya inclined his head at the word 'was' like he wanted to know more but didn't press, and Shane was grateful.

"My mom always likes to say that I was skating before I could walk. That I'd crawled until I was too old to be crawling, but the second my dad put skates on me I was off like a shot."

Shane started talking about his mom then. It had been the two of them for quite a while, and he knew some people might call him a mama's boy. He didn't care. It had been hard moving away, but she pushed him – "Shane, you need to stretch your wings. You can't do that here."

When Shane first moved to New York; before he met Hayden or got friendly with the guys on the team, he'd called her every day.

"You have no siblings?" Ilya asked once Shane reached a break in his stories.

"No, no, it was just me."

"So, parents have perfect child and decide that was enough."

Shane snorted again. He knew it wasn't an attractive laugh, but he couldn't help that it kept slipping out.

"What's your family like?"

Shane was never the best at reading anyone's facial expressions, but something *truly* unreadable passed across Ilya's face at the question.

"My family is tiresome."

"Tiresome?"

"Not worth talking about really."

He tried not to focus on the distinct air of awkwardness that was now settling over him. Shane wondered if Genevieve would be back soon to help put him out of his misery. Why had he asked about Ilya's family? He needed to change the subject. Obviously, he did something nefarious for work, Shane couldn't ask about that. But he did have a rolodex of first date questions still.

"What are your hobbies, and how did you get into them?"

God, it sounded like a question he had looked up online and then memorized. Probably because it *was* a question Shane had looked up online and then memorized.

"Shane," Ilya's face had broken into a genuine smile. "I am sorry. I did not mean to make you feel awkward and ask me job interview questions."

"It's not a job interview question!"

"Ok, Mr. Human Resources. What next? I tell you about strengths and weaknesses?"

"Oh, fuck off!"

But Shane was smiling now too, relieved as the tension started to melt off of him.

Genevieve reappeared then, arms laden with dishes that she carefully set down in front of them, more descriptors of the food flowing out of her mouth.

"Could you tell me about Russia?" Shane asked after they'd finished what he was sure was the best food he'd ever put in his mouth.

“Hm,” Ilya took a moment to sip his champagne. “Is cold there.”

“Cold, wow, thrilling description.”

“Smart ass. Cold like… not just outside cold, is cold in your bones when you’re there,” Ilya continued. “Can be hard to be there. But it is beautiful too.”

“When were you there last?”

“I have not been back since I was eighteen.”

“That long?”

“Mhm,” Ilya just nodded.

“Do you miss it?”

“Is complicated question.”

Another silence settled over them, but Shane didn’t feel the same awkward tension as earlier. This was more like a worn blanket – familiar and maybe a little heavy but comfortable. Shane liked this silence. A lot of his life was filled with noise – classes and hockey and the sounds of the city in general. It was part of the reason he liked working at the 7/11 at night. It got so quiet. It let him finally give his brain a break. Let him slow down. He closed his eyes for a beat while he drank another mouthful of champagne – holding the bubbles in his mouth for a moment, letting them dance across his tongue.

“You like the quiet.”

A lot of the time, Ilya’s questions didn’t sound like questions, but Shane could tell this wasn’t one of those times. There was no judgement in his tone – more like a curiosity, an observation that he made while his eyes intently studied Shane. His hand had been resting on the table, but Ilya turned it over now, running his fingers carefully across Shane’s up-turned palm.

“Sometimes. Yeah, I do.”

“I like the quiet too. The city is so,” Ilya waved his hand around vaguely before returning to his caress of Shane’s palm. “It’s a lot.”

“It is.”

Shane knew his breath was getting quicker, could feel his face getting flushed. It was such a casual touch, a gentle one. It shouldn’t be affecting him as much as it was.

“Should we go somewhere quieter?”

“We’re in an empty ballroom, Ilya.”

“Hm, but shh, you can still hear people out in the restaurant. So loud, no?”

“Maybe we *should* go somewhere quieter.”

*****

Shane had expected Ilya to call the Mercedes back, but he had just taken Shane’s hand when they walked out the glass doors and silently guided him down the sidewalk. It was less than ten minutes before Ilya turned them into another ridiculously luxurious building, silently nodding when the doorman greeted him by name.

He only dropped Shane’s hand when they reached the door of an apartment, fifty-something floors up. Ilya fiddled with keys before getting the door open and letting Shane into a foyer. Shane couldn’t help wandering away down the small hallway and into a living room that had a view to rival the restaurant they just left.

“Do you live here?” He heard Ilya following behind him.

“Sometimes. You want vodka?”

He glanced behind him to see Ilya standing by a bar cart, pouring clear liquid into a glass over a large ice cube before Shane turned back to the immaculate view.

“I think I’ve had enough to drink.”

“You are not missing much. Is ok vodka. Not as good as Russian.”

He took a large sip and then left the glass on the cart, sidling up behind Shane.

“You ask what I want from you, Shane. But what do you want from me?”

Ilya was standing behind him now, his hands came to meet Shane’s waist, his mouth close to Shane’s ear as he asked the question.

“I told you already.”

“Ah, yes, for me to be in charge?”

Shane nodded.

“You like someone else being in charge?”

“Sometimes.”

“You don’t seem like someone who would like to take orders, Shane.”

Ilya’s lips moved below his ear, lightly mouthing at a sensitive point at his neck. Shane couldn’t help the noise that escaped him.

“Depends on the orders. I can follow directions well,” Shane tried to swallow the honest-to-god whimper that had almost left his throat.

“What directions would you like to follow?”

Shane shut his eyes, his head tipping back slightly. Ilya's hands ran up his arms, over his shoulders. His deft fingers reached beneath the lapels of Shane's jacket, sliding it off of him and letting it pool on the floor. Shane wanted to turn and pick it up, but Ilya's hand found his chin, the other pulled him back against Ilya's chest.

"I asked a question, Shane. Answer it."

Shane's breathing was loud in his own ears. He wanted to say something clever – something bold and bratty – but he couldn't think clearly anymore. One of his hands came up over where Ilya's rested on his stomach.

"Please," Ilya's voice was so close, the heat of him pressing into Shane's back. "Answer me. Tell me what you need from me."

"Just… just to not think. To not make decisions. For someone else to be in charge."

"Someone to get you out of your head?"

"Yes," Shane's relief at being understood was palpable. "Yes, can you do that, please? Take me out of my head?"

"With pleasure."

Ilya's fingers dropped from his chin, caressing down his throat.

"You know I'm not a good man, Shane? You put yourself in my hands?"

"Yes."

Shane didn't know which question he was answering. Maybe it was the same answer to both. Maybe he wanted to disagree that Ilya wasn't a good man. Maybe he didn't care right now.

Ilya continued his stroking of Shane's throat, his fingers catching over the light stubble on the underside of Shane's chin.

"Are you hard, Shane?"

He nodded his head, embarrassed at how little it actually took to make him painfully hard. He knew Ilya was, too, he could feel it against his back.

"I want you to answer when I ask questions, Shane."

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, I'm hard. Fuck," Shane gasped out.

"Unbutton your pants. Unzip them."

Shane reached for his waistband – just under where Ilya's hand was still at his abdomen, holding him close.

"No, slower."

He unbuttoned his dress pants, drawing his zipper down, and then waited.

"Good boy. Take it out."

Ilya's hand encompassed his throat – pushing back slightly, but not enough to be uncomfortable. Shane swallowed, liking the feeling of his throat working against Ilya's fingers, and pushed his boxer briefs down, taking his cock in his hand.

"Beautiful," Ilya's face was just over his shoulder, his voice was still in Shane's ear, his lips occasionally meeting the side of his neck. "Let me see you play with yourself. Slowly."

Shane started to move his hand, stroking himself slowly.

"Wait."

Ilya's hand moved off his stomach, grabbing Shane's wrist, and bringing it up to Ilya's own mouth so he could spit in his palm.

"Now, touch yourself."

Shane moaned as he started moving his hand, spreading Ilya's spit over himself. The sound vibrated in his throat, against Ilya's palm.

"I want you to make yourself come. I want to watch. And I want to hear you."

"Fuck, are you going to touch – "

"You want to know if I will touch myself while I watch you?"

"Yes, Ilya. Fuck."

"No," Ilya sounded almost amused. "No, I think when I next come, it will be with you beneath me. Crying my name."

"God, Ilya," Shane could have come right then if not for the slow pace that Ilya wanted him to maintain.

"I'm looking forward to that. Maybe I will press you against one of these windows. Or push you into my bed. Maybe both."

"You could – fuck – you could – do that now," Shane gasped.

"You do not like to talk during, do you? While you fuck?"

Shane shook his head slightly.

“But you make so many other pretty noises. Go faster. I want you to come thinking about how I will fuck you. Thinking about how much you want to spread your legs for me, and – ”

“Jesus, fuck!” Shane let out, and then he was coming, spilling over his own fingers. Ilya’s hand was still against his throat, his head being held against Ilya’s shoulder as his hips jerked. He gasped, finishing, and Ilya’s hand relaxed, moving slightly until it rested against the base of his throat – against the Cartier chain.

His hand around Shane’s waist was practically holding him upright, Shane wasn’t sure his legs were doing a damn thing to help that effort. His fingers softly stroked the side of Shane’s face.

“That was perfect. You did so good. You listen so good, Shane. You’re so pretty when you come.”

He guided Shane to one of the plush couches in the living room, settling him into it before reaching for handful of tissue and wiping the cum off Shane’s hand. He was sure the rest of it was somewhere over on Ilya’s beautiful wood floor, but the Russian man stayed kneeling in front of Shane. It was a miracle none of it got on his black pants.

“Aren’t you going to – ” Shane vaguely motioned to Ilya’s own dick, clearly still hard.

Ilya reached his hand out, cupping Shane’s face, and lightly resting his thumb over his lips.

“Who is in charge, Shane?”

“You,” he spoke against Ilya’s thumb, a shudder running through him.

“Good. Stay here, one moment.”

Ilya stood and disappeared from the room, and Shane was suddenly aware that his now softening dick was still out. He tucked himself back into his pants, zipping them up. It was the most exposed he had ever felt, and he hadn’t even been naked.

Ilya returned with a glass and held it out to him.

“I don’t want vodka.”

“Is water.”

“Oh,” was all Shane said as he took it from Ilya’s hand, suddenly aware of how thirsty he was. Ilya stayed kneeling in front of where he sat until he’d drained the entire glass, his hand gently rubbing circles into one of Shane’s knees.

“You want me to take you home or to stay here?”

Shane did want to stay there. He wondered if he stayed there if Ilya would curl up behind him in bed, if he would pull him close and fall asleep tangled up in him. If he would press a soft kiss to Shane’s lips when they woke up. But that felt like the kind of thing a couple would do. And they weren’t a couple. Regardless of what had just happened. Ilya hadn’t even kissed

him. Whatever this was, they weren't *together*. The thought settled in Shane's stomach like a brick.

"Take me home, please."

Chapter End Notes

Seriously the most sincere thank you's ever for reading. Your comments put oxygen directly into my lungs and I've been trying my best to respond to all of them even if it's just a heart to let you know that I appreciate you - I'm sure that I'm missing so many because life is generally ridiculously overwhelming. But know that even if I don't respond, I am truly so grateful.

Also, some fun facts - the restaurant Shane and Ilya go to is Manhatta on Liberty St. It does have phenomenal views and a ballroom that you can rent out (for like 40k). Also, Ilya's financial district apartment is at 125 Greenwich St which is in fact a 7 minute walk from Manhatta. Lemme tell you, research is going into this even if it's running on vibes only.

Chapter 5: Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Shane has anxiety. About everything.

Ilya has panic. Only about Shane

Chapter Notes

All usual disclaimers apply - author hates AI and loves em dashes; I'm running on vibes only and apologize for errors (I don't have a beta and I barely edit).

Thank you so so much for reading!!

(Editing because I forgot what profession I originally gave Yuna, and I wound up changing it in later chapters. Bless the commenter that pointed it out. This story truly lives in like 14 scatter shot notes in my notes app.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The drive from Ilya's lux Financial District apartment to Shane's shabby studio took roughly half an hour. He had been tempted to tell Ilya that he'd just take the train but instead let the Russian man call a car instead. Shane had then been tempted to tell Ilya to just stay there and let Nikolai take him home. Maybe that would have been the smarter decision for his own self-preservation, but Shane was having a hard time making smart decisions right now – the choice to go home was maybe the smartest one he'd made the whole night.

Now that he had a moment to think, he couldn't stop his brain from the torrential downpour of overthinking that was flooding him.

Was that stupid? Does he think I'm just some slut? Is this just sex? Did I sell my body for a Cartier chain? Does he even like me? He didn't even kiss me.

It was distressing that the last thought was the most upsetting to Shane. Almost against his will, he could feel the fingers of one hand start to pick at the cuticles of his other – a nervous habit he'd had since childhood.

When he was little, he'd pick at his cuticles until a bright red bloom of blood frightened him – the color giving away how hard he had gone to town on his own delicate skin long before

the pain hit him. The other kids would give him weird looks when he showed up to school with band-aids covering most of his fingers. They'd give him disgusted looks if he managed to peel any of those band-aids off – the scabbed over skin at the base of his nails making him look like patient zero of the zombie apocalypse.

"We're here," Ilya's voice cut through the storm of thoughts.

Shane barely noticed that they'd spent the last half hour in silence. He turned to say goodbye, but Ilya was already out of the car, waving Nikolai away as he opened Shane's door instead.

Should I invite him inside?

Before he could unlock his door and spiral about that question, Ilya's soft hand planted itself on Shane's chin and turned his face gently toward the man.

"Did you have nice time?"

Shane almost nodded when Ilya's voice from earlier sternly asking him for an answer echoed through his mind.

"I did," an eternity passed in the pause Shane took. "Did you?"

"I think you know I did."

"Maybe I want to hear you say it."

"Oh, the pretty boy wants to hear me say how much fun I had with him?

Ilya's thumb moved to caress the scattered freckles on Shane's cheek. That word. *Fun*. That's what this was. And that was fine. Shane was fine with that. He leaned into the touch all the same.

"I had very nice time. I think you are lovely. And I want to do it again," Ilya's hand moved from his cheek to his neck before flowing softly over Shane's shoulder and down his arm. His lithe fingers wrapped around Shane's wrist. He brought Shane's hand up to his lips, pressing them softly onto his fingertips, his palm, his wrist.

Lovely.

The word was stuck in his head, the sound of it mixed with the press of Ilya's plush lips onto his skin blissfully stilling the overthinking frenzy for a moment.

"Goodnight, Shane," Ilya finally let his hand go.

"Goodnight, Ilya."

*****

Shane hadn't called his mom in two weeks. He'd seen her missed calls on his phone, saw her brief voicemail ("Call me when you have a chance, I know you're busy, baby!"), but he had

yet to call her back – and now it was somehow two weeks later.

He knew he was being a coward. He knew that if he called her, she would put him at ease, and in their easy flow of conversation he would accidentally tell her he had been on a date. A kind of date. Maybe a date.

“Hi, honey! I left you a voicemail; did you not get it?”

His mom’s voice was bright when she picked up the phone. He could hear her shuffling around while she spoke – no doubt she was still at work. Yuna Hollander had once worked for the National Gallery of Canada for a while when he was too young to remember. He knew that she did something with the library and archives, but he had no idea what. It made him feel like a little bit of a dumb jock anytime she started to talk about it, but he knew that she had loved it.

She hadn’t bought the restaurant until he was a little older, not until after his dad was gone. It still made him feel like a little bit of a dumb jock to hear about overhead and profit margin and real estate developers chomping at the bit to try and get at the space, but he had at least seen first hand growing up what running the place was like for her.

“Hi, Mom, hey, yeah, I did. I’m sorry, I lost track of time – ”

“That’s ok, I know school keeps you so busy. And that you need to focus on hockey, too. Then you had to go and get this insane job – ”

“It’s not an insane job, Mom. It’s a very normal – ”

“Working until all hours of the night is not sane, not normal, Shane.”

“You’re one to talk – are you at work right now?”

Yuna’s laugh rang out, and any anxiety Shane had about talking to his mom slowly melted as they fell into an easy conversation, voices overlapping with the same familiarity and speed that they’d always had.

“So, have you been seeing anyone?”

Damn, he should have known.

“Not really, Mom. You said it yourself, I’m busy.”

“Too busy to talk to any other cute boys in the program?”

“Mom, I’m not going to date someone in the same program.”

“Why! You know you’d already have something in common. And you would know that they’d have a good future too.”

“Mom, I’m going to *be* a doctor, you don’t need to try to set me up with one.”

“You’ll have a doctorate; you could stand to meet a nice surgeon, I’m sure.”

“Mom!”

“I’m not going to bring attention to the fact that you avoided my question.”

“I didn’t avoid it. I told you not really.”

“There’s something you aren’t saying – ”

“Mom, I – ”

“But that’s ok,” she spoke over him. “You’ll tell me when you want to.”

“Thank you, Mom.”

Shane made promises that he wouldn’t wait so long between phone calls as they said their goodbyes. He only felt moderately guilty for not telling her anything about Ilya after they’d hung up.

*****

Shane had been late to class twice this semester. Each time he had tried to quietly creep into the back of the room, tamping down the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, and hoping to god that his face wasn’t as red as it felt.

And now he was cursing his own lack of sleep as he made that journey a third time.

“Mr. Hollander!”

Fuck.

“So good of you to join us.”

“Yes, I, uh, I’m sorry, Dr. Stetler, I just – ”

“I don’t actually care about the reason, Mr. Hollander. Take a seat, but talk to me after.”

Shane kept his eyes trained down, hyper focused on retrieving his laptop from his bag and setting it on the surface in front of him. His face was burning so hot that he knew there was no way it wasn’t bright red, and he didn’t want to see the pitying looks from his peers.

“Ok, so getting back to neuromuscular…”

Dr. Stetler’s voice turned into a dull drone – Shane should have been paying attention to it, but he’d opened a Google doc intending to take notes and just left the cursor sitting there, blinking on the blank document.

He wasn’t sure how the class was finished as fast as it was, but soon everyone had packed up and was leaving Shane to whatever fate awaited him.

“Dr. Stetler, I just want to say – ”

“Mr. Hollander, it’s – ”

“No, I just need to apologize because I didn’t mean to be disruptive to your class, and I know it’s rude of me, and not respectful of your time. And I don’t want you to think I don’t respect your time because I *do*, and it’s just that – ”

“Shane,” his professor cut off the word salad that he hadn’t been able to stop. “I was being sincere. I don’t care why you were late.”

“Ok, but I just wanted to make sure – ”

“You put an extraordinary amount of pressure on yourself, don’t you, Mr. Hollander?”

Shane didn’t know how to respond to that. He knew that he put pressure on himself, but he didn’t think it was so out of the ordinary. He had to be the best. It was a statement of fact.

“I don’t mind that you were, what, three minutes late for maybe the second time ever, Mr. Hollander – “

“I think it was more like 15, and this is three times.”

“Regardless, I just wanted to talk to you about your clinical observations in spring.”

“Oh,” this conversation was not going anywhere that Shane thought it was going to. “Is there a problem with my observation?”

“No, no, nothing like that. I just know that you have an aim of going into sports medicine. You’re on the hockey team, right?”

“I am, but it shouldn’t interfere with any clinic schedules. If you feel that that’s becoming a distraction, I can easily – ”

“Shane. No. I was just going to tell you that while the parameters for clinical observations are fairly strict, I think that I might be able to pull some strings and have your observation next term be with the head trainer over at the Rangers medical facility.”

“I – wait, what?”

That would be perfect. Was it *too* perfect?

“I can see you’re still in anxiety mode, Mr. Hollander. Don’t overthink this. I’ll shoot you and your advisor an email with the details – just give it some thought and then let me know what you think.”

*****

“You haven’t called me in weeks, Shane Hollander – ”

“Ok, it hadn’t been that lo – ”

“WEEKS. And now you’re going to say that you’re about to have all your dreams come true, but you sound like a sad puppy about it?”

Shane was catching up on all the phone calls he needed to return. He could only see part of Rose’s face in his phone screen as his phone lay flat on the counter at work. Normally, the time difference between here and where Rose was in LA was the bane of his existence. But right now, as the clock inched past midnight and the store started to quiet down, it was perfect timing.

He’d met Rose when he first moved to New York. He’d had no idea that she was an influencer with millions of followers; he thought she was just a nice girl in his undergrad Comm 101 class at a time when he didn’t know a lot of nice people. Rose had been delighted that he had no idea who she was and decided that they were going to be fast friends.

True to her word, they stayed friends even after she moved across the country.

“I’m not being a sad puppy about it, I’m just nervous.”

“What could you possibly be nervous about, babe?”

“What if I fuck it all up?”

Even if he couldn’t see her whole face, he saw the way that the edges of her eyes crinkled a little – he knew the little smile that was spreading across the unseen half of her face.

“You won’t.”

“You sound confident.”

“I *am* confident, Shane Hollander. And I’m perfectly fine being confident for the both of us until you can catch up.”

The door chime sounded its sad battery-dying song in that moment, and Shane glanced up – about to just say ‘hey’ and get back to his conversation with Rose until he saw who it was.

“Shane-bug, you just absolutely lit up, who just walked in? Aren’t you at work?”

“Rose, I gotta go.”

“Shane, what are you – ”

“I’ll call you later, okloveyoubye.”

He punched at the red button to end the call twice before he managed to hit it.

“You heard me come in that time.”

“You weren’t purposefully sneaking up on me that time.”

“I never *sneak*, Shane.”

“Yes, you do.”

He bit his bottom lip to kill the little smile that was dancing on his mouth. Shane desperately needed to get it under control and not act like a junior high kid with a crush. But damn if he didn’t feel like a junior high kid with a crush.

“Did you miss me?”

He liked how Ilya’s accent shifted on the vowels in the word ‘miss.’

“I just saw you.”

“Not for whole day, you haven’t.”

“Should I miss you after not seeing you for one day?”

But, damn, he *did* miss Ilya even if it had only been a day. He’d spent most of his Monday distracted, late to class, frazzled over talking about his clinical observation options, and thinking about Ilya. Wondering if Ilya would come tonight. Wondering if Ilya wanted to see him again. Wondering if Ilya would make good on all the dirty things he’d talked about when he had Shane pinned against him.

“You missed me,” a quiet smile snuck onto Ilya’s face.

“Shouldn’t you be going to grab your Coke? They might be all out, there were a bunch of college kids in here earlier.”

“College kids all drink Mountain Dew, is fine.”

Ilya stalked back toward the cooler, and Shane watched the muscles of his shoulders flex and relax as he opened the door and grabbed a bottle. It’s not as though it was Shane’s intention to soak in the view, but it was a nice benefit.

“It’s not good for you to drink caffeine so late,” Shane rang up the soda.

“Is not good for me to smoke cigarettes, but I’m not stopping that either.”

“Smoking is awful for you, Ilya.”

“Is it, Shane?”

“Would you quit if I asked you to?”

Ilya paused for a moment, wallet in his hand, before opening it and throwing a few hundred-dollar bills on the counter.

“Keep change, is for you. And yes. If you asked. I would do this.”

*****

“You never told me what happened with the mysterious Russian dinner.”

Hayden collapsed into the seat next to him on the team bus. Shane had been set to put his noise-claiming headphones on and pretend to be listening to music for the three-and-a-half-hour drive to Annapolis.

He hated away games. He hated the disruption of his routine. He hated never knowing if the hotel sheets would be ok or if they’d be scratchy and awful. He hated how the water pressure was different in the showers at the hotel and the arenas than his own shower or his own rink’s locker room.

Away games were on the list in Shane’s mind that he’d labelled “reasons I didn’t want to go to a D1 school” too. At least at NYU they never had to travel very far.

“I don’t know if you can call it a Russian dinner. The dinner wasn’t Russian. It was just with a Russian man.”

“Ok, then you never told me what happened with dinner with the mysterious Russian.”

Shane knew there wasn’t any getting out of this. Hayden would nag him until he shared *something*. And if his resolve somehow held then Hayden would recruit Jackie in the effort, and Shane was powerless against the two of them.

“It was good. I had a nice time.”

“Are you being real with me right now, man?”

“Yeah,” Shane was indignant. “It was nice!”

“I need so many more details than that to make Jackie happy.”

“Oh, so now we both have to make your girlfriend happy?”

“Obviously!”

“We went to a very fancy restaurant and ate very fancy food. Then we went to his very fancy apartment and drank very fancy vodka. Then he drove me home. The end.”

Shane didn’t feel bad about lying about drinking vodka. Hayden didn’t need to know details about what may or may not have happened at Ilya’s very fancy apartment.

“Ok, Jackie will want to know what restaurant and what his apartment was like and where is the apartment exactly. Oh, and also – ”

“Hayd.”

“Sorry, sorry, you just know she’s going to want to know all about it.”

“Ok, so let’s just go to Doc’s when we get back, and then you don’t play telephone and I won’t get annoyed at your questions.”

“It’s a deal, Hollander.”

Shane thought that that would be the end of it, but he should have known better.

“Did you have a good time though?”

“Yeah, Hayd,” Shane smiled. “I had a good time.”

“Why do you sound not that happy about having a good time? He didn’t… Did he pressure you into anything or like – ”

“No, no, no,” Shane quickly cut off the line of questioning. “I just… I’m trying to be careful.”

“Well, I *hope* you used protection, Hollander.”

“Oh my GOD, Hayden, not that kind of careful.”

Hayden was fighting off a laugh.

“You are such an asshole, Pike,” Shane gave a half-hearted punch at his shoulder. “I just meant, I don’t want to get in too deep, too emotional. It was fun. I had a good time. I’m not out here touring wedding venues or doodling his last name in my trapper keeper though, ok?”

“Do you still use a trapper keeper? Man, I haven’t thought about those since middle school.”

“You’re missing the point, but no, I don’t actually have a trapper keeper.”

“That’s such a weird phrase, isn’t it?”

“Hayden…”

“I’m trying to lighten the mood here, Hollander!”

“I’m putting headphones on now.”

“We both know you’re not going to listen to a damn thing.”

“Still putting ‘em on, Pike!”

*****

Shane was completely exhausted. He should have asked for one more night off work just to recover. It had been a good road trip – three awful days away from home, but two games played against the Naval Academy, and they’d won both of them. It was always fun winning an away game. He loved hearing NYU fans cheering at Chelsea Piers, but there was something really fun to him about shutting up fans in their own rinks.

It had been a long bus ride back after the game on Saturday afternoon, and Shane fell asleep as soon as his head hit his own pillow. But now his alarm was going off, and he needed to drag his ass to work. It was going to be a long night.

“Dude, you look like a zombie.”

“Helpful, Jake. Thank you.”

“Just saying,” the younger man held his hands up in a shrug as he backed out of the shop.

Jake was a nice kid. But he hadn’t restocked a damn thing. And he hadn’t unpacked the boxes of cigarette cartons that were just sitting behind the counter having accumulated over the last three days. Or put more coffee cups next to the machine.

“Jesus Christ,” Shane muttered to himself as he started looking around for a box cutter. He wanted to at least clear out the boxes behind the counter, and then he’d deal with restocks. It was easy enough to just hand someone a coffee cup if they happened to come in while he was fucking around with this.

He’d finally gotten all the boxes taken care of when a crash at the front of the store startled him – someone had thrown the front door open with enough force that it had knocked over a display beside it.

“What the fuck – ” Shane was ready to kick out whatever asshole had decided it was cool to come in like a goddamn tornado at 1am.

“Shane.”

The relief in Ilya’s voice was palpable – he was staring at Shane like he’d seen a ghost.

“Ilya?”

Ilya crossed the space between them in two strides, coming behind the counter and cradling Shane’s face in his hands a little roughly.

“Ilya, what the hell?”

“You were not here.”

Ilya’s sea glass eyes were darting all over his face like they were looking for signs he’d been replaced by a clone.

“Ilya,” Shane brought one hand up to cover one of Ilya’s. “I had away games.”

“Away games?”

“We went to play… hockey… in Maryland.”

“You have been in Maryland.”

“Yes.”

“For the last three days?”

“Yes.”

“To play hockey.”

“That is what I said, Ilya, yes.”

“Jesus Christ, Shane. What the hell?”

“What the hell *me*? Why are you tearing in here like a bat out of hell?”

“Why was bat in hell?”

“Ilya, that’s not – That’s not the point. What’s wrong?”

“I thought something – I thought that – It does not matter what I thought,” Ilya finally settled on saying.

He finally let his hands fall from Shane’s face but kept one of them tangled in Shane’s hand.

“You shouldn’t be behind the counter.”

“Shane.”

“It’s against policy.”

“I don’t care.”

“You were *worried* about me, weren’t you?”

Shane thought he might like that Ilya had worried.

“Was not worried. I just… I just didn’t like not knowing.”

“That sounds like being worried.”

Ilya let out an exasperated sigh and leaned back onto the wall. Shane’s phone was sitting where it usually was on a narrow shelf underneath the register when Ilya suddenly let his hand go and grabbed the phone.

“Ilya, what – ”

“What is password?”

“I’m not giving you my phone password!”

“You type it, it’s fine.”

“What are you doing?”

Despite his protests, Shane found himself unlocking his phone and handing it back to Ilya.

“There. You have phone number now. You will tell me when you are gone?”

“Ilya – ”

“I already have Nikolai stop waiting by your home. By rink. I do not have anyone watch store. I do what you ask. But please, I want to know you are safe still. I need to know this. Please.”

It was the tone of voice that changed on the word ‘please’ that made Shane’s heart stutter a beat. Ilya was always a force of nature – larger than life. He commanded every room he walked in; from Shane’s tiny studio apartment to a ballroom at the top of the Financial District. But his voice sounded so small when he’d said ‘please,’ like the word itself was delicate, and he needed to be careful that he didn’t damage it with a harsh mouth.

“Okay.” Shane wanted to bury his hands in Ilya’s hair. He wanted to pull Ilya’s lips to his mouth, and drink him in. But he settled for just saying ‘okay.’

“Okay?”

Ilya did run one hand through Shane’s hair, his fingers scratching lightly at his scalp. He leaned into it, hell, he might have made a noise out loud, but Shane wasn’t sure if he had or if that was just in his head.

“I forgot,” Ilya’s hand moved to his own pocket. “I have gift.”

“For the beer delivery man?”

“Obviously.”

This red box was smaller than the previous one but was just as luxurious. Shane wondered if he was going to end up getting used to opening Cartier boxes. What a thought.

The chain inside looked like the one that he had worn around his neck on Sunday night, but much like the box, it was smaller.

“I thought you needed matching set.”

Ilya gently plucked the chain out of the box, unclipping the clasp and wrapping it around Shane’s wrist.

“Ilya – ”

“You are going to ask cost?”

Ilya smirked.

“I wasn’t. I just. Thank you.”

Ilya leaned close to his ear before he spoke.

“Thank me tomorrow. I send car to bring you to my house,” Ilya paused. “If that is something you want.”

“It’s something I want.”

Shane should have been embarrassed about how quickly he said it, but he couldn’t find it in himself to feel shame. Not when Ilya’s mouth had found the sensitive skin below his ear again. Not when Ilya’s hands were gripping his waist. He couldn’t even be embarrassed at the whine he let out when that mouth left his skin, and Ilya stepped back.

The door chimed, and Shane quickly remembered how to feel embarrassed as two girls wandered in, took one look at Shane and Ilya, and started giggling as they walked to the snack aisle.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Shane,” Ilya was smirking, on the edge of holding back a laugh himself.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know why influencer Rose popped up - I feel like Shane just needs to be able to queen out with someone, you know?

As always, your comments and kudos are so so kind and I love them so so much. I'm so grateful for your kindness and for your willingness to come along on this journey with me.

ALSO, I meant to post chapter 5 and 6 at the same time, but work crisis (plural of crisis there) took over my life. Chapter 6 is well on its way though, and I'm aiming to have it posted before the week is up!

Chapter 6: Ilya's POV

Chapter Summary

> The storm of anxiety that has been Ilya's life while Shane was happily shooting pucks in Maryland.

Chapter Notes

> As per usual, no AI, I just love em dashes. I have read back through my work at this point and have found really devastating-to-me grammar errors. I will probably fix those at some point. Right now, they remain a testament to the fact that I don't use AI for even grammar
>
> Also, if Nikolai and Ilya's dialogue is italicized, that is to indicate they've switched to speaking Russian instead of English.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ilya should say something. He wanted to say something. He wanted to tell Shane, “no, you said I will be in charge, you will stay,” but that felt wrong. That *was* wrong. He wanted Shane to stay with him because that’s what *Shane* wanted. He could hardly keep the man prisoner in this apartment just because he wanted to touch his skin, wanted to see where else freckles might reside on his body.

He was trying to be careful – to not push Shane into too much too fast. He made sure to get him water afterward, to touch him soothingly, gently, to tell him how well he had done because fuck, he had done well. He was trying to take care of Shane.

Everything about the encounter was burning under Ilya’s skin as they got into the car. The feeling of Shane pinned to him was seared on his body in a way that he knew no shower would erase. And he didn’t want it erased.

The car ride was silent. It did nothing to calm the thoughts racing through Ilya.

Does he hate me now? Did he enjoy that? Can I kiss him? Can I see him again? Does he even like me or does he just like that I give him things and make him feel good?

Ilya was desperate to extend the night in whatever way he could – jumping out of the car as soon as Nikolai pulled up to the curb so that he could open Shane’s door for him. He was

certain he saw the faint stain of a blush across Shane's freckled cheeks as he stepped out of the car.

Shane wasn't meeting his eyes as they stood in front of his door, and Ilya couldn't stand it anymore. Before he could stop himself, he gently turned Shane's face up, his fingers softly holding his chin in place so he *had* to look at Ilya.

"Did you have nice time?"

It looked like Shane was hesitating, and Ilya's heart dropped into his stomach. He had misread this. He had fucked up. He had done something Shane didn't want and –

"I did."

Relief was a riptide that threw Ilya's body onto a shore built of hope.

"Did you?" Shane sounded shy when he asked.

"I think you know I did."

It hadn't occurred to Ilya that maybe Shane was having a similar internal battle – somehow thinking that Ilya didn't want him with every fiber of his being; that he didn't love the feeling of having Shane come apart in his arms.

"Oh, the pretty boy wants to hear me say how much fun I had with him?"

He couldn't stop himself from moving his thumb to caress the freckles that peppered the upper part of Shane's cheek. He was obsessed. If Shane had stayed at the apartment, Ilya was sure he would have been awake the entire night, cataloging those freckles, memorizing them, writing poems to them that Russian literature students would study fifty years down the line.

"I had a very nice time. I think you are lovely. And I want to do it again."

If that wasn't the biggest understatement that Ilya had ever uttered…

Before he could stop himself, he ran his hand down Shane's arm, grabbing his wrist and bringing his fingers to Ilya's mouth. He pressed a soft kiss to the pads of his fingertips, to his palm, to the fluttering pulse in his wrist before making himself let go.

If he didn't stop, he was going to insist on following Shane into this crappy apartment and taking him apart bit by bit.

*****

"You are trying to appear desperate?" Nikolai was holding back a laugh as they got into the car.

"I am not desperate."

“You see this man last night, and now you cannot go whole day without going back to see him again?”

“Maybe I just want soda, Nika.”

“Could have gotten that from your own refrigerator.”

“I do not remember asking for commentary about where I would like to be driven.”

“As though that’s ever stopped me from giving it.”

Ilya wished that Shane was distracted when he came through the door – so often Shane was so preoccupied with a mindless task or a book that he didn’t look up or notice Ilya right away. Ilya relished those quiet moments. He liked the handful of seconds that he got to freely stare, to drink Shane up with his eyes.

It looked like Shane was on the phone, maybe on a video call, when Ilya walked in – the small black rectangle of his phone was sitting propped up against the register while Shane sat on the rickety stool behind the counter.

“I’ll call you later, ok, love you, bye.”

Love you. Love you?

Maybe he had been talking to his mom. Ilya hoped that he had been talking to his mom.

“You heard me come in that time.”

“You weren’t purposefully sneaking up on me that time.”

“I never *sneak*, Shane.”

It wasn’t true. Ilya could be as silent as the grave when he was trying to send a person to theirs.

“Yes, you do.”

“Did you miss me?”

Because I missed you. I’m starting to miss you every moment you aren’t near me. It’s going to be a problem soon if it isn’t one already.

“I just saw you.”

“Not for whole day, you haven’t.”

“Should I miss you after not seeing you for one day?”

Fuck, yes, please, miss me as much as I miss you.

He couldn't say that. He couldn't say any of what was in his head, so he turned back to the light teasing that was comfortable between them.

"You missed me."

"Shouldn't you be going to grab your Coke? They might be all out, there were a bunch of college kids in here earlier."

Ilya didn't give a damn about the Coke.

"College kids all drink Mountain Dew, is fine."

He still walked back to the dingy cooler. Maybe he walked a little slower than necessary – hoping that Shane was watching him as closely as Ilya was always watching Shane.

"It's not good for you to drink caffeine so late."

It wasn't good for him to be this taken with a man that he'd known for a matter of a couple months either, but here he was.

"Is not good for me to smoke cigarettes, but I'm not stopping that either."

"Smoking is awful for you, Ilya."

"Is it, Shane?"

"Would you quit if I asked you to?"

I would climb Mount Everest with no oxygen if you asked me to.

"Keep change, is for you," he threw an indiscriminate number of hundred-dollar bills onto the counter – not bothering to even count. "And yes. If you asked. I would do this."

*****

Claire was obviously thrilled to see him return. He didn't know why. Ilya had been such an asshole to her during the first trip to Cartier – she brought out piece after piece all with him dismissively waving his hand over them and making snide remarks.

"Mr. Rozanov, I'm so pleased to see you back! The chain must have gone over well, your recipient enjoyed it?"

"He did. And I did. I want something to match."

"For yourself? If you're going to an event, and you'd like to dress to match your partner – "

"No, no," Ilya waved his hand before he could stop himself. He was going to be an asshole again evidently.

His *partner*, she'd said. That wasn't what Shane was. Was it? Maybe not yet. Maybe not ever. Ilya wasn't sure how he felt about the word or the idea. He pushed it down where he kept

most complicated feelings – in a carefully closed box behind his heart where they couldn't hurt him.

"I want second piece for him."

"I have just the thing!"

He did *not* have a lot of faith that Claire had 'just the thing.' Claire had said the exact same phrase before showing him a gaudy diamond necklace in the shape of a panther. At least she had enthusiasm.

"That chain has a matching bracelet – simple, elegant, just like you wanted before. A nice little edition. Maybe the beginning of a larger collection?"

It turns out Claire did have just the thing. Maybe a bracelet was more subtle – something Shane would feel better about wearing all the time.

"Perfect, I would like that one."

*****

He should show some restraint, but Ilya didn't really care if he was "desperate looking" as Nikolai took so much pleasure in pointing out. He wanted to give Shane gifts. He wanted to give him much more than that. He wanted to revisit the idea of repeating their night out again – he had already said he wanted to do it again, but Ilya wanted a plan, wanted a set point in time that he could orient his life toward.

He was starting to like the silly little jingle that the chime on the door let out whenever it was opened.

But Ilya's gleeful anticipation at seeing Shane react to the bracelet turned rancid when it was not *Shane* sitting behind the counter but some other man who looked to be barely legal drinking age.

"You are not Shane."

"Uh, no, I'm not."

The kid gave no further explanation, and Ilya didn't even attempt to look like he had another reason to have entered the store – turning on his heel and leaving.

"He did not like the gift?" Nikolai had started to do a crossword puzzle behind the steering wheel of the Mercedes.

"He was not there."

"A night off then maybe?"

"But he did not say – "

"Oh, he must tell you every move he makes, Ilya?"

Ilya supposed that Nika could be right. Maybe Shane just took a night off. There could be a thousand reasons why he was not there. Maybe he had a big deadline for school coming up. An exam that he needed to concentrate on preparing for.

Ilya would not go to his home. He would not panic over such a slight thing.

*****

He was beginning to panic.

Ilya stayed up half the night trying to think about reasons Shane may not have been at the store. His mind cast around to the phone call he interrupted – maybe Shane had to go see the person that he was saying "love you" to.

He drove himself the next time – not wanting to hear Nikolai's opinions on his attitude.

"Sorry, I'm still not Shane."

That fucking kid was there *again.* Where the *hell* was Shane.

"Where is he?"

"I'm not supposed to talk about employee schedules to strangers."

"I'm not a – "

Wasn't he a stranger though? What claim did he have on the details of Shane's life like that?

"Nevermind," Ilya let out quietly instead.

*****

"When did you find him? Where was he?" Ilya stared down at the mangled, bloody body that had once been Evgeni.

They had laid him out on a table near the back part of the warehouse that Ilya owned off Neptune Ave. It was an unassuming brick building. He was sure that no one outside his operation knew he owned it, but…

"Out back, near the loading dock. Mikhail was leaving early this morning and saw him. Right in front of the door, he was not hidden."

Ilya nodded. It was a message. It was Aleksandr. There was no other option. Evgeni had not boarded the flight to Moscow – he had followed the example of his brother and tried to run to Ilya's competition instead. Aleksandr didn't take any kindlier to liars and thieves than Ilya did. Especially when those liars and thieves came to him *from* Ilya.

"You think – "

"Yes. Aleksandr," he finished Nikolai's thought for him.

"Fuck."

It was an escalation. They'd been dancing around each other for months, for years really, but had never left so blatant a message. 'I'm coming for your people, I'm coming for your turf' is what Aleksandr was trying to say to him, Ilya was sure of it.

"He should not know about this warehouse. He has to be watching you."

Nikolai was right. There had to be eyes on him, on the operation, maybe on everyone.

"Maybe you should not see Tatyana for a while. She doesn't need the trouble."

Nikolai was right again. It was why he was Ilya's right hand. Ilya felt as though he'd been plunged into a bath of ice at the statement though. If Aleksandr was watching *him*, Aleksandr might be watching *Shane.*

"I will be back."

"But, Ilya – "

"Just take care of Evgeni. I will be back."

He jumped behind the wheel of the car before he could think very much about what a bad idea this was. The distance to Shane's apartment was nothing from here. Ten minutes if that. His mind was racing with the possibility of someone *else* making this trek – of someone dumping Evgeni for Ilya to find and then going after the person who would hurt far more when Ilya found him.

He shook the thoughts from his head. Maybe he was overreacting. Maybe Shane had gone to visit his mom. Maybe he was safely ensconced in a boring home in chilly Canada.

The first floor of the building – the floor where Shane's apartment was – was dark when he pulled up. Ilya didn't bother to take the keys out of the ignition before he was half sprinting to the front door, banging a fist against the doorframe. When he glanced to his left, he could see a couple days' mail shoved into the mailbox.

"Jesus Christ, you know what time it is?"

"No," he barely glanced up toward the window the voice had drifted out of.

An older woman was half leaning out of an upper story window, glaring at him.

"It's fuckin' late, you lunatic."

"Do you know the man who lives here?"

"Who's asking?"

Ilya appreciated her caginess – the protective edge in her voice would be welcome by him if it were anyone else but him asking after Shane.

“I am… We are friends.”

“If you’re friends then you should know where he is.”

“Ok, but I don’t,” he couldn’t keep the edge of irritation from his voice.

She didn’t understand that this was an emergency, and he couldn’t explain to her that this was an emergency.

“I’ll tell him that some Bond villain was looking for him when I see him next. Now get off the property.”

Ilya didn’t have a choice but to trudge back to his car, veering around the still open front door and plopping into the front seat.

It was fine. It had to be fine. Shane took a trip. Or was staying with a friend. He was somewhere, anywhere, and safe. Ilya would *know* if something had happened to him, wouldn’t he? He would feel some kind of cosmic shift. He would feel a tug of the string that had wound its way around his heart and joined him to Shane.

Ilya briefly considered staying here until Shane came back or having Nikolai stay outside until he could confirm that Shane was safely home. But he knew how upset Shane had been when he tried that. And if he wanted Shane to *not* be upset about it, he would have to convey some measure of the danger he suspected Shane could be in. And he did not want to figure out how to explain that. He didn’t want to see Shane’s expression twist as he realized exactly what kind of man Ilya was – what kind of men Ilya dealt with. No, he couldn’t do that.

*****

Ilya slept for a couple hours all together – waking and dozing in fits and starts. It was bad enough that he asked Nikolai to drive him to the convenience store, so he didn’t fall asleep behind the wheel. He was tempted to ask Nikolai to say whatever Orthodox prayers he knew on the way there, but he resisted that particular urge.

Shane had to be there tonight. He *had* to. If he wasn’t there, Ilya would turn over the whole of Brooklyn to find him. Hell, he would go to Canada if he had to.s

He spotted him before he even opened the door – obviously muttering to himself as he wandered back and forth behind the counter, putting cartons of cigarettes in various places. Ilya couldn’t stop himself from throwing the door open with more force than he’d intended. He wasn’t sure if the chime sounded or if he’d broken it.

“What the fuck – ”

“Shane.”

He was there. He was right in front of Ilya. He wasn't hurt. He wasn't bleeding. Underneath his eyes were dark circles like he had the same quality of sleep as Ilya, but he was okay.

"Ilya?"

Ilya crossed the space between them in two strides to come stand behind the counter – exercising an immense amount of self-control when he wanted to vault over the counter to get to Shane faster. He took Shane's face in his hands, inspecting everything there, making sure every freckle was accounted for.

Ilya wanted to press his mouth into Shane's, to feel his breath just to reassure himself that air was currently going in and out of Shane's lungs, but he didn't.

"Ilya, what the hell?"

He suddenly remembered that wherever Shane had been, he had no clue the battle that Ilya had been waging with his own anxiety.

"You were not here," was all he managed to get out by way of explanation.

"Ilya," his hand covered one of Ilya's. "I had away games."

"Away games?"

The phrase didn't make any sense to Ilya in the moment.

"We went to play… hockey… in Maryland."

"You have been in Maryland."

"Yes."

"For the last three days?"

"Yes.

"To play hockey."

"That is what I said, Ilya, yes," Shane had an amused smile playing across his face now.

"Jesus Christ, Shane, what the hell?"

"What the hell *me*? Why are you tearing in here like a bat out of hell?"

"Why was bat in hell?"

American idioms were stupid even on Ilya's best day and today was decidedly not his best.

"Ilya, that's not – that's not the point. What's wrong?"

"I thought something – I thought that – It does not matter what I thought."

He couldn't explain it to him. Maybe some time. Maybe some day when he knew that he could end the story by reassuring Shane he would never be in danger ever, not while Ilya was around. But he couldn't tell him everything right now.

He finally let his hands drop from Shane's face but caught one of his hands and intertwined his fingers with Ilya's.

"You shouldn't be behind the counter."

"Shane."

It was such a perfectly Shane thing to say that Ilya wanted to burst out laughing. Of course, he was worried about Ilya being behind the stupid fucking counter. Never mind that Ilya owned this building, owned half this block.

"It's against policy."

"I don't care."

"You were *worried* about me, weren't you?"

Shane was inspecting *his* face now – studying the expression that he made in response to the question.

"Was not worried. I just… I just didn't like not knowing."

It was a lie. Ilya was worried out of his mind.

"That sounds like being worried."

He let out a sigh and leaned back on the wall. He spotted Shane's phone then – sitting on a narrow shelf below the register. He let go of Shane's hand and grabbed the phone before he could think twice about it.

"Ilya what – "

"What is password?"

"I'm not giving you my phone password."

"You type it, is fine."

"What are you doing?"

Shane questioned him but still handed the phone back after unlocking it. He quickly pulled up a new message, typing out a quick text and sending it to himself from Shane's phone.

"There. You have phone number now. You will tell me when you are gone?"

"Ilya – "

“I already have Nikolai stop waiting by your home. By rink. I do not have anyone watch store. I do what you ask. But please, I want to know you are safe still. I need to know this. Please.”

Ilya knew the second please ended on a note of desperation. Nikolai would have made fun of him mercilessly if he’d heard it. But Ilya was a desperate man.

“Okay.” Shane’s voice was soft.

“Okay?”

He ran a hand up through Shane’s hair, lightly scratching his scalp with his fingertips. Shane leaned into the touch, letting out a quiet noise – he might not have even intended for it to slip out. Ilya needed to stop touching him. Because if he didn’t stop, he was going to end up dragging Shane into the back room of this 7/11 and doing something filthy to him.

“I forgot,” he dropped his hand from Shane’s hair. “I have gift.”

“For the beer delivery man?” Shane looked proud of his own joke.

“Obviously.”

Shane opened the box delicately – just as he had the necklace – like he was afraid his hands would somehow damage the leather just by touching it.

“I thought you needed a matching set.”

He took the bracelet out of the box and motioned for Shane to hold out his wrist, clasping it around him carefully.

“Ilya – ”

“You are going to ask cost?”

“I wasn’t. I just. thank you.”

Ilya leaned in, grabbing Shane by the waist, letting his lips brush the edge of Shane’s ear as he spoke.

“Thank me tomorrow. I send car to bring you to my house. If that is something you want.”

“It’s something I want.”

Shane responded quickly, and Ilya’s heart jumped a little. The air around him felt thick and foggy. American phrases about cutting tension with knives were running through his head. But in the moment that he was deciding what he wanted to do with that tension, the door chime sounded loudly.

They both took a step back quickly as a group of giggling girls entered, and Ilya wanted to let out a nervous laugh of his own.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Shane.”

*****

The front of the luxury luggage store was unassuming – Ilya might have missed it if he hadn’t been looking so carefully for it. Shane must have other away games. He must have more travel happening. Ilya wanted to make sure that he had everything he needed for that travel.

He’d been to one place before here, and the experience was so off putting that Ilya almost never wanted to see a suitcase again. He had heard the phrase “zipper pocket” so many times that he was no longer sure he knew what it mean.

Now he was in lower Manhattan, hoping to avoid a similar experience. The interior of the shop was quiet – elegant wood fixtures and neutral colors were everywhere. The place smelled of fine leather.

After forty-five minutes with a salesman that was so effusive he put Claire to shame, Ilya had arranged for six or seven pieces to be sent directly to his apartment in the financial district. He would let Shane choose what he wanted to keep when he came there tonight.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone cares the luggage store is Carl Frederick's. I've only passed it, never been inside, but I have discovered that they have a $900 weekender bag that I would love to be able to afford!

I've been on a bit of a streak here and have the first little bit of the next chapter currently residing in the notes app of my phone. Really unhinged place for it to be, but there you have it. Hoping to update again by the weekend!

And, as ever, you have my undying gratitude for reading this little story that has been rattling around in my head. Your kudos and comments put air directly into my lungs - nice, fresh springtime air. I really could cry at how writing as been fun again lately. Thank you so much

Chapter 7: Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Shane goes back to Ilya's apartment. Maybe he wants to stay this time.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is largely porn with plot, BUT there IS plot! We are still running purely on my stream-of-consciousness vibes so I'm sure there are typos and errors in this chapter as there are in every chapter. Please show me grace and ignore them and assume the best of me instead <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shane tugged at the hem of the soft blue sweater he and Jackie finally decided on. She was right when she'd picked this from the wreckage of his closet – outfits tried on and abandoned everywhere. He liked this fabric and how it sat on his skin, but it wasn't frumpy, so he would be comfortable but still look good.

Nikolai wasn't driving this car, and whoever the driver was he wasn't concerned with trying to make conversation with Shane. It was a long silent drive across Brooklyn and into Manhattan, and Shane had more than enough time to overthink everything from his outfit to the pass he'd missed from Hayden at their last game. He caught an edge at the exact wrong moment, stumbling a little, and couldn't stop replaying the moment in his head.

He had a better chance now, while the sun was still shining, to see the building that was Ilya's home. He hadn't realized when he was last here just how tall it was. Everyone inside seemed to know who he was and where he needed to be.

"Mr. Hollander, we're pleased to see you again. Mr. Rozanov arrived a little while ago, I'm sure he's waiting for you."

Shane hadn't realized he'd seen the doorman the first time around, but he spoke as though they were old friends. He got a similar reception from the woman at the front desk and someone who he thought must be a housekeeper of some kind in the elevator.

His anxiety was crashing through him in waves over the way that it felt as though everyone *knew*. Had Ilya said something? Told them that he was expecting his… His what? His fuck buddy? His sugar baby? Shane wasn't sure what label to claim, but he knew several that he would *like* to claim if they were on offer. The apartment was as luxurious in the light as it had

been when it was illuminated by the city lights. Ilya opened the door and silently let him inside.

Should I have worn something else? Are we just here for sex? Is he going to ask if I want to stay again? Should I stay if he does ask?

“Shane.”

Ilya was standing in the living room; Shane was pretty sure he was near where they’d been standing last time when he…

“I can hear you thinking from here. Very loud.”

He finally met Ilya’s eyes.

“Sorry, just, thinking, yeah.”

“Yes, I gathered.”

Ilya moved across the room toward him, and Shane was struck again just how like a jungle cat Ilya seemed to move at times – slinking across the floor with no noise until he could grab Shane firmly by the waist and pull him into Ilya’s chest.

“Would you like me to do something about too many thoughts?”

It flickered across his mind that he should have hesitated a second longer – seemed less eager. But Ilya liked that he was eager. And he *was* eager.

“Yes.”

Ilya’s hands moved him gently.

“Go. Against the window.”

Shane wasn’t sure how he didn’t trip as he walked across the room, face to the window, back to the room. *Maybe I will press you into one of these windows* – it was something Ilya had said last time. Something Shane had thought about more than once since then.

He placed his hands gingerly against the glass. It was smooth and cool enough that it felt nice against the heat of Shane’s palms. Ilya’s hand raked into his hair then down his neck. He could feel Ilya’s breath getting quicker against his skin.

One of his hands came around Shane’s waist, his fingers briefly hooking over his waistband but then withdrawing, seemingly changing his mind – moving lower instead, gently gripping Shane’s rapidly hardening dick over the fabric of his pants. His breath caught in his throat, and he was sure he heard Ilya let out a small, pleased laugh at the noise. A knee nudged his legs until his thighs were wider apart. His own breath was coming fast now – practically panting as Ilya’s hands explored. His fingers roamed Shane’s body; cupping his dick, running down his neck, reaching under his sweater and caressing over his abs, as though Ilya was trying to memorize his body by touch.

Ilya leaned in, one hand coming up to grip Shane's chin – a favorite place for his hand to be, Shane thought, for the both of them.

"Do you remember what I told you I would do to you against these windows?"

He nodded, his body trembling with the tension.

"Shane."

"Yes," he supplied immediately, knowing the unspoken command to answer out loud that was contained in Ilya just saying his name. "Yes, I remember."

Ilya sucked hard at his neck, just under his ear, then soothed the skin with his tongue. It was definitely going to leave a mark, and Shane found himself liking that idea.

"Is that something you want?"

"Yes, yes, I want it."

"What do good boys say when they want something? How do you ask nicely?"

"Please," Shane couldn't stop the crack in his voice. "Please, fuck me. Ilya, Please."

The third 'please' might have been a little much, but Shane didn't care. He'd say it until his voice gave out if Ilya asked him to.

Ilya's hands went back to his waistband then, unbuttoning his pants and roughly shoving them and his boxer briefs down until the fell to his ankles.

"Fuck," he rested his forehead on the glass in front of him. Ilya's fingers slid across the curve of his ass, squeezing lightly.

He seemed content to take his time – ignoring the tiny whimpers and whispers of 'please' that kept escaping Shane mouth as Ilya's hands ran down his thighs, his ass, pushing up his shirt and leaning down to press lips to his hip.

"Look at you. So desperate for it. Fuck." Ilya's teeth grazed his neck gently, equal parts a kiss and a bite.

His cock was heavy, throbbing in a demand for attention that Ilya was busy giving to every other part of him. When a slick finger finally pushed into him, he let out a surprised gasp.

"You said you did not like to talk during. But, fuck, I love to hear you, Shane."

Ilya's finger slid out and back in.

"You sound so sweet. So good for me. Are you good for me, Shane?"

"Yes, yes, I am. Please," it was a whine coming out of him now.

Ilya added another finger, still in no obvious hurry, and Shane briefly wondered if this was something a person could die from. What a way to go if it was.

He was sure he had been gasping and moaning and murmuring "please, I'm ready" for an age before he finally felt Ilya's fingers pull out of him and the larger, blunt pressure of his cock press against Shane's hole. He tried to widen his stance, progress impeded by the pants still hooked around his ankles.

Ilya's breath was a hard pant against his neck as he slowly pressed in, Shane's body giving way to the intrusion. He was moving agonizingly slow, pushing in inch by inch until he was fully seated in Shane's body. But he didn't move right away.

Shane tried to shift his hips, to make him move, to hurry him along, when Ilya's hands fell on his hips, gripping them hard enough that Shane hoped it would leave bruises.

"So impatient."

"Please, move, Ilya, Christ."

"Are you begging me?"

"Yes, I'm fucking begging," the words hissed out through his gritted teeth.

Ilya started to thrust into him – slowly at first, steadily moving in and out of him as Shane's hands tried to find purchase against the smooth wall of windows. He reached to touch himself only for Ilya to grip his wrist to stop him.

"Fuck me harder. I can take it. I want it."

"For someone who claimed to not like to talk you have lot to say."

But he did as Shane requested – letting his wrist go and wrapping the arm around Shane's chest and pulling him tight against Ilya as he began to slam into him mercilessly.

"Do you think anyone can see you? Some tourist looking through view finder seeing into these windows maybe?"

The question shot through Shane like lightning as he fell forward and pressed his face to the window, letting the coolness of it seep into his skin before moving his arm to cushion his forehead, Ilya's thrusts sending shockwaves through him.

"They see how well you take it? How much of a desperate slut you are?"

He let out a moan that might have been half a sob.

"You want everyone to see you come apart," Ilya wasn't posing the words as questions anymore – he could see how Shane responded to the idea.

He gasped into his own arm, reaching down to touch himself now, desperate for relief. Ilya didn't stop him this time.

“I’m going to come, Ilya, fuck, oh my god, I can’t, please – ”

Shane’s words were a babble of incoherence as he came, stroking himself furiously in time with Ilya’s movement.

“Oh god, Shane,” Ilya made a breathless noise, pushing into him roughly a few more times before he collapsed over Shane’s back.

“You liked the idea of someone seeing,” words were still spilling out of Ilya’s mouth as he finished. “But no. This is only for me, isn’t it?”

Shane could have come again instantly. They stood, locked together, chests heaving.

“Say it.”

“Only for you. It’s only for you.”

They stood still for a minute, breathing slowly returning to a regular pace in the quiet room. Shane became extremely aware that Ilya was still inside him, his weight heavy leaning on Shane’s back, his lips still brushing Shane’s neck.

“Um, could I…?”

“Christ, sorry,” Ilya’s accent drew the r’s of the apology out as he gently removed himself from Shane. “Wait there.”

As though I could move right now.

Ilya returned, Shane noticed now wearing joggers and a t-shirt, and ran a warm washcloth over his body, cleaning far more skin than was really necessary. He tapped at Shane’s leg softly until Shane lifted his foot, allowing Ilya to remove the clothing wrapped around his feet and ankles.

“Here, let me help,” Ilya produced a pair of soft sweatpants and let Shane rest his hands on his shoulders as he stepped into them.

“Sit.”

Shane wandered to the plush couch, collapsing into the cushions, and Ilya once more took up his position at Shane’s feet, sitting up on his knees, hands rubbing gently at Shane’s knees.

“Did you like that?”

Shane rolled his eyes, trying to hide his blush under one of his hands but Ilya took both his hands in Ilya’s own.

“Shane, I need you to tell me.”

“I think it is very obvious that I liked that, yes.”

“And what do you need right now?”

Ilya’s eyes were full of concern – like he was worried he’d done something Shane didn’t like, something Shane didn’t want.

“I liked every single thing that just happened. And I don’t need anything right now. Just stay there for a minute.”

Ilya pressed a small kiss to Shane’s knee before resting his chin on it, eyes still trained on Shane’s face.

“You did so well, moyo solnyshko. You were so perfect.” Ilya’s mutterings were quiet but constant, filling Shane with an odd sense of pride at what had just happened.

“I will make food.”

He pressed a kiss into Shane’s palm before pushing off the edge of the couch so he could stand upright.

“You don’t need to do that.”

“You ate before?”

“Well, no – ”

“Then I will make food,” Ilya leaned over and pressed his lips into Shane’s neck one more time.

*****

“I thought you’d have a cook. Like, a private chef.”

“Hm, I am very rich, but I can still chop a vegetable by myself. You think I am helpless?”

They were sitting at a small dining table in a space just off the living room. Shane had closed his eyes briefly on the couch, and the next thing he knew Ilya was gently shaking his shoulder, telling him to come eat. He no longer saw his clothes on the floor, and the window was cleaned of smudges.

A bowl full of some kind of small dumpling was sitting on the table, and Ilya had put down plates full of other things he couldn’t immediately identify. Shane asked what everything was – half out of curiosity and half out of worry that he was going to now be eating two meals that fell outside of his careful meal prep plan within so short a time frame.

Ilya was the most unguarded Shane had ever seen him as he carefully explained each dish and ingredient – a smattering of Russian foods that Shane had never heard of alongside more familiar fare. Shane noticed that Ilya had a tendency to be short when he spoke – not snappy but never saying more than was strictly necessary. But here, in the soft light of his home, he was casual; his words flowed easily. And Shane was happy to eat and listen.

“ – that was my mother’s favorite to make,” Ilya ended a long history of pelmeni that he’d been illuminating.

“What was your mother like?”

Shane worried that he had ruined whatever this way – he didn’t miss the way Ilya’s face fell, the hard swallow that he took.

“She was good. Kind woman. They tell me I looked like her.”

Shane didn’t miss the past tense.

“She’s…gone?”

“Yes, she is gone.”

“And your dad?”

“I’m sure is still somewhere in Yekaterinburg.”

“You don’t know?”

“No,” was all Ilya said before sighing. “Sorry, my family – ”

“Tiresome. That’s the word you used.”

“Tiresome, yes. My father was sick when I left Russia. Maybe he is gone now too. I do not know.”

Shane could almost hear him say “and I do not care” to finish the sentence, but it wasn’t uttered out loud.

Shane was prepared to head back to his place when they were done eating, but he had no idea where the clothes he’d arrived in were. He also didn’t know a polite way to ask, “could I have my pants so I can go home and hyperventilate about this interaction and what all of this even is in peace?” He finally settled on –

“My clothes?”

“Ah, they are being cleaned. They were… what is place at Sea World?”

“At Sea World?”

“Yes, where the whales jump and get water everywhere?”

“Jesus fuck, the splash zone?”

“Yes!” Ilya snapped his fingers. “They were in splash zone. Sorry.”

He liked this side of Ilya – almost playful. Like he was finally seeing the person who hid beneath carefully tailored suits and the trappings of immense wealth and power. Underneath

that was just a man who explained Russian dumplings and made jokes about Shane coming all over his own clothes.

“I do not know when they will be done. But I can send them to your house later. If you are wanting to leave.”

There was a question in there, Shane was sure. A tension had settled back over the room with it.

“Do you want me to leave?”

Ilya’s face had become serious again, his eyes flickering back and forth over Shane’s own – like he was trying to read his thoughts and find out the answer he wanted from Ilya.

“No.”

“You want me to stay?”

He just wanted to hear Ilya say it.

“I would like if you stayed, yes.”

*****

Shane was momentarily confused when he woke up. And then struck with the panic that he was late for his classes.

“Set alarm for 9, it is early. You are fine.”

Ilya’s arm was flung over his waist, his bare chest almost brushing Shane’s back. He wasn’t sure how Ilya kept reading his mind like that. If he liked him less, he would worry about it more.

“But since we are awake…”

Ilya’s hand moved lower, pausing for a moment in a silent question before Shane nodded for him to continue. Ilya didn’t demand a verbal answer this time – instead he just gripped Shane lightly, stroking him slowly until he was fully hard.

Shane stayed in a half awake, fully aroused daze, whimpering softly as Ilya’s hand kept moving.

“Are you close?”

Another nod, and Ilya removed his hand.

“Ilya, please.”

“You can come when I fuck you.”

Shane heard the snap of a cap closing and then Ilya’s slick fingers entered him.

“Ilya, I’m already so close.”

“Not yet.”

Shane had never come hands free before, but if Ilya kept this torture up he may be able to.

Ilya withdrew his fingers, and Shane almost sobbed in frustration. He felt Ilya’s other hand running up his chest, pinching a nipple, and waking up new nerve endings. The exploration was similar to the night before – Ilya taking his time, bringing Shane to the edge over and over until he was begging out loud.

“Please, please, can I – ”

“I said not yet.”

“Please!”

“I am in charge, yes?”

“Yes, you are, please – ”

“Then let me be in charge.”

Shane closed his eyes, letting himself immerse in every sensation. It was almost dreamlike, laying here in the dark, his focus shrunk down to the exact points where Ilya’s hands met his skin – where Ilya’s voice brushed his neck. All he felt was a throbbing *need* and an almost dizzy feeling of floating. Ilya finally pushed into him.

“Now, you can come.”

It didn’t take long until Shane was spilling into the sheets, dick untouched, gasping. He was sure that he felt tears on his cheeks when Ilya finally followed him over the edge.

They lay in silence for a few minutes, and Shane felt blissfully emptied. Like the racing thoughts that were always bubbling beneath the surface of his skin had all been drained away. He barely noticed when Ilya slid out of the bed, returning to complete the ritual of cleaning Shane off, pressing soft kisses into his shoulder, his neck, his chest.

It was this action that sent the thoughts boiling again.

He never looks me in the face. We still haven’t kissed.

“What is it?”

Ilya’s voice was brusque, but not harsh.

“It’s nothing.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Ilya grabbed his shoulder, pulling gently until Shane had no choice but to roll over and look at him – propped up on an elbow and staring expectantly at Shane.

“It’s just… Why don’t you look at me?”

“I’m looking at you right now.”

“No, I mean,” Shane threw an arm over his face, so he didn’t have to meet Ilya’s eyes. “This is, what, the third time we’ve fucked? And you haven’t looked at me. Like at my face. You haven’t even kissed me. It’s just – I’m not asking you to or anything – I just – I’m trying to say – ”

“This is worrying you?”

Shane finally looked at him.

“It feels like you don’t want to. And that’s fine. I just want clarity.”

This is mortifying. This is only sex. That’s it. I shouldn’t have said anything; it’s just that he can read my mind too well.

“You want me to look at you?”

“If *you* want to, I – ”

“And you want me to kiss you?”

“Again, I’m not saying – ”

“Shane.”

Ilya gently took hold of his jaw, fingers cupped gently against Shane’s face, leaned in, and kissed him.

His lips pressed against Shane’s gently for a moment, and then Shane was moving, straining up into the kiss and opening his mouth. The light stubble on Ilya’s face scraped against his skin, his tongue entering Shane’s mouth. He brought his hands up to tangle in Ilya’s already wild curls, gripping him like he would disappear if Shane didn’t keep hands on him.

Ilya moved on top of him, pressing him into the bed with more hungry, open-mouthed kisses. His hands moved over Shane’s jaw, his neck, down his shoulders and back up until he finally pulled back.

“Does that answer question of if I want to?”

Before Shane could answer, Ilya leaned down again to press another gentle, almost chaste, kiss to his lips.

“You will be late for class now if you do not get up.”

*****

Shane was glad notetaking was an almost automatic skill for him because he wasn't sure he would be able to recall a single word any professor said today. He'd floated from his first class to his second then somehow wound up at the rink for practice.

If Hayden looked at him strangely, he didn't note that either.

By the time he got home, Shane was finally feeling like his feet were meeting earth again.

Ilya kissed him. Ilya liked him.

He jiggled his key in the old lock when Mrs. De Rossi stuck her head out the window.

"Next time you have deliveries that big, make sure you're home, kid. Oh, and I let your friend inside."

His friend? Deliveries?

"Ok, Mrs. De Rossi, sorry about that."

He had no idea what she was talking about and was wondering if Ilya was currently standing in his home when the door flung open, his keys still in the lock going with it.

"Shane bug!"

Rose threw her arms wide.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Wow, nice to see you too, asshole."

"No, sorry, no, it is good to see you. But how are you here?"

"Some hotel wanted to do a big brand thing. It's all so boring. But it means I get to be in town for a couple days!"

Shane followed Rose into his house.

"Oh, Jesus Christ."

"Yes, please tell me what this is, I have been dying trying to figure out how you have several thousand dollars' worth of luggage in your kitchen."

Ilya. It had to have been. There was a small card on the leather weekender bag that Shane plucked off of it.

For away games. I hope you like – IR

"I would also love to know why you have Cartier boxes under your pillow."

He hadn’t told Rose about any of it – mostly because he wondered if she would talk him out of pursuing what was obviously a bad idea. It might still be a bad idea, but there was no getting around telling her now.

“You should probably sit down for this.”

Chapter End Notes

You guys' kindness, kudos, and comments have truly kept me going the last couple weeks. Thank you thank you thank you. I hope both sides of your pillows are cold and that you find money in an old jacket pocket.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Rose makes an appearance and has the kiki session of her life. Ilya is possessive and respectful.

Chapter Notes

Hi Hey Hello, here are my usual beginning of chapter notes:
-Screw AI, I hate AI, I would never use it, and actually it is a point of pride that I have never in my life even oooooopened ChatGPT.
-This chapter is delayed because I wrote half of it in a fever fugue state. I barely read back and edited after the fever broke. Whatever fevered me thought of, it remains here.
-I do not speak Russian (alas, that Ilya is not a German speaker, but it's maybe a less romantic sounding language to be fair) so all Russian text is translated via google translate or a pocket translator that lives in my work office. I'm very sorry for inaccuracies
-I am an elder queer with not a lot of coding experience, and I probably could figure out the coding to make Ilya and Shane's texts actually look like texts, but I just did not have the brain power for it and I hope their texts don't look too chaotic visually this way.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I would really like if you could say something. Because if you don’t say something, I will just keep talking to fill the space. And the only thing I haven’t told you about is the sex. Well, I mean, I told you about the sex. But I didn’t go into detail, and I’m nervous and if I keep talking, I’m going to start going into detail. And, Rose, I don’t want to word vomit details about my sex life to you, and – ”

“Shane.”

He was pacing in front of the small loveseat that Rose was lying across.

“I need more than 24 seconds to process here, Shaney. You dropped a lot all in one go. But if this man is as hot as you’re telling me, I don’t know that I’d be *mad* about sex details…”

“Rosemary.”

“That’s not even my name, Shaney.”

Rose's ability to keep her face neutral was always impressive to Shane. She was usually so expressive – sometimes to an exaggerated degree. But she had sat and listened to the entire story quietly, and he hadn't left a thing out. She knew it all now. The only time she'd interjected was to beg to try on the Cartier chain.

She ran a hand along her collarbone now – absentmindedly brushing the gold chain because of course Shane hadn't been able to deny her request.

"So, with all this," Rose motioned at the luggage and Cartier boxes, "and that dinner… This man has definitely spent over 30 grand – "

"Plus the cash."

"Right, plus the cash. Which you are… stockpiling. For some reason."

The first few times Ilya had nonchalantly overpaid for a bottle of Coke, Shane had spent the money – it had maybe been 50 bucks. But the more it kept happening and the larger the overpayment… He didn't know why, but he now had a stack of cash in an old bank bag in his nightstand.

It was stupid to have that much cash just sitting in a drawer. It felt like asking for a break in.

"I don't know. I just feel like… What if he gets tired of me and decides he wants it all back? The gifts and the money and everything?"

"Shane."

"And I know, I *know*, I feel like I've gotten past the anxiety of wondering if he even likes me or if it was just sex especially since he finally ki – "

"Shane."

"What?"

"I think that man would harvest organs to sell on the black market for money to shower over your diamond strewn naked body. He is obsessed with you."

"Oh my god, do you think he actually does that? The organ harvesting, I'm very much ignoring the whole diamonds on my body part," Shane knew he was turning red.

"No, I think he probably sells designer drugs to bored rich kids and launders money through shitty pizza places. It's not 1986. The mob is different."

"Do I want to know how or why you seem to know that? Besides, I don't even know that he's in the mafia."

"Shanebug, you are *so* smart. *I* know that *you* know that the impossibly well-tailored and lavishly wealthy Russian gentleman who has a fleet of both cars and also other Russian gentlemen at his beck and call is probably not like an insurance actuary."

“Maybe it’s family money. Maybe he doesn’t work at all.”

“So, he just chooses to beat up drug dealers for fun?”

“He could!”

“He’s not Batman, Shane.”

Shane went quiet for a little while, absentmindedly chewing at a fingernail. He knew that there had to be some nefarious explanation for Ilya’s money, something a little dangerous behind all the men who seemed to report to him. He didn’t really want to think about it though. He put it out of his mind purposefully when he was around Ilya.

But when they were apart, a dark kind of curiosity kickstarted a spiral of overthinking.

“What are you thinking there, Hollander?”

Rose was carefully removing the Cartier chain and nestling it back in the box.

“What if he is a dangerous person?”

“Has he ever done anything to harm you?”

“I’m not worried about him being dangerous *for* me.”

“What are you worried about then?”

He considered the question, slowly uncovering the myriads of excuses that laid on top of what was actually on his mind.

“What if I don’t *care* that he’s dangerous?”

That was it. The tiny, nagging guilt that lay dormant most of the time but reared its ugly head when Shane least wanted it to. What if he didn’t care? What if Ilya did bad things and was a dangerous person, and Shane just… didn’t care? Maybe he wasn’t as good of a person as he thought he was.

“I like, jesus, this is embarrassing. I just like that he takes care of me. It’s nice. To not be constantly thinking for once.”

“I know, Shane. I think it’s been a long time since you let someone take care of you. And I like that you’re letting someone do that now. And it’s ok to want that. And it’s ok to accept that.”

“But how long do I let it happen without asking some questions about where the, uh, funding for that is coming from?”

“Shanebug, I can’t make your decisions for you. All I can tell you is that you deserve to be treated well and loved tenderly. If he does those things then I think we can work through a shitty profession, no?”

“He doesn’t. I mean, he treats me well. But he doesn’t love me.”

“I think he’s definitely on the road to doing that though.”

“Rose,” Shane shook his head. “He likes me. I think he probably even cares about me. But I’ve known the man for a matter of months. We’re not in love.”

“Yet.”

“Rose.”

She held her hands up in mock defeat.

“I’ll drop it. But I want constant updates, do you understand? No more waiting until I’m physically here to tell me things.”

“Deal.”

Rose left with promises that she would be back the next night to drag him to some club. Shane hated clubs. But he loved Rose. And so, he would go.

*****

He’d already talked to Jake who agreed to work for him with about as much enthusiasm as Jake ever showed for anything. Shane thought Jake could live through an earthquake with barely more than a “huh, wild” coming out of his mouth. But he was an easygoing guy and always covered on the extremely rare occasion Shane asked him to. Shane pulled out his phone and hovered over a message thread before shooting off a couple texts.

Shane: I just wanted you to know that I’m not working tonight.
I didn’t want you to not-worry.

Ilya: You are away?

For games?

Shane: No, a friend is in town. Just spending some time with her.

Ilya: A friend? Should I be jealous?

Shane: Hardly.

Ilya: Who is friend?

Shane: Rose. *Her* name is Rose.

Because she’s a woman.

And I’m gay.

Ilya: Ok, I get it. Am not jealous.

Shane: It's ok.

Maybe I'd like it if you were.

Ilya: Oh would you?

Shane: Maybe I'd like to see what you'd do about it.

If you were jealous.

But you aren't.

Ilya: You are menace.

Shane knew he'd texted Ilya more often since they'd finally kissed. It felt like some kind of barrier had been broken and now he could just…talk to the man. Usually, it was just little things – expressing frustration about a class, sharing excitement over a particularly good goal he'd scored.

He'd started waking up to 'good morning' texts though and on nights that he didn't see Ilya, there was always a 'goodnight' text too.

Sometimes little bits of Russian would slip into Ilya's texts, and Shane had a translation app downloaded at this point so he could decipher the unfamiliar letters that made up what Ilya was saying. Every endearment made him blush to the tips of his ears.

Ilya: Have fun time with friend, Солнышко

Sunshine. It was one of Shane's favorites. Sometimes it was *my* sunshine, and he knew that he smiled like an idiot anytime that came across his screen.

"Oh my god, that is *not* what you're wearing."

Rose was pushing him back into the apartment as he opened the door, phone in hand, ready to call a Lyft for the both of them.

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

"You look like. I don't know. A jock."

"I'm so sorry to confess this so late into our friendship, but I kind of am a jock, Rose."

“Shut up, I know you have a great top that I bought for you last time I was in town.”

By the time Rose was done playing dress up with him, Shane was out of the jeans and t-shirt he’d been wearing and was in a mostly sheer black button up, said buttons undone most of the way down his chest, and jeans that Rose insisted were very different from the ones he’d been wearing. Shane thought jeans were jeans. She had also insisted that he wear the Cartier chain and bracelet despite Shane’s protests.

“Stop saying they’re too nice to wear out! You’re supposed to wear them out!”

He grabbed a worn leather jacket on his way out – the chill of New York fall was starting to have some real bite – and they finally slipped into the back of the car which promptly whisked them toward the club Rose gave the name of.

Shane lost his jacket almost immediately when they entered the dim club – the heat of more than a hundred bodies instantly warming him. He let it fall on the seat where Rose guided him, and the awkwardness instantly took over.

“Come dance with me!”

“I need a couple more drinks before we’re there.”

Shane made his way through sweaty exuberant bodies to the bar, leaning on it just to feel a little more solid before the bartender found his way to Shane.

“Shaney. Do a shot with me, come on.”

Rose was staring at him with her wide doe eyes, knowing full well what she was trying. Shane knew he was going to wake up with a headache the size of New Jersey tomorrow but sighed and shook his head with a smile.

“Tequila?”

Rose squealed in delight.

*****

Three shots and a fruity drink he didn’t know the name of later, and Shane was blissfully unaware of how gone he already was. He was always a lightweight. And maybe he should have eaten something before they went out. It was too late now, and he decided to just embrace the heavy fuzziness taking over his entire body.

The night seemed to come at him in dazzling snapshots. He was dancing with Rose, and she was laughing with her head tilted back, and Shane loved his friend who lived so far away from him so much. Of course, they’d run into more friends of Rose – she didn’t know a stranger anywhere that she went. Shane wasn’t sure exactly who it was that had joined them. Another woman and her boyfriend, both of him had hugged him tightly when Rose introduced them, but Shane couldn’t remember their names to save his life.

He lurched a little to the side, losing his balance on the dance floor as the shimmering lights changed color around him for a minute when it hit him that maybe he should drink water.

“Are you ok if I get – ”

“I’m fine, Shaney, go!”

Rose turned back to her friends as he found his way back to the bar.

“Hey, could I just have a water?”

The bartender nodded absentmindedly and a plastic cup of ice water materialized in front of him. He opened his phone again as he started to drink like a man lost in a desert.

Ilya: Have fun time with friend, Солнышко

Shane: Haveinf fun. Woulf ne more if your here.

Fuck

You’re*

Ilya: Still correcting grammar when drunk? Impressive.

Shane: pfft not drnk

ok maybe drunk

Ilya: I should be amused, not worried, right?

Shane: want you here

Ilya: Do not ask unless you mean it.

Shane: youd coome if I askrd

Ilya: If you asked, yes.

Shane: I’m asking.

Shane shared location

He didn’t know why he did it. Maybe he’d been staring at that “sunshine” a little bit, and he wanted to hear the words whispered into his ear. Maybe it was because he knew that he would have seen Ilya at the store tonight, and Shane didn’t want any moment that he could see Ilya to be stolen.

“Shanebug, what are you doing?”

He flashed his phone at Rose as she came to stand beside him.

“Shaney, no! Jules and Russ wanted to go to Honey’s! There’s supposed to be some DJ that’s fantastic tonight.”

“S’ok! Go with them.”

Jules and Russ. *That* was their name. The snapshot memory of their introductions crept back into his mind.

“But I want to meet the rich Russian!”

Rose playfully stomped a foot but was already hugging him goodbye with promises that they’d meet for coffee before she had to leave the city. Shane let the pleasant dizziness take him over as he leaned back against the bar. The water was gone now, but he shook a piece of ice into his mouth and letting it slowly melt over his tongue – a desperate attempt to cool himself from the inside out.

“Hey, gorgeous.”

It put a smile on his face that fell fast when Shane turned to his left to see it was not Ilya standing beside him.

“You all alone?”

“Not for long.”

Shane tried to sound firm, but he couldn’t get the cotton white noise in his head to still long enough to find his assertive hockey voice.

“Not now that I’m here, hm?”

“Not interested.”

Shane meant to shuffle further down the bar, but when he turned to his other side, he saw he was pinned to the spot by a wall of bodies.

“I’m sure I could get you interested, hot stuff.”

“Sure you couldn’t,” Shane snorted.

“You’re a little bit of a brat, aren’t you?” the man leaned closer to him. “I like that.”

“Fuck you.”

“Told you I could get you interested.”

Shane settled for turning his head away, hoping the guy would get the hint.

“This is pretty,” the man’s fingers came up to touch the Cartier chain around his neck.

Shane jerked back, trying to pull out of reach, but the man’s hand never actually made contact with him.

“That’s not for you to touch,” Ilya’s voice was rough, and his hand was white knuckled around the man’s wrist.

“Jesus, dude, sorry, didn’t know.”

“Said I wasn’t alone for long,” Shane knew he sounded smug, but *god*, Ilya’s broad chest had come up behind him and the press of it against his back made him feel smug.

Ilya’s wrist was still gripping the other man.

“This is true? He told you no, and you did not listen?”

“No, I just – ”

Shane saw Ilya’s grip tighten; his other arm came up to wrap protectively around Shane’s waist. They were starting to draw attention, and Shane saw the look that the bartender shot at them.

“Ilya – ”

“Shane, is fine. I’m handling.”

“There a problem here?”

A bouncer materialized from somewhere that Shane couldn’t see and fixed his eyes on Ilya.

“This man was bothering my… Shane. Not taking no for answer.”

The bouncer turned to Shane for confirmation and he just nodded, the phrase “my Shane” rattling in his brain like a pinball machine.

“All right, buddy, you’re out of here for tonight. And you take your boyfriend home now, Dracula, he looks drunk as hell.”

Ilya let the man’s wrist go so the bartender could shuffle him out, half protests leaving his mouth the whole time.

“You are ok?”

“I’m fine. ‘s fine.”

“I’m taking you home.”

Shane didn’t have any protest in him. It was what he wanted when he texted Ilya in the first place. He let the man lead him out of the club and to a sleek car parked half a block away. His arm never left Shane’s waist.

“No driver,” Shane slurred.

“No, just me.”

Ilya poured him into the passenger seat. He registered that they were heading towards Shane’s place when he put his hand on Ilya’s thigh.

“Shane…”

“I wanted you to take me home.”

“I am.”

“No, take me home with you. To *your* home.”

“That is what you want?”

“Would you take me there? If I asked?”

“If you asked, yes.”

“I’m asking to go to your home then.”

*****

Shane thought that they’d head toward the city, but Ilya kept going toward Brighton Beach. He eased the car into a lot surrounded by gorgeous red brick buildings. Shane could hear the ocean somewhere to his left.

“Where are we?”

“This is home. My home.”

Ilya led him into a beautiful apartment – simpler than the one Shane had been in, but still very obviously expensive.

“What was the other place?”

“House. Not home.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Will maybe make more sense after water and sleep, I think.”

Ilya was holding a bottle of water out toward him, but Shane couldn’t remember when he’d gone to the kitchen and came back. He drank it quickly, greedily. Maybe he was a little more gone than he realized. He was looking at Ilya now, really looking.

His curls looked looser than normal, fluffy and framing his face in a way that Shane wanted to have immortalize in oil painting. A small smile was playing across his perfectly formed lips. Shane wanted to bite them.

“You need sleep, moya dorogoy.”

“What is does that mean?”

“Means you are barely standing up.”

Shane huffed but allowed himself to be propelled toward a bedroom. Ilya carefully undid the rest of his buttons and slipped the shirt off his shoulders before moving his hand toward Shane’s pants – unbutton them and shimmying them down his hips until they pooled at his feet.

“You have to help, Shane.”

He stepped out of his pants, and Ilya straightened upright just in time to catch Shane as he aimed his lips toward Ilya’s. He missed, catching the corner of his mouth, but leaned back to try again.

“Shane.”

“Ilya,” he whined.

“Shane, no.”

“No?”

Shane’s hands were trying to find the buttons or zippers or anything on Ilya’s clothing that he could undo to release the man from the fabric.

“You are so drunk, moy kotonok.”

“mm not *that* drunk.”

“Too drunk for me to feel good about using you in this state.”

“I like when you use me. Use me. I’m asking.”

Ilya ignored the request, pushing him gently toward the bed until it hit the back of his legs and he automatically sat on it. Shane didn’t resist when Ilya motioned for him to bring his legs into the bed. He didn’t resist when Ilya had him drink another entire bottle of water before he laid down on the plush pillows.

“Are you gonna fuck me?”

“Not tonight, moye sokrovishche.”

Ilya pulled the soft blankets over him and disappeared from Shane’s sight. He *was* drunk. Somewhere in his mind he knew that. But surely not so drunk that he had to be relegated to some guest room like a stranger.

Shane wasn’t sure how long he lay there, willing his feelings to try to hurt less.

He was just feeling the sharp sting of tears forming at the edges of his vision when he felt the bed shift behind him. Warm arms pulled him back until he leaned into Ilya's bare chest.

"Shh, solnyshko."

Shane melted. It was what he'd wanted to hear since he saw it in that text message, and here Ilya was whispering it softly into his ear. He felt firm lips press to his bare shoulder, his neck, his temple.

"Just sleep now."

Shane happily obeyed.

*****

For a brief moment, Shane was enveloped in confusion when he woke to soft sunlight filtering through transparent white curtains.

I don't have white curtains…

The night came back to him in a wave – including his drunkenly coming on to Ilya. Jesus Christ, this is why he didn't drink. The bed beside him was empty, cold. He was sure what time it was, but the sun felt like it had to be early still. Miraculously, his head didn't hurt as bad as he was prepared for, and he remembered the multiple bottles of water that Ilya had asked him to drink after they'd come to the apartment.

His body still ached as he swung his feet out from under the blankets and planted them on a cool hardwood floor.

Ilya came into sight as he wandered into the living room – standing on a terrace, an impressive view of the ocean in front of him.

Shane had never seen him look like this before. A loose linen shirt was blowing slightly open in the ocean breeze; his curls were loose and messy. But Shane couldn't stop staring at his face – there was usually a sharp slant to his mouth, a crinkle between his eyebrows, but his face staring out at the water was relaxed, smooth.

"Come out, solnyshko."

Shane padded out, painfully aware that he was in nothing but boxer briefs, but they were high enough up that he didn't think any of the joggers on the boardwalk could see him.

"Good morning, party animal," Ilya pressed a soft kiss to his lips.

"Ilya, I'm so sorry – "

"No, no, no apologies. You were very cute. Very eager. It was… what is word? Made me feel warm for you. Endearing."

Shane knew his face had to be bright red, and he laid his forehead on Ilya's collarbone to avoid his eyes.

"I am one who should say sorry."

"What? Why?"

"At the club," he felt Ilya swallow. "I – I was so angry. I treated you like possession. You are your own, yes? I should not treat you like something that belongs to me."

"Maybe I liked it," Shane lifted his head now, meeting Ilya's surprised eyes. "Maybe I want to be treated like I belong to you."

Ilya met his mouth in a far less gentle kiss, tongue running along his bottom lip before entering Shane's mouth, teeth nipping at him before Ilya's lips moved to his jawline, his neck, the spot below Shane's ear that always made him whimper.

"I want you to fuck me like I belong to you."

"Fuck, Shane. Do you? Do you belong to me?"

"Yes. I do."

He said it simply. It didn't fill him with dread or anxiety. It felt like the truth.

Chapter End Notes

Hi Hey Hello, here are end of chapter notes and benedictions:
-I adore each and every one of you for reading. This has somehow become my most-read fic, and that's so confusing and delighting to me. I had really fallen out of love with writing, and you all have given me such a confidence boost, it truly truly means so much
-I read each and every one of your comments (often times more than once) and I try my best to respond, but I will confess I get very overwhelmed trying to keep up sometimes. Please know that if you leave kudos, comments, or just think warmly of me/this fic in your heart that I hope you get every green light on your way home and that your phone always has full charge.

Also, I typed Shane's drunk texts on my phone while on cold medicine just to see what misspellings he would realistically have. (It wasn't even strong cold medicine - I have sausage fingers and constant iphone typos)

Chapter 9: Ilya's POV

Chapter Summary

Ilya spoils Shane, but the uglier parts of his life are starting to sneak in.

Chapter Notes

My apologies for the delay in this chapter! I had to spend 2-4 business days second guessing every writing decision that I made, you know how it goes!

Mandatory - screw AI, we hate AI here. Am I beating a dead horse by putting that in every notes section on every chapter? Maybe! But I've attended no less than 3 city council meetings in the last two weeks about data centers that we're trying to keep out of our city so I'm pretty riled about it basically all the time. (We have defeated one data center, we will defeat the others).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He wasn't sure what Shane had expected when he said it, but Ilya *had* fucked him exactly like Shane belonged to him – slowly, with care, taking him apart bit by bit, with none of the roughness that Shane usually liked to be handled with or that he may have expected. Ilya made sure to never turn Shane away from him; he wanted to watch his face the entire time.

"Eyes on me," he'd said when Shane closed his eyes or turned his head.

Shane's voice asking why Ilya didn't look at him was stuck in his brain still, and he felt like he needed to make up for the hurt he'd heard flowing under those words.

Ilya hadn't meant to *hurt* him. He assumed Shane didn't want to be so… intimate. That it was just gifts and sex and fun for him, and that Ilya needed to be careful and maintain distance, or he'd wind up breaking his own heart. He didn't care about distance anymore. That might come back to bite him in the ass, but he just couldn't care. Not while he had Shane underneath him, looking up at him with those deep brown eyes. Not when Shane so eagerly accepted his tongue making its way into Shane's mouth. Not when he finally got to know that Shane tasted like leftover tequila and the slightest chase of mint.

He had edged the man within an inch of his life until Shane was practically trembling below Ilya, begging to come, before Ilya finally showed mercy and took him over the edge that they had been dancing on for god knows how long.

Shane fell back asleep almost immediately, his body already growing heavy, his movements pliant as Ilya cleaned him up and pulled a soft sheet up over him. Ilya had stepped onto the small balconet to sneak a cigarette – he needed one but didn't want Shane to leave his eye line so he elected to not return to the terrace he'd started the morning on, instead just leaning on the iron railing outside the floor length window in the bedroom and letting the sun filter into the room around him.

Shane had shifted around in his sleep until the sheet was barely around his hips, and Ilya couldn't take his eyes off the wide expanse of his back, the inches of smooth, tanned skin. He was a little in awe of the fact that he got to *touch* that skin. That he was *allowed* to. That Shane *wanted* him to. That Shane was who he was, so good, so much better than Ilya, and he still wanted Ilya was something of a minor miracle to him. Ilya still felt so hesitant – he felt like he was performing some kind of high wire act. Right now, everything was balanced carefully, but he knew it would only take one misstep for him to ruin everything.

He shook the anxiety from his mind as he put the cigarette out on the railing and went back to the bed. Shane didn't wake as he slipped under the sheets. Ilya had things to do today, but he didn't care about any of them anymore. All he cared about right now is the way that Shane turned and nuzzled into the space between his shoulder and his neck in his sleep.

*****

Nikolai had called and woken him up – it turned out he *couldn't* actually ignore all his responsibilities for the rest of forever. He snuck out to his living room, reluctantly leaving Shane in the warm bed.

"We think we found who Aleksandr had watching. He's taken care of now."

"And it was just the one?"

"As far as I know right now. We're still on it though, Ilya. But probably ok for you to go get some borscht from Tatyana. She misses you."

"Ilya?"

Shane's voice was soft, but it still made him whip around immediately. The man was standing in the doorway, blanket from the end of the bed now wrapped around his shoulders. His hair stood at odd angles, and Ilya wanted to run his hands through it.

"Nika, I must go now."

"Oh, he's there, isn't he."

"I don't know who you mean. And I don't like your tone," a smile played across Ilya's mouth as he said it.

"Too bad. Go woo your lover. We have it handled."

"Good morning again, solnyshko."

Ilya wanted to somehow bottle the blush that spread across Shane's face every time he called him some little Russian endearment. It was more intoxicating than the most potent vodka.

"I, um, I should probably go. That sounded like business, right? I have some things to work on, and you obviously do too, so – "

"No, I don't."

He lied quickly. Ilya *did* have things to do. He just didn't want to deal with any of them right now. Here, he could pretend that there was no Aleksandr to deal with. That there was none of the ugliness that so often coated his life. He could pretend that the only thing that concerned him was Shane.

"Can I take you somewhere?"

"Is it going to make me ask how much money you're spending?"

"No. Maybe. You should not ask. So rude to ask about cost of gifts, Shane Hollander."

An hour later, Shane Hollander was wearing *his* clothes, getting into his car. Ilya hadn't realized how much he could like someone else wearing his clothes until Shane had exited the bedroom in a simple black t-shirt and pants and made his heart stutter.

"Are you going to tell me where we're going?"

They stepped out of the apartment, and Ilya noticed a shiver run over Shane. It was getting colder in New York as they were firmly into fall, and the man was only wearing a t-shirt.

"First, I think to get coat. And maybe something pretty. And whatever else you want. And then we go somewhere important."

*****

Shane had protested the entire drive into Manhattan. He'd told Ilya he wasn't cold, that he had left his jacket at the club, they could just run and grab it, that he didn't need Ilya to buy him things. A thousand excuses had run from his mouth, and Ilya didn't pay attention to a single one of them. And now they were standing in a private dressing room in some overpriced luxury store – Ilya planted in the seating area, Shane in the small changing room, and an armful of Armani hung up along the wall, and Shane came out and stood in front of him with his arms crossed.

"Ilya."

"Shane."

"This is so excessive."

"You need coat, I saw you shiver."

"My jacket is at the club. And I have a coat at my house."

“Now you will have one on your shivering body.”

“I’m not going to win this with you, am I?”

“Mm, no.”

Shane shook his head, but Ilya caught a tiny smile at the corner of his mouth as he slid a navy jacket off its hanger and tried it on. He went through a few before he settled a smooth black jacket over his shoulders, and Ilya saw his face shift at the feel of the fabric.

“You like that one.”

It wasn’t a question. If there was one thing Ilya was it was perceptive. Especially when it was something he deemed important. Shane was important. Learning all the tiny little shifts of Shane’s face and posture was important. Studying him until Ilya could almost tell what he was thinking was important.

“It’s nice.” Shane’s tone was purposefully light.

“Ok, we get.”

“Ilya, I think this is cashmere.”

He got up from the armchair where he’d been enjoying the view, walking until he had eliminated most of the space between him and Shane. He ran his arms from the man’s broad shoulders down his arms and back up.

“Is soft.”

“It’s like five thousand dollars.”

Shane’s voice was quiet. Not the soft tones that he sometimes slipped into when he spoke close to Ilya’s mouth, when he wanted Ilya to touch him, but a quiet that betrayed a sense of embarrassment. Shane’s eyes were studying a spot on the carpet intently.

“You like the jacket?”

“It’s too much.”

“That’s not my question.”

“I like the jacket.”

“Then I buy the jacket. I do not care if it was five thousand dollars or fifty thousand.”

Ilya lightly gripped Shane’s chin, turning his head so Shane had to look at him. He pressed his lips to Shane’s – slowly, softly, practically chaste.

“You like it.”

He pressed another soft kiss on Shane’s cheek.

“I like it.”

Another kiss to his other cheek.

“I want you to have it.”

He lingered on Shane’s lips again, letting his tongue flit out to run along Shane’s lip before slipping it into his mouth. Decidedly not chaste.

“Oh,” the store salesperson who had been helping them had walked into the room. Ilya hadn’t even heard him knock. “I’m so sorry, I just wanted to make sure you were getting on ok.”

“We are,” Ilya’s eyes never left Shane’s as he held a card out toward the man. “I want this one.”

*****

Ilya knew he was pushing his luck, but they were only two minutes away from Cartier and his favorite salesperson, Claire. Shane was wearing the chain and bracelet still – Ilya had insisted he put them on. And he was dying to see what Claire would say was “just the thing” if she saw Shane in person.

“Mr. Rosanov! Here I thought you may have forgotten about me!”

“Who could forget you, Claire.”

Her eyes sparkled mischievously as they turned to Shane.

“And you’ve brought a guest!”

“This is Shane. As you can see, he looks good in things you picked out.”

“He certainly does.”

Ilya was doing it on purpose. He knew that Claire would play along and flirt and fuss. And he knew that it would make Shane go red. Claire ushered them over to her usual spot and planted them in the plush chairs in front of her.

“I think he needs more, no?”

“Ilya, I don’t need – ”

“Oh, I have just the thing!” She jumped up and disappeared.

Oh, Claire, I hope you never change, you over eager little woman.

“Why are you doing this?”

Ilya studied his face, saw the edge of worry that was hiding behind Shane’s eyes.

“Because I want to. Because I like spoiling you.”

“I don’t need you to spoil me.”

“I need me to spoil you. But say word and we will leave. Won’t even say goodbye to Claire.”

Shane didn’t say anything. Ilya’s hand came to rest loosely on his knee, drawing nonsense geometric patterns with his fingers as they waited for Claire to return. She came back clutching a small leather jewelry pad with several watches resting on it.

“Claire, no saying any numbers out loud, please.”

“Of course, Mr. Rozanov.”

*****

Ilya hadn’t been to see Tatyana in weeks – trying to keep her safe from anything Aleksandr might be up to. But he’d felt a tightness in his chest loosen for the first time since Evgeni’s body had turned up on his doorstep. Nikolai was taking care of it. Tatyana was fine. Shane was fine. Shane was a little put out over the watch that Ilya had fastened around his wrist, but he was safe. A comfortable blanket of security felt as though it had been laid over the people he cared about. He owed Nikolai for that.

“*Ilyusha! My little Ilyushenka! You haven’t been to see me in so long.”*

Tatyana pretended to pout before kissing both his cheeks.

“You have brought skinny boy to come see me?”

“Skinny? Tatyana, this man is not skinny.”

“Man?” Tatyana rolled her eyes. *“You are also too skinny boy who has brought another too skinny boy to see me. It’s ok. I will fix this.”*

“Shane,” Ilya switched to English. “This is Tatyana. She makes best Russian food in city. She has known me since I was very young and stupid.”

“Hello, Tatyana,” Shane reached his hand out to shake hers, and it was promptly brushed away as she pressed kisses to his cheeks as well.

“You are skinny.”

“Baba Tanya!”

“I tell Ilyushenka I will fix, come come.”

She ushered them into the empty dining room of the restaurant and planted them in a corner table.

“This was the somewhere important that you wanted to take me?”

Ilya nodded.

“She’s family?”

Ilya paused, considered how to answer.

“Not through blood. But family, yes.”

“I like her. Even if she thinks I’m skinny.”

“She thinks everyone is skinny.”

Shane’s eyes sparkled as he smiled at Ilya – he noticed that it seemed like they did that without any help from any light anywhere in the room; like he *was* the light.

“What was the name she called you?”

“Ilyusha? Ilyushenka? She calls me lots of things.”

“What do those mean?”

“Is just my name. But. My name for people who are close to me?”

“Do I get to call you those things?”

You can call me anything as long as you’re calling to me.

“If you want to, yes.”

“Ilyusha,” Shane said the name like he was trying it on for size, and Ilya liked the way it fit in Shane’s mouth.

Tatyana came out with arms laden with far too much food for just two of them and wasted no time in piling things on a plate and pushing it toward Shane. Ilya wished that there was some way he could etch this day permanently in his heart – this woman who cared for him so much immediately taking to this man who he hoped cared for him. Or could come to care for him in some way.

Tatyana had started to tell stories of teenaged Ilya, embarrassing him to no end and delighting Shane who asked more questions with every story.

“So, when is wedding?”

They were just starting to walk out when she sprung the question on him.

“Wedding for who exactly?”

“Wedding for who? Wedding for you and skinny boy, of course.”

“Tanya…”

“He looks at you like you hung the moon.”

“He doesn’t.”

“And you look at him like he’s a miracle.”

“Time to get your eyes checked, I think.”

“I have better eyes than you, I think.”

She made Ilya bend down to give her a hug, holding him tightly for a beat.

“You deserve love, Ilyusha. Let yourself have it.”

*****

“She’s nice and… intense.”

Shane was laughing as he dropped the mirror down in the car and carefully wiped a lipstick mark off his cheek.

“She likes you.”

“I like her.”

Ilya’s phone rang – an unknown number but he figured it had to be Nikolai calling from a landline in the warehouse or somewhere. He was annoyed at the interruption; hadn’t he told Nikolai to just do whatever was needed?

“What?”

“How was Tatyana?”

Ilya froze before jerking the car to the side of the road and throwing it into park. Shane whipped his head around to stare at Ilya. It wasn’t Nikolai’s voice. It wasn’t a voice that he’d heard in the last decade, but he knew it instantly. Ilya knew his breathing was turning erratic in his surprised panic, and he needed to get it under control.

“Aleksandr.”

“You think killing one little no one means I have no other eyes on you? I’m disappointed, Ilya.”

“What do you want?”

“I liked that pretty thing with you. Not my taste, but I see why you like him.”

Shane. Shane who was still in his passenger seat and was looking at him with increasing concern.

“He has nothing to do with any of this.”

“You’re showing your hand. You’ve gotten so sloppy. So soft.”

“What do you want?”

“Is he what made you so soft? Maybe I will be doing you a favor. Toughen you back up.”

“What do you fucking want, you bastard?”

“I want to see if he looks just as pretty when he’s crying. Do you think he would call your name? Cry for you to come save him?”

“Fuck you, Aleksandr, you’re not going to touch him.”

“I’m going to tell you a secret, Ilya. I was going to visit Tatyana. I was going to burn her little building to the ground and let you know that it was all your fault. I wouldn’t harm her, of course. She’s an old woman. I’m not without heart.”

“Aleksandr – ”

“Shh. I’m not going to do any of that anymore. I think it will be far more fun to take your pretty toy away from you instead. Goodbye, Ilya.”

Aleksandr hung up without another word, and Ilya threw his phone with a curse.

“Ilya?”

He had to do something. Something to keep Shane safe. He didn’t know how he could be so profoundly *stupid*. Of course, Aleksandr wouldn’t have just one man watching him. Of course, he would have fail-safes and back-ups; he’d make moves and counter moves and not be stupid enough to let Nikolai take out his sole source of information. And Ilya *had* gotten sloppy. He had been so focused on wanting whatever this domestic pipe dream was, he was so focused on playing house with Shane, and he let his guard down.

“Ilya, what’s wrong?”

Shane’s face had gone a little pale. He couldn’t help but stare at how it made his freckles seem even more prominent.

“We talk at home.”

“Ilya, I do have to go to *my* home, you know,” the edge of a laugh entered Shane’s voice. “I have like, schoolwork and then actual work. And I do want to stay, maybe next time I have a night off, but right now I – ”

“I will explain,” Ilya interrupted. “But I need to take you to my home right now.”

“Explain here.”

“Shane – ”

“Explain here, please.”

Shane's arms were crossed now – his face a picture of stubbornness alongside the concern.

"I need to have Nikolai with you again."

It wasn't an explanation, Ilya knew that. But he hoped that maybe it could be enough of one for now.

"First off, that explains nothing. Second, absolutely not."

"Shane – "

"We talked about this already. I don't want your… assistant or whatever he is stalking me. Especially with zero explanation why."

"Shane, I need you to – "

"You *told* me I'm my own person, didn't you? I don't want this."

"And you told me you belong to me! No?"

His voice cracked on his last word, and Shane went quiet. He knew it wasn't fair of him to throw that at him, but Ilya was desperate now. He had to keep Shane safe. If it meant he had to fucking kidnap him and keep him in his home, at his side, he would.

"I'm sorry, Shane, please, can I just – "

"I do belong to you. But I need you to tell me what's going on. Especially if you want me to agree to Nikolai."

"Ok, yes, I will. Can I please, *please,* take us home and then I will explain?"

"You can take me to *my* home and explain."

*****

To his own detriment, he could deny Shane nothing, and that was why Ilya now found himself sitting on the end of a neatly made bed while Shane puttered around in his small kitchen, ostensibly making tea for Ilya because he insisted Ilya looked pale.

Shane's own face was still a paler shade than Ilya would have liked, but he could tell that Shane was trying to be calm through his worry.

"I'm not a good person," was how Ilya had started his explanation, and he'd held a hand up when Shane tried to protest.

He didn't give him every detail. Shane didn't need every detail. But he'd told him enough to make him understand – Ilya did not have a normal job; he did bad things; he hurt people. And someone who also did bad things wanted to hurt Ilya, and now that man wanted to hurt Shane. Apologies were sprinkled through the entire explanation – because Ilya *was* sorry. He

was sorry that he was selfish and brought Shane into his life and now he had to deal with this when he should be thinking about things like research papers and hockey practice.

“This person who wants to… hurt me – ”

“Aleksandr.”

“Aleksandr. He knows where I live? Where I work?”

“Probably, yes. I’m sorry.”

“Does he know where I go to school? Are my friends in danger?”

“No, they are not.”

“How can you know that for sure?”

“He wants to hurt you because of me. Your friends don’t know me. He will not care about them. He is… precise, focused.”

Shane nodded absentmindedly as he set a mug down on the nightstand for Ilya.

“Shane, I – ” Ilya swallowed. “Shane, you are in danger because of me. And I am sorry, so sorry. And I understand if you are angry. And if you never want to see me again. Would be better for you, I’m sure, so I – ”

“Wait, what are you doing?”

“I am telling you I understand if you do not want to see me again. And I will let you go. But I still want to keep you safe.”

“Let me go? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I should never have put you in this position. I should never have dragged you into my life. I – ”

“Are you… are you like leaving me? What, you’re just done with me?”

Shane’s breathing was getting quicker, and he had started pacing back and forth. Ilya wanted to just grab him and hold him. He wanted to make him understand that Shane was better off without Ilya in his life. That all Ilya would do is ruin things for him. That he had already ruined so much.

“I want what is best for you.”

“And abandoning me is what’s best for me?”

“Shane, I am not – ”

“Do you want that? Do you not want to see me anymore?”

“No! That’s not it, I – ”

“Then why are you trying to do this? Why are you trying to leave me?”

“Because I’m a shit person, Shane, and all I will do is ruin your life!”

Shane stopped his pacing. Ilya couldn’t meet his eyes now, staring intently at the floor. Shane’s feet came into view, standing directly in front of him.

“Ilyusha.”

It would have struck him less if Shane had just reached directly into his rib cage and squeezed his heart with his bare hand.

Shane straddled him, knees on either side of Ilya’s hips, and cupped his hands around Ilya’s cheeks – forcing his eyes up to Shane’s.

“I don’t believe you. You make my life better. You could never ruin it.”

“Shane – ”

“You want to keep me safe?”

Ilya nodded.

“Then keep me safe. I’ll let Nikolai follow me. But don’t leave me. Not unless that’s what you want because it’s not what I want.”

Shane stole any response Ilya may have had as he crashed his lips into Ilya’s, his arms coming around to cling to him. Ilya pressed his lips to any piece of Shane’s skin within his reach, soft apologies falling out of his mouth between every kiss.

Ilya wasn’t sure if it was Shane who had pulled him or if he had pushed Shane until they were lying in his bed, but that’s where they ended up – Ilya on top of him, staring for a beat too long before he realized he’d just been looking down at Shane, studying his face. The other man’s hands were threading through his hair, and Ilya felt a warmth spread in his chest – it felt dangerous.

Shane gave his hair a harder pull and then he was kissing him again, hands scrambling to remove clothing.

When Shane was finally bare beneath him, Ilya wasted no time – he wanted to touch every inch of Shane’s skin, with his hands, with his mouth, with anything that could make contact happen between them. Shane seemed happy to bask in the attentive worship, his breathing quick and shallow, occasionally interrupted by a sharp gasp or whine when Ilya found a particularly sensitive part of his body.

“Please,” the whimper fell out of Shane’s mouth.

“Please, what?”

“You know, you know already. Please.”

“Say it.”

“I need you. I need you in me. Please.”

Ilya had no appetite to make Shane wait. He needed it too. He separated from Shane long enough to rifle around in his nightstand drawer until he found what he needed and then set to work immediately, circling a slick finger around Shane’s entrance.

I need you. I always need you. I don’t know how I can stop needing you now. I’m afraid I’m falling in love with you, and it’s making me reckless.

He needed to bite his own lip to keep the words from spilling out loud.

“Ilya. Please.”

He gently pressed his finger into Shane, relishing the way his head tilted back into the pillows, the arch of his lithe neck. He had started whining insistently, trying to push down on Ilya’s fingers as he fucked them into Shane.

“I’m ready, fuck, please.”

“So impatient.”

But Ilya pulled his fingers away, positioning himself between Shane’s legs and pushing into him slowly.

“Fuck, thank you, fuck.”

Ilya held back a small laugh at the sincerity of the ‘thank you.’ Shane’s hands found his hair again, pulling him down to his mouth as Ilya started to move above him. Ilya wanted to lick every delicious noise out of Shane’s mouth. Coherent thought was quickly leaving his mind – all of them replaced with this picture of Shane under him, mouth open, panting breath and moans, chest flushed. He wanted to commission a fucking oil painting of it to hang in his goddamn living room. Ilya’s hand found its way to stroke Shane’s cock.

Ilya wasn’t going to last much longer, and he wanted to, he *needed* to watch Shane come for him first.

“Come for me, solnyshko, let me see you.”

As if he just needed the command alone, Shane arched off the bed, cum falling over Ilya’s hand as he obeyed. He felt Shane pulse around him and knew he would be close behind him. He gripped Shane’s hips hard, driving into him. He could feel Shane’s hands on him, pulling him in until Ilya came, eyes squeezed shut so hard he thought he saw stars. As he came down from it, he opened his eyes to look down at Shane, his breath finally evening out, face blissed out, sparkling brown eyes still lit up somehow from the inside.

He kissed him almost lazily before carefully pulling out and collapsing beside Shane.

“Would you stay with me tonight? If I asked.”

Of course, Ilya would stay. He would do anything Shane asked.

“If you asked, yes.”

Chapter End Notes

All of my gratitude and appreciation goes to you for reading, for kudos-ing, for commenting, for all your love. It is so very kind, and it makes my heart grow three sizes every time.

I hope that you all have the best hair day the next time you have plans to go out!

Chapter 10: Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

> Nikolai takes on his new role. Hayden and Shane disagree. Ilya and Shane are both dancing around the same phrase.

Chapter Notes

> I think I may have been possessed of a spirit and wrote this in a fugue state. Please forgive typos or nonsense - I know my writing is always riddled with it, but I appreciate you all giving me grace so much.
>
> A standard chant now - Fuck AI, we hate AI. (another data center meeting is coming up, cross your fingers that we can get this one blocked too)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For all of Shane's initial insistence that he did *not* want Nikolai following him around, it was remarkably easy to get used to. There seemed to be two distinct modes that Shane could operate in under these circumstances – one where Nikolai tended to stay further away, near doorways, noticeable but unobtrusive, never interacting directly with him and the other where Shane made a concerted effort to just integrate Nikolai into his life as though he was any other friend.

The second mode admittedly sounded like far more fun for Shane. So, he planned to launch a whole campaign to get Nikolai to feel more like a friend – maybe to *be* more like a friend.

"Will you just sit down?"

Shane had been grabbing a quick bite to eat in the dining hall – Lipton, not the most convenient location-wise, but he liked that they had more vegetarian options than some of the other dining halls, so it was easier to find things to fit his diet during the season. Nikolai had stood awkwardly near the bland brown table Shane plopped down at before finally surrendering to Shane's request without a word.

"So, Nikolai…"

Shane realized he needed to talk to the man that he'd practically commanded to sit with him, but he was at a loss for how to make conversation with him now that the silent Russian was across from him.

“How’re you?”

Nikolai just stared at him for a beat.

“Fine.”

“I’m sorry that your job is so boring lately.”

“Boring is fine.”

For a minute, Shane wanted to ask what a not-boring day would be like. Ilya had told him in broad strokes and vague terms everything that he was involved in, but Shane could tell that he was hiding a lot of it still – he’d been hesitant and his eyes had remained on the floor of Shane’s apartment the entire time. Shane wished that he *had* told him in detail – if only so Shane could be explicitly clear how little it all mattered to him. So that he could tell Ilya with detailed accuracy that there was nothing he could pile on the scale in Shane’s heart to outweigh Shane’s growing affection for him.

He knew Ilya wouldn’t give details. Probably not even if he explicitly asked. But maybe he could get more out of Nikolai though.

“Is your job usually boring?”

“Yes.”

Maybe Shane wouldn’t get *anything* out of Nikolai.

“How many of Ilya’s friends do you have to follow around?”

“You are friend?”

Nikolai raised a single eyebrow in incredulity – the first sign of personality that he had shown in the couple weeks that he’d been with Shane all day every day, and Shane knew he blushed a bit.

“I have not followed other… *friends*.”

It shouldn’t send the little thrill through Shane that it does, but he couldn’t help it. It made him feel special in some way. He wasn’t entirely naïve – he knew that Ilya must have had other partners, girlfriends, boyfriends, whatever word anyone wanted to use. The man was at least a decade older than him, how could he have gone the whole time without anyone important in that role? Hell, for all Shane knew there was a whole spouse back in Russia.

“You are different.”

Shane was a little unsettled by the way that Nikolai seemed to read his thoughts.

“What do you mean by different?”

“Just different.”

“Maybe he just didn’t tell you about anyone else.”

“Even if he didn’t tell, I see.”

“You see?”

“Mhm, everything. You are different.”

*****

Hayden hadn’t said anything out loud, but Shane could see that he clearly was not a fan of Shane’s new shadow. He had been letting out exaggerated sighs since he’d spotted Nikolai trailing Shane into the rink. He had been pointedly looking for at him every few minutes during practice – casting his eyes back to Shane in an unspoken question. It wasn’t until they got through practice that he finally asked out loud.

“Dude, why is that creepy dude here again?”

They were cleaning crap up on the rink, just picking up the squat orange cones that they’d been using for some drills. Or Shane was picking them up, and Hayden was gliding along behind him. Supposedly, he was helping, but Shane had noted that he was the only one with a fist full of plastic cones.

“Were you actually going to help me or just trail behind me like always?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m faster than you.”

“Wow, harsh.”

“Just facts.”

Shane was laughing as he shoved half the cones at Hayden.

“You didn’t answer my question though, man. What is that dude doing here?”

“Hm? Oh, it’s nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Yeah, it’s nothing.”

“You are the worst liar.”

Shane hadn’t considered how he was supposed to explain Nikolai’s presence to anyone who had noticed it. He fumbled around in his own mind for what a reasonable explanation would be and was coming up empty.

“Uh, so, Ilya has had some like… corporate espionage issues. With his job. And he just wanted to make sure no one bothered me.”

“Corporate espionage?”

“Yeah, like stalking employees and stealing industry secrets or whatever.”

“And it’s serious enough that you need Igor over there following you?”

“His name isn’t Igor.”

“Avoiding my question *again*.”

Shane had plucked every cone up at this point, tossing them in the net bag on the bench and heading toward the locker room. Maybe he should have said that Ilya had a stalker. A crazy ex. In hindsight, that would have been more believable, but he’d made his bed and now he had to lie in it.

“It’s really nothing, Hayd. Stupid stuff with his job. He was just anxious, and this makes him feel better. I wanted him to feel better.”

“You flipped the last time Igor – ”

“Not his name.”

“The last time this dude,” Hayden plunged ahead, “was around. Why is it fine now?”

“Because I say it is. Don’t worry about it, man. It doesn’t matter.”

Hayden was studying him with an expression Shane hadn’t seen on his face before. It was somewhere between worry and annoyance, but Shane didn’t know what it meant. He went through all the motions of showering and changing and tried to figure out what that face was supposed to mean.

“Let’s go to Westside and grab a beer, yeah?”

Hayden’s face has settled into something more recognizable when he asked the question, but Shane was still confused. Hayden was focused on tying his shoe, not looking up for Shane’s answer.

“Ok, let me just, uh… tell Nikolai.”

“Sure, tell Nikolai.”

It was maybe a ten-minute walk down W 23rd, and Hayden was back to cracking bad jokes; condensation from their laughs hanging in the cold air around them.

Hayden insisted that the first round was on him as they settled in at a small hi-top table in the corner of the dim dive bar. Shane noticed that Nikolai stayed near the front door – seated at the end of the bar but facing out so he could see the entire place. If Shane was being honest, it was almost comforting to know that someone was there to have his back so thoroughly – not only Nikolai, but really Ilya.

“Oh, damn, that’s new!”

Hayden nodded toward Shane’s wrist, his new watch visible now that he’d taken his coat off. He wasn’t about to wear a Cartier chain and bracelet around, and he didn’t want to wear the nice jacket Ilya had gotten him when he was gross from practice. But the watch… It was simpler, a leather band and a square silver framed face. It could be an everyday thing. Ilya had wanted him to try on a larger, all gold piece, but Shane had been drawn to this one.

It almost reminded him of an old watch his dad owned. He suspected it was far more expensive than his dad’s, but Claire had stayed true to her word and didn’t say a single price during their interaction though. And Shane hadn’t wanted to go home and look up how much it cost this time.

He liked that every time he’d put it on, he remembered the way that Ilya’s fingers felt against his wrist as he’d fastened it onto Shane. He’d been touched by Ilya in countless ways, but there was something so soft about the moment that sent a small smile to his face every time it came to mind.

“How many blowjobs for that? Maybe I need a new watch.”

Hayden’s joke immediately pulled him out of the memory, and he knew that an angry flush sprang to his face unbidden. His stomach jerked like he was on an old roller coaster.

“That’s not… It’s not like that.”

Hayden’s laugh quickly died on his lips, and the facial expression that confused Shane came back.

“I, actually, uh,” Hayden cleared his throat like the words were getting stuck there. “I wanted to talk to you about that. About what’s it’s, uh, like.”

“What do you mean?”

“What actually is this. Like… none of your friends have met this guy. We know barely anything about him outside of him stalking you – ”

“He wasn’t – ”

“And Shane…”

Hayden took a deep breath and a gulp of the beer in front of him. Shane hated feeling like he wasn’t coming into a conversation with all the information, and that’s how he felt now. Like he should know what Hayden was talking about, but he was clueless. And he hated how dirty Hayden’s comments were making him feel; how cheap and meaningless they were making his relationship with Ilya feel.

“I just… I see things, right, man?”

“See *what*? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You can tell me, it’s ok. I’m not going to, like, judge you or anything. I want to help you.”

“Help me what?”

“I know that maybe it feels hard to leave since it’s been a few months now, but I can help you, and I just want you to know – ”

“Hayden, what the fuck are you talking about?”

“Shane, look. I see the bruises. I know what’s going on. I want to help.”

“What?”

Hayden’s voice was getting continually softer with each sentence while Shane’s words were rising in volume. His confusion wasn’t clearing the more that Hayden spoke; if anything, it was growing. Bruises? Of course, Shane had bruises. He was a fucking hockey player. What did that have to do with Ilya?

“I know he stalked you. And now he’s hurting you.”

Bruises. Ilya. Hayden telling him that he wanted to help. Confusion was clearing, but Shane dropped his head in his hands at how incredibly sweet but stupid his friend was.

“I know those aren’t from hockey, man, and I just. Look, I’m here to help you. I get that this guy is spending a lot of money, and that he’s buying you nice things. But that doesn’t mean you have to take this kind of treatment.”

“Hayden,” a tight smile was playing across Shane’s mouth now. “It’s not – ”

“Not like that?” Hayden was indignant. “Shane, I’ve seen… I’ve seen fucking *bite marks* on you, ok.”

Shane wanted to hide his face again over how embarrassing this entire conversation was.

“Hayden, I need you to know that nothing is happening to me that I haven’t asked for.”

“Shane,” he was shaking his head. “Buddy, no, don’t… don’t do that. There’s nothing you did that makes you deserve being treated like this.”

“No, no, no, Hayd, you’re not understanding. There is not a mark on my body that I haven’t *explicitly* asked Ilya to put there.”

“What do you – Oh, *oh*, Jesus, Shane!”

“You brought this up, dude!”

His voice was raised again. Neither of them was laughing, and Shane knew his face was still red. He glanced up toward Nikolai and saw a set of eyes trained on him intently. He shook his head slightly, trying to let Nikolai know there wasn’t any need for him to come give Shane an out.

“Ok, but he *did* stalk you. I mean, Shane, what do you even really know about this guy?”

“What did you know about Jackie besides that she was a cute barista you’d seen for two weeks before you asked her out?”

“That’s different. We’re… nor – ”

“If you say ‘normal,’ I am walking out of this bar, Hayden.”

“I didn’t mean it in like a gay-straight way! I just meant, fuck, like in a she’s-not-leaving-me-bruised way.”

“Ok, well, I’m sorry for your vanilla ass sex life, but you’re allowed to have that just like I’m allowed to do what *I* want.”

“Look, even if I set aside the strangely violent sex bruises you have…”

“Jesus Christ,” Shane muttered.

“There’s still the fact that he has some goon following you around. That’s not healthy.”

“Look, Ilya has a lot of bodyguards and staff around. And Nikolai isn’t a goon! I just – He just – he wants to make sure I’m safe.”

“Make sure you’re safe or make sure you can’t escape?”

“I don’t want to *escape*,” Shane’s voice was a hiss, and he hadn’t realized he stood up until he registered the scraping sound of the stool moving. “I’m exactly where I fucking want to be, Hayden.”

“Shane,” Nikolai’s low voice sounded from beside him. He hadn’t noticed the man coming across the bar when Shane stood.

“I’m fine. I’m ok. Sorry.”

Nikolai nodded and turned to go back to his post.

“Wait.”

He stopped.

“Nikolai, could you please tell Hayden that Ilya would never hurt me, and that you are not holding me hostage?”

Nikolai looked both confused and vaguely horrified, and Hayden let out an exasperated sigh.

“Ilya would cut off own hand if you did not like how it touched you.”

“Thank you. Take me home now, please.”

Nikolai immediately freed his coat from the back of the stool and held it out.

“Ok, we go.”

“Shane!”

“No, Hayd, I’m not in the mood.”

“I’m sorry, I just. I’m sorry, ok?”

“I get that, I appreciate it. But I’m gonna go home now.”

*****

Shane was glad that Nikolai understood “take me home” to mean “take me to Ilya.” He had to fucking work tonight, but there were at least a tiny handful of hours where he could see Ilya and not think about the shit show of a conversation with Hayden.

Nikolai must have texted Ilya… something. Shane didn’t know what, but the second he stepped foot in the Brighton Beach apartment, Ilya swept him into his arms.

“Zaychik,” was all he said, pressing light kisses to the top of Shane’s head.

“Nikolai is a tattle tale.”

“I don’t know what that means, solnyshko.”

“It means he told you my friend was stupid, and that I’m upset.”

“He only told me you had a bad day. What did your friend do?”

Shane didn’t want to rehash the whole stupid argument. He would recount the whole thing for Ilya at some point eventually, but all he wanted right now was Ilya.

“Can I tell you later and right now you just hold me until I have to go to work?”

“Don’t go to work.”

“Ilya…”

“Why work at all? You want something? I pay for it.”

“I have to pay rent, asshole.”

“I buy you house.”

Shane rolled his eyes.

“I’m not doing letting you do that.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve already had one stupid conversation today; can we not have another one?”

Ilya lightly gripped his chin and tilted his head back, so he had to look at Ilya. He pressed his lips softly into Shane's, his other hand coming up to thread into Shane's hair.

"I'm sorry, solnyshko," Ilya's voice was light as he pulled away.

The second press of his lips was decidedly less gentle, and Shane leaned into it, opened his mouth for Ilya, clenched his own fingers into Ilya's curls.

"Maybe I can see if Jake could work."

*****

"You must know, I would *never* hurt you. Nikolai was right, I would cut off my hand if you did not like how it touched you."

Ilya's was lying on his bare chest, fingers lightly caressed a small bruise now blooming on Shane's collarbone – the evidence of a moment where Shane had grasped Ilya's hair and held him to Shane's chest as he made Shane forget his annoyance, forget the argument, forget his own name.

"I know, Ilya."

Jake had been happy to pick up the extra hours. Shane briefly felt guilty – he knew next to nothing about Jake, and Jake was always so willing to do him a solid whenever he asked. He was sure if he told Ilya, the man would do something remarkably over the top to say thank you. Maybe buy Jake a car. Maybe he should ask if Jake would want that.

"Tell me how to make it better, zaychik. I will do whatever you want."

"It'll be fine. I just. I don't know."

"Would you make you feel better if I met your friend?"

"Met him and – ?"

"And did not *do* anything to him. Just met him. Met his girlfriend. Show them I care for you, and they should not worry."

Shane hesitated. They hadn't defined whatever it was they were doing. Shane was almost scared to. He knew that Ilya cared about him. He knew he cared about Ilya. He didn't know if he needed any kind of label put on it – he didn't know what label he would even choose to put on it. But the offer was tempting. The idea of getting to sit in a bar with his friends and have Ilya there, have him hold Shane's hand… that would almost feel, well, normal.

"Maybe. Maybe I'd like that."

"After I fix everything, after I fix Aleksandr and know you are safe, I will meet them. They will see."

*****

Shane had been in New York for years at this point, and the break for American Thanksgiving always snuck up on him. It was only a couple days, but practice was also optional, so it was two days that Shane could sleep in and attempt to worry about nothing.

He had dragged himself through Monday and Tuesday, and now he just had to get through a work night on Wednesday before he could see Ilya and have a peaceful morning with no class, no practice, no nothing. Realistically, he knew that he'd wind up waking up early still. Probably going to the gym before it got busy. But it would be his *choice*. And that made a difference.

"Hey."

He glanced up to see Hayden standing at the end of the tiny aisle where he was acting like he was straightening up.

"Hi."

"So, I talked to Jackie…"

"Oh, you needed someone smarter than you to tell you that you fucked up?"

"Ok, harsh. But fair."

Shane stayed silent, facing Hayden, waiting for him to get on with whatever this conversation was going to be. He still didn't know if he even wanted to have it.

"I would like to emphasize that my goal was only to support you."

"Ok."

"And that I misread the situation."

"Sure."

"And that I'm sorry and you're allowed to have whatever weird sex you want to have as long as it's… safe, sane, and consensual."

Shane was sure that the phrasing came *directly* from Jackie's mouth.

"I accept your apology. And I want to continue to never talk about my sex life with you."

A grin broke out over Hayden's face when he saw the tiny smile that appeared on Shane's own.

"So, I wanted to talk to you about tomorrow."

Shane was lost once more.

"What about tomorrow?"

“Ok, please, *please*, don’t be mad. We just hadn’t talked about logistics or confirmed anything, and I just thought you’d probably stay here. So I told Jackie that I would go with her.”

“Of course I’m going to stay here. Where did you think I was going to stay? Go with Jackie where?”

“Shane, I am very seriously worried about how many concussions you may have sustained in your life.”

“Fuck off,” Shane shoved at him, laughing.

“You were gonna come back with me for Thanksgiving. But Jackie asked if I would want to come with her instead.”

“Oh,” Shane had been way more distracted this semester than he had realized. “Hayd, of course you should go with her. We both dropped the ball on that one. No worries.”

“And you’re going to spend the next two days with Mr. Russia, I’m assuming?”

Shane hadn’t thought about it. He knew that he was going to go to Ilya’s apartment after this never-ending shift was finally over. Ilya said he’d come drive him. But he hadn’t brought up his two days off. And why would a Russian remember when American Thanksgiving was? Shane had had a break for the holiday every year for the last few years, and even he forgot about it.

“Maybe. Either way, I’m sleeping in and not meeting your dumb ass for coffee at the ass crack of dawn. No matter how much groveling you do.”

*****

“Do you celebrate Thanksgiving?”

“What?”

Ilya had picked him up in the early hours of the morning, and Shane should be asleep after working and then the morning that he and Ilya had. But instead, he was laying in the bedroom – dark now thanks to black out curtains drawn over all the windows to block the early morning sun – wide awake and listening to the soft sound of Ilya’s breath. He lightly jostled the man’s shoulder as he asked the question, and Ilya was still waking up, his voice thick with sleep and confusion.

“Thanksgiving. Do you celebrate it?”

“Malysh, you woke me up to ask about American holidays? Why would I celebrate this? I am Russian.”

“Right.”

“I can go back to sleep now?”

“Yeah. I was just going to – but never mind, it doesn’t matter.”

“You were going to what?”

“I was just gonna ask something that doesn’t matter.”

“Everything you ask me matters. And I am awake now. You have questions about Earth Day next?”

“Asshole,” there was no heat in his voice though. “I was just going to ask to like… tag along if you celebrated or anything. It’s fine.”

Shane kept rambling, his anxiety ridden, too-awake brain not having the wherewithal to put the brakes on.

“I just… I don’t work, and I was supposed to go to New Jersey with Hayden, and he apologized, but I kind of forgot I said I’d go, and now he’s going home with Jackie, and it’s all fine. Nikolai will just have to forgive me for a boring couple days while I do nothing in my house.”

“You would rather be in your house doing nothing than be here?”

“You just said you don’t celebrate Thanksgiving.”

“Shane, you are Canadian. *You* don’t celebrate Thanksgiving. You can still stay with me, solnyshko. Is not even something you have to ask for.”

Ilya’s hands were wandering over the bed in the dark now, finding Shane and pulling him closer until he was resting with his back pressed to Ilya’s chest.

“I always want you here. You could just live here.

Shane knew that Ilya was just talking, murmuring the words as he ran his hand through Shane’s hair and pressed a kiss to his head, so he didn’t respond.

“Would,” Ilya cleared his throat. “Would you want to do that?”

“Do what? Celebrate Thanksgiving? No, I don’t give a fuck, Ilya, I – ”

“No. Live. Here. With me.”

Shane’s mind was already working overtime with the anxiety of trying to figure out if he could stay here with Ilya, and now the man was talking about moving in. His mouth went dry for a reason that he couldn’t put his finger on.

“Live here?”

He repeated the phrase mostly to try to buy time to get his brain to catch up to the idea that Ilya had *not* just been talking – that he really was floating the idea out there for Shane’s approval.

“Yes, malysh. You live here; I take care of everything.”

“Oh, and I suppose quit my job, too, hm?”

Shane tried to make it sound like a joke, but it came out a little too sharply.

“If you wanted to. I have already told you this.”

“I don’t want to quit my job.”

“I don’t think I asked you to, dorogoy.”

“But you want me to live here. To take care of everything. I mean, I still have a lease, Ilya. I can’t – ”

“I pay for you to break the lease, it’s fine.”

“I don’t know.”

“Why are you so fucking stubborn when I want to take care of you?”

Shane tried to laugh again, to just dismiss the question – this time a little more convincingly. He didn’t need anyone to take care of him. He’d taken care of himself for quite some time, thank you. It was easy enough to give up control in this bedroom – to let Ilya hold him down and take him apart and let his mind go blissfully empty as he followed Ilya’s directions. But talking about moving out of his apartment or quitting his job was a level of giving up control that Shane couldn’t stomach right now.

“I want real answer, malysh, not a laugh.”

“I don’t have an answer. I just… I don’t need you to take care of me, Ilya.”

“Who said ‘need’? This is something I *want* to do. I know enough English to know the difference.”

“That’s not fair, I wasn’t making fun – ”

“No, is fine. We don’t need to talk about it.”

“Ilya – ”

“I’m going to smoke for a minute.”

Ilya freed himself from under Shane and slipped out of the bed – electing not to go lean out one of the balconette bedroom windows but crossing the room to the door and heading toward the large terrace.

Fuck.

Shane was fucking it all up. And the anxiety spiral he had desperately been trying to keep under control was rapidly spinning out of it. He knew that eventually it would come to this –

that he couldn't be what Ilya wanted. That he couldn't let go even just a little bit and let someone take care of something, anything for him. Ilya was going to leave him. And it would be Shane's fault. And he couldn't blame him, who would want Shane and his tight grip on control and his inability to let go even a little bit.

His anxiety broke out of his control, and his breathing was starting to go the same way. He tried breathing through his mouth, a deep almost gasping breath, but it didn't help. Shane could feel his stomach drop in a wave of dread that he couldn't identify. He was sure his heart wasn't supposed to be beating as fast as it was.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

He couldn't get his lungs to fill all the way with air, and if they didn't fill all the way with air, he was going to suffocate.

"Shane?"

He knew that he heard his name, but he couldn't focus on where it came from.

"Shane, malysh, what is wrong?"

Ilya.

"I can't breathe."

It was all he could get out. He'd only felt like this a couple times in his life. He'd forgotten how all-encompassingly awful it was and how hard it was to get out of by himself.

"I can't breathe, I can't breathe."

The words came out panicked, breathy.

"You are having panic attack, Shane," Ilya moved across the room, sitting on the bed and pulling Shane into his lap.

"Why can't I breathe?"

"It's ok. I have you. Follow mine, ok, breathe with me?"

He tried to follow the deep, slow breath that Ilya took, but Shane's caught in his throat. Ilya took his hand and pressed it to Shane's chest; took Shane's hand and pressed it to his own.

"You feel how slow? Follow that, malysh. You can do this."

Shane's eyes finally found Ilya's in the dark, the deep sea glass blue of them stayed unblinkingly focused on Shane's face.

"There, you are doing it. You are ok. Just breathe."

He hadn't realized that he matched Ilya's breathing successfully, but his heart did feel a bit less like it was about to beat out of his chest.

"You are doing so well. Just follow me."

Shane tipped forward and leaned his forehead against Ilya's, feeling the man's breath breeze across Shane's face. He wasn't sure how long they stayed like that – Shane straddled over Ilya's hips, foreheads touching, hand memorizing the feel of Ilya's heart beating.

"Better?"

Shane nodded and started to move off Ilya's lap.

"Not yet."

He pulled Shane closer to him, shifting them both until they were laying back down on the bed. Shane nuzzled his head into Ilya's chest, searching for his heartbeat again.

"Shane, you do not have to move in. You do not have to quit your job. You do not have to do a single thing that you do not want to do."

"Ok."

"No, I mean this, malysh."

"I'm sorry."

"No, no sorry. *I* am sorry I made you feel this way."

"I'm scared I can't be what you want me to be."

"Shane. You are *exactly* what I want you to be. You. That is all. I want you just like you are."

"A control freak?"

"Shh."

They laid in silence, Shane still focusing on keeping his breath even. Ilya took a deep breath before speaking again, his voice still soft.

"I lost my mother when I was very young."

Ilya so rarely talked about his family, and Shane didn't interrupt.

"She was unhappy. My father… he was hard on her, on all of us. But her most of all. The only thing I wanted to do was grow up to be someone who could help her get away from him. Who could take care of her.

He swallowed thickly

“I could not be that for her, and she chose to leave us. I found her on her bathroom floor when I came home from school.”

“Ilya, I’m so sorry.”

“I never cared about my father. He was awful man. But my mother? She was gentle and so funny. She was the most beautiful. And I cared about her more than I have cared for anyone… Until I met you.”

Ilya’s arms tightened around him slightly, and Shane’s breath quickened for a very different reason.

“I want to take care of you for this reason. Because I care for you this deeply. Do you understand? Not for any other reason. Not because you are helpless and need me to. But because of how I feel for you. Maybe that is crazy – ”

“It’s not,” Shane interjected immediately. “It’s not crazy. Or if it is, I’m crazy too.”

“Oh, are you?”

There was a teasing edge in Ilya’s voice.

“Yes.”

Shane tried to imbue the single word with everything that he felt. With the idea that he knew what three words Ilya was saying without saying, and that Shane felt the same way. That he was also dangerously close to telling Ilya the truth – Shane loved him.

Chapter End Notes

"But, Jean, why don't they just tell each other 'I love you'??" Because they are but dumb boys and I like my slow burns SMOLDERING, BAYBEE.

As always, you all have my immense gratitude for being so kind and gentle with my little fic. Your kudos and comments fuel me through my days; I hope that your own loveliness will be visited upon you by everyone you come across.

I have a couple one shots and maybe another little AU in my head... Do I dare start writing more? I did also start a silly little AU set in a jewelry shop, if anyone feels like checking that out! You have my undying gratitude either way! **Diamond Heart**

UPDATE 6/17 - I wrote chapter 11 and absolutely hated it. And then pouted about that for about four days. And now it is being rewritten. Yet to be seen if I don’t hate it but either way, should be up this weekend!

Chapter 11: Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Shane has to go back to Canada. Ilya makes a huge gesture.

Chapter Notes

I am so so so sorry that it's taken me so long to update this! My real-life-job got very crazy. (Supposedly, I'm an actual adult that has to be a school admin. during the day, and lemme tell you a high school right before summer break is a heck of a place to work.)

I also wrote out the whole chapter and absolutely hated it, deleted the entire thing and then wrote this. I think I like it a lot better, and I hope you guys like it too! Hopefully, this being a bit longer of a chapter makes up for the delay! Somewhere there's a "worth the wait?" joke to be had.

As per always - fuck AI, I hate it. One of the data centers has moved to the next step, and I can't tell you how irate it makes me. Light a candle that the next city council meeting gets us somewhere.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This is such a bad idea,” Shane’s voice was breathy as he pulled his lips away from Ilya’s mouth. He didn’t even believe himself as the words slipped out.

“What is?”

“Tatyana will be back and wonder why we’ve disappeared.”

“Mm, Tatyana is fussing with oladushki and will be busy for at least ten minutes. Long enough for one of us to get his cock sucked, no?”

Shane was on his knees before he even realized he was heading that direction, Ilya’s hand coming up to grip his hair. He ran his hands over the muscle of Ilya’s thighs.

“Good boy.”

He leaned in, mouthing at Ilya over the fabric of his clothes, and the hand in his hair moved to stroke at the nape of Shane’s neck. He dealt with the buttons and zipper in his way, fingers clumsy in their hurry. His hand closed around Ilya’s cock, slowly stroking the length of it,

taking his time, exploring rather than moving with any real purpose. The fingers at the back of his neck gripped him tighter.

“Nine minutes, Shane.”

He leaned in, still gentle, and closed his lips over the head – moving with a singular purpose now.

“Fuck,” Ilya’s voice was low and soft, a rasp of itself. “You are my good boy, but you like being bad, don’t you?”

Shane moaned around him, his own dick growing harder by the second.

“You *like* that we are tucked in this little bathroom, and that anyone could hear how much you love my cock in your mouth. Did you even stop to check if I locked the door? Or did you want someone to see how good you take it?”

Shane glanced toward the door but couldn’t be bothered to try and decipher whether it was locked or not.

“Are you hard?”

Shane made a sound that he hoped was an answer and started to move a hand down to seek out some relief himself.

“Don’t touch yourself. Not unless I say.”

Shane looked up into Ilya’s eyes, pleading silently while he still worked his mouth steadily over Ilya.

“Christ, you are so beautiful.”

Ilya’s hand caressed the side of his face, fingers smoothing over his cheekbones where Shane knew a cluster of freckles were splashed.

“Should I fuck you somewhere people could hear next? Sneak away and let everyone wonder who is making such pretty noises? But only I will know that is how you sound with me inside you.”

Shane made a noise that sounded like a choked off sob; he leaned in taking Ilya as deep as he could, his jaw burning from the quick steady movements. He felt Ilya’s hand move back up to tighten in his hair.

“Fuck, I love the way you want me, Shane. The way you go to your knees. The way – fuck, Shane – ”

Ilya came, gasping his name out, pulsing into Shane’s throat before jerking him back by the hair – the last of his release landed across Shane’s cheek. He wiped a thumb across it and pressed it into Shane’s open mouth. He closed his lips around it without a second thought,

tongue wrapping around to clean everything off before he leaned his head on Ilya's thigh to catch his breath.

He stayed like that for a moment, forehead on Ilya's leg, hands clutching at Ilya's clothing, until the Russian man gently nudged him up. He grabbed a paper towel from beside the sink, wiping Shane's face for good measure before tucking himself back and zipping his pants up.

"I think we have a couple more minutes, no?"

"We do."

"Touch yourself."

Shane's hand went instantly to his own zipper, but Ilya stopped him.

"Over your clothes. Quickly."

"Ilya," his voice was pleading.

"Two minutes."

He moved his hand between his legs, searching for relief for his desperately needy cock.

"Harder. Your legs, wider. Let me see you. Fuck, if you could see your own face."

Somewhere to their left, behind the closed door, he heard Tatyana calling their names.

"Ilya! Please?"

"Keep going."

"I'm going to come," Shane couldn't even be embarrassed. He wanted it so badly. Even if it meant coming in his own pants. The humiliation of it barely registered to him.

"Don't stop until I tell you, or I'll fuck you without letting you come at all tonight. Do you understand?"

He heard Tatyana's footsteps sound closer to the door now.

"Yes. Understand. Fuck, god. Ilya."

He was so close, the pressure of his hands and of Ilya's threat reducing him to nothing but the sensation that was building. He was so close.

"Stop."

Shane jerked his hand away.

"I didn't – Ilya – please, let me come, please."

"You are so pretty when you beg. But we are out of time."

Like Ilya was a prophet, a knock came at the door.

“Are you in there?” Tatyana’s voice didn’t give away any suspicion she may have had about what they were up to. “Food is ready!”

“Be right there, baba Tanya!” Ilya called out as though his dick hadn’t just been in Shane’s mouth. As if he hadn’t just denied Shane the release he himself had been granted.

“Ilya, please.”

“I am going to go to the table. And you are going to stay here until you have…calmed down before you follow me. You will not touch yourself. I will know. And then, after we have eaten whatever Tatyana has put out. And after we have had lovely visit and said long goodbyes. Then I will take you home and fuck you until you forget your name.”

*****

“And do you remember your name now, dorogoy?”

Shane couldn’t remember his own name, what day it was, what city they were in. Anything. He was lying across the wreckage of Ilya’s bed trying to catch his breath before he could give an answer.

“What name?” he finally got out.

“Perfect.”

Ilya leaned over him, lips pressing onto Shane’s temple, his cheek, his neck, before finally finding his mouth. He curled into Ilya’s arms. He wanted to take a shower. He wanted to stay exactly where he was. He wanted to melt into Ilya’s skin so he could just stay there forever.

“I would keep you there forever.”

Fuck, he hadn’t realized he’d said that last part out loud. Ilya’s hands were soft in his hair, stroking down the back of his head to the nape of his neck – making the hair there stand on end with the softness of his movement.

“You are always so good for me, Shane. So perfect.”

Shane might have hummed a little under the praise – it was the only noise he could manage at present. He nuzzled his head into Ilya’s chest and let the man keep showering him with the Russian accented affections that made his heart beat faster.

He wasn’t sure how long they stayed that way before Ilya slid out of the bed, reaching a hand out and pulling Shane out after him. He’d led Shane to his shower, turning the water on and checking the temperature before depositing him under the warm water and stepping in after him.

Shane let out a contented sigh as Ilya’s hands worked shampoo through his hair, soap over his body, pressed open mouthed kisses to his skin as he rinsed off Shane’s body.

He was wrapped in a towel and sitting on an armchair in the corner of the room, watching Ilya change his sheets after they'd been so thoroughly wrestled off the bed when he finally felt himself float fully back into his body.

"Nikolai says you are stressed."

"Huh?"

Ilya had pulled him back into the bed and settled Shane across his chest, hands still playing softly with his hair. Shane could hear the beating of his heart under the warm skin. It was soft, comfortable, lived in. A sign of a level of comfort that Shane really loved. He liked that he could just *touch* Ilya, just feel his skin beneath Shane's.

"Nikolai says he can tell you are stressed about something."

"I'm not stressed."

"Solnyshko…"

Ilya's hand stilled in Shane's hair.

"I'm a little stressed."

"Ah, that is what I thought."

"How would Nikolai possibly know that? I haven't said anything to him."

"He is very…perceptive."

Ilya leaned away from him briefly to open the drawer of his nightstand.

"I know this won't fix it, but maybe little reminder that you can always come to me. That you are mine."

Shane should have predicted it – he should have been used to the over-the-top gifts by now, but he wasn't. He propped himself up on an elbow and opened the box – not Cartier red, but Tiffany blue – and saw a simple gold bangle sitting inside it.

"Don't tell Claire I cheated on her."

Shane turned the bracelet over in his hand and a mark on the inside caught his eye. Centered inside the bracelet in elegant script were two words in an alphabet that Shane recognized but couldn't read – "мое солнышко."

"What does it mean?"

"Moy solnyshko. My sunshine. I see your face when I use that one. It is your favorite."

He carefully slid the bracelet onto his wrist.

"No questions of cost this time?"

Shane only shook his head before leaning down and pressing a kiss to the center of Ilya's chest, directly above the beating heart that Shane loved to listen to, and laying his head back on him.

"Dorogoy, what has you stressed?"

"It's silly."

"I will decide that, I think."

"I'm going back to Canada for Christmas, and I don't know how that works with Nikolai, and I'm worried it won't be safe, that I'll put my mom in danger, and I don't want to be away from you, and my mom is dealing with these awful real estate guys who want to buy the restaurant, and it's just all a lot."

It came out in a single breath, rushed like if he didn't do it all in one go, it wouldn't come out at all. Ilya's arm tightened around his shoulders.

"Lyubimyy, this is not silly. Of course, you must go home for Christmas. If you would like, Nikolai can go with you but stay out of sight. I don't think Aleksandr would like an international incident, but I will *always* keep you safe. I would never let anything happen to you or anyone you love. You will not be away from me forever and think how good I will fuck you after so long away."

Shane blushed at that.

"And tell me what real estate men make your mother's life harder, and I will take care of it."

Ilya answered each of the anxieties that had poured out of him, fucking in order, and with an even calmness in his voice.

"Will you miss me?"

Shane hadn't meant to ask it. He'd meant to keep that particular anxiety in the back of his head and not let Ilya know about the juvenile and ridiculous worry that he'd had.

Ilya didn't say a word, instead bringing his hand to the back of Shane's neck and tilting him up into a hungry kiss. Shane's hands automatically found their way to thread their way through Ilya's curls, opening his mouth to deepen the kiss.

"Shane," Ilya pulled away, leaving him a little breathless. "I miss you every moment that you are not with me. I miss you when I must blink and do not see you for even that second."

Shane could only nod, a thick knot starting to form in his throat as his emotions threatened to sneak up from where he was trying to keep them boxed up in his chest.

"You will miss me too, I hope?"

"Of course," Shane's voice cracked a little bit. "Of course, I will."

“Good. Now sleep. And know that I will miss you while we are sleeping, too.”

*****

“Drive? Why drive? I will pay for you to fly. You can be in first class and drink champagne the whole way.”

Ilya had picked him up when he got off work, and they were laying in his Shane’s bed. He’d meant to go to sleep. But Ilya walked him through his door and pushed him against the wall, kissing him with the hunger of a starving man. Fucking in Shane’s place was always involved the challenge of keeping quiet enough that Mrs. De Rossi didn’t bang on the floor for him to keep it down.

It had only happened once. After that, Ilya liked the game of seeing what he could put in Shane’s mouth to muffle the sounds.

“I don’t even like champagne. It’s only 7 hours or so. And I like having a car while I’m up there, it’s convenient.”

“But Canada is snowy. There could be ice on the roads.”

“Wow, you’re so perceptive,” Shane snorted.

“You drive a fucking Toyota whatever from 1983.”

“Ok, it’s a 2014, first off. And I’ve driven that Toyota whatever to snowy Canada every year since I moved here.”

“I don’t like thinking about you in ancient, tiny car in snowy Canada. What if you blow off the road? What if you wind up in ditch and no one is there because Canada is untamed wilderness? What if there are bears?”

“Ilya, I’m going just over the border. To a city. Not to Nordegg or something.”

“What is Nordegg?”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m just saying, I’ll be fine.”

Ilya’s lips were pursed, and Shane could tell he was thinking of how he was going to disagree with him next.

“What if you just take one of my cars?”

“Yeah, sure, ok.” He let out a tiny scoff.

“I am serious. Take the Lexus. The SUV. It will be better in bad weather, and I will feel better about you and your odds of not being stranded in Canadian wilderness.”

“And how am I supposed to explain to my mom that I’m suddenly driving an eighty-thousand-dollar SUV?”

“Shane, we need to talk about why you know the cost of everything. Or need to know the cost of everything. I do not even know what that car costs.”

“The point is, it’s not a car I could have bought.”

“So? Tell her it belongs to me.”

“And who will I tell her you are?”

“Your lover?”

“I cannot tell you how much I won’t be using that word to tell my mother who you are.”

“Your partner?”

Shane’s breath caught a little bit in his throat.

“Partner?”

“You do not like that. I misread, I’m sorry.”

Ilya moved to get up, an awkward air starting to settle over the room.

“No, Ilya,” Shane put his hand on his shoulder to keep him from getting out of the bed. “I… I do like that. I didn’t know that *you’d* like that.”

“Shane, partner, boyfriend, fucking whatever. You are mine, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Ok, and I am yours.”

“I wish you were coming with me.”

“Maybe next year.”

Shane knew that he stiffened up at that. It wasn’t that he didn’t want Ilya to come meet his mom. Thinking about the two people that he cared about most in the world being in the same room together did something funny to his heart. He thought about his mom showing Ilya baby photo albums. Thought about how Ilya would tease him mercilessly for his braces era.

He’d never considered it a possibility – how could it be with who Ilya was, with what he did?

But he would love if it *could* be possible.

*****

Shane hadn’t realized how much he missed Longueuil. It wasn’t much on paper – just a larger suburb of Montreal basically, but it was his hometown. He’d spent so much of his childhood and especially his teenage years wanting to be anywhere but there. Wanting to get

the hell out of there and the hell away from working in the restaurant to help his mom and just to be anywhere else.

Now that he was driving down the quiet street where his mom lived, he felt struck by how ungrateful he'd really been for the place he'd grown up. Maybe it was easier to feel that way when he was only here once a year these days, but the feeling was there nonetheless.

Shave knew that Nikolai was somewhere behind him; he didn't know where. True to Ilya's word Nikolai was almost impossible to spot. It was a little unsettling to think about who else might be watching him unseen, but he tried not to think about it. He knew Nikolai would be there, somewhere, keeping him safe even if he was out of sight.

"Shane!"

His mom walked onto the front porch as he put the car in park. He'd squeezed the SUV into the driveway just behind his mom's car – it was imposing, expensive. Shane had felt nervous about driving it almost the entire way up, knowing how much it cost even if Ilya had no clue.

"Hi, Mom!"

"Shane, what on earth is this?" She motioned to the car. "Did you win the lottery and forget to tell me?"

"No, my, uh, my boyfriend let me borrow his car. He was worried about the Toyota in the snow."

"Boyfriend. Hm. You've been holding out on me," his mom had a small smile. "Come in, tell me all about him. Starting with what on earth he does that he has a spare Lexus for you to borrow."

He followed his mom into the small house – noticing that the cheerful blue siding was starting to fade. He might need to plan a summer trip to help repaint it.

"So, you're driving a Lexus… You're wearing gold bracelets… What does this guy do? Old family money? Corrupt detective taking bribes? Mafia?"

Shane almost choked on the glass of water he'd poured himself when they went in the kitchen. There was no way his mom actually believed – She couldn't somehow know – He glanced up at her; his mom's face wore a teasing smile. He cleared his throat and tried to breathe a little easier. Of course she was kidding.

"Mom, he's in finance. I'm not sure what, something boring."

Ilya would laugh if he heard Shane now. He would have *cackled* at Shane's mom suggesting he was in the mafia. Shane's explanation was a well-rehearsed lie. And Shane was mildly horrified to find that he didn't even feel guilty about it. He should. He *should* feel guilty about lying to his mom. She was talking now about someone in town that she knew also did something in finance, but Shane was only focusing on his lie. He wondered if Ilya would really want to come up and meet his mom.

Ilya would love her, he was sure. And he hoped she would love him back.

“You two must be pretty serious. When do I get to meet him?”

Yuna Hollander could read minds, he was convinced.

“I think it’s getting serious, yeah. And I don’t know, we haven’t talked about it. His business keeps him really busy, I don’t know how coming to Canada would work,” Shane started to ramble before his mom cut him off.

“I can see you starting to get anxiety about it, hun. It’s ok. Bring him, don’t bring him. We can figure it out. I just want you to be treated well. Treated like you deserve. Does he do that?”

“Yeah, Mom,” Shane couldn’t help the smile that bloomed on his face. “He does.”

“He’s kind?”

Shane thought about Ilya – the gentleness that he treated Tatyana with, the softness in his eyes when Svetlana called him, the way that blanketed Shane with so much care that Shane thought he might drown in it – happily, gladly drown in it.

“Yeah, he really is, Mom.”

“I’m going to make some coffee. And then you are going to tell me all about it, ok?”

*****

Shane had told Yuna a version of the truth – a highly edited, very amended truth. No drug dealer; Ilya had just come into the shop at random, a total coincidence that Shane happened to be working that night. He left out some of the more ostentatious gifts, the increasingly larger amounts of cash that Ilya kept leaving when he bought a soda, but his mom had already spotted the Tiffany bracelet, so he simply glossed over everything with a “Ilya is so generous.”

It was easier to just talk about Ilya himself; to tell her how he always made sure Shane was cared for – how Ilya constantly worrying about whether he had eaten; how he was quick to talk Shane down from his anxiety, somehow able to soothe his stress before it even bloomed to full strength.

His mom had just kept a small smile on her face as Shane talked for what felt like an hour before telling him that he needed to head upstairs and get some sleep.

He didn’t realize until he was lying in the bed in his childhood bedroom how much talking about Ilya had made his chest ache. Shane missed him. It had only been a day, and he was pathetic, and he missed Ilya.

He slipped his headphones into his ears and hit the call button on his phone. He didn’t think Ilya would answer, he would probably be busy. But maybe Shane could at least hear his voice on his voicemail, and Ilya would call him back later.

“Shane.”

“Ilya. Hey. Hi. I thought you would be too busy to answer…”

“I will never be too busy to answer you. You should know this.”

Ilya’s voice took a little bit of the ache out of his chest.

“I miss you.”

“Already? Dorogoy, has not even been a day,” Ilya paused. “I miss you too.”

He let himself just listen to Ilya’s breathing for a moment – briefly wondering if it would be weird to ask him to just let Shane stay here listening to him breathe for the rest of the night.

“Tell me about your drive. You were safe? Nikolai followed?”

“I guess he did. I never saw him though.”

“He’s good at that. Your mother is ok?”

“She’s fine. I don’t want to talk about her. And I don’t want to talk about Nikolai.”

“And what do you want to talk about, zaichik?”

Shane bit his lip. He wasn’t sure how to ask.

“Do you want to talk about what I would do to you if I were there?”

Ilya always knew.

“Yes.”

The video call request came in a second later, and Ilya filled his screen – casually leaning back onto the arm of his couch, his chest bare but the lower half of him still unfortunately clothed.

“Oh, Shane, you have on too many clothes.”

Shane flushed but didn’t move.

“Take them off.”

He set his phone on the nightstand, angling it and sitting back so Ilya could see all of him before he stripped out of his clothes. Obedient.

“Touch yourself. Like I would if I were there.”

Shane’s breath was getting quicker as he let his eyes fall closed and dragged his hand across his chest, down his abs, his hip and thigh, and finally wrapping his hand around his cock.

“Spit in your hand.”

He did it without question, smoothing it over his shaft as he went back to stroking himself. He heard Ilya let out a soft curse and a whine escaped his own mouth.

“We cannot have you be too noisy, can we?”

He shook his head, finally casting his eyes to his phone to see Ilya’s hand moving rhythmically below the waistband of his pants. Shane couldn’t help the noise that left him at that.

“What did I just say?”

“Can’t… can’t be noisy.”

“Hm, seems like you can’t follow instructions either.”

“I can… You know I can.”

“I think you need help to be good. Find your underwear. For your noisy mouth.”

Heat pooled in Shane’s stomach as he obeyed the direction, leaning over the edge of the bed and finding where he’d discarded the boxer briefs; balling them up before shoving them in his own mouth.

“Good boy.”

The fabric muffled his moan at the praise.

“Look at me.”

He looked at the camera, watching as Ilya finally shoved his pants and underwear down and let Shane see what he was doing.

“Look at what you do to me, even from so far away.”

He wanted to ask if he could come – wanted to beg Ilya to tell him to. His mouth was watering and his jaw was starting to ache a little at being held open by the now damp fabric of his own underwear.

“I want you to come first. Do it for me.”

His hand sped up, and Shane was glad something was muffling the sounds that he couldn’t help make as he came over his fist. He locked his eyes on his phone to watch Ilya do the same – falling apart with Shane’s name on his lips, nothing impeding the sounds that fell from his mouth. He let his eyes close again, leaning over into the pillows on his bed.

“Solnyshko… You can take them out of your mouth.”

He hadn't realized he'd been lying there for a solid minute, practically panting as he caught his breath, with his own underwear still shoved in his mouth. He flexed his jaw a little after he'd removed the briefs from his mouth and used them to wipe his hand.

"You are ok?"

Ilya's eyes were focused on him, and Shane stared at the blue green of them wishing he could see them in person.

"More than ok."

"That is what you wanted?"

Shane let out a hum of assent.

"Yes, yes it was."

He stayed naked lying in his bed as Ilya started asking him soft questions about his trip, and he answered each of them. Told him about his mom, about the restaurant, about how he'd probably go out to the rink at some point just for fun, talking about anything until his answers to Ilya's questions started to get shorter and come to his mind more slowly.

"You are tired, sweetheart. Call me whenever you want but sleep now."

And because Shane was so good at following direction, he did.

*****

He still appreciated his hometown, but the days in the restaurant were starting to remind Shane of why exactly he left. Shane didn't mind helping his mom, but he was getting a little tired of folding seemingly endless amounts of mandu or thinly slicing beef to marinate in the aromatic soy mixture his mom wouldn't tell him the recipe for. His mom didn't have a lot of other help. One guy, Anthony, helped her in the kitchen and a college kid, Alicia, handled everything up front. She ran a tight ship, there was minimal overhead, and she didn't want a lot of staff to wrangle, she always said. Anthony was easy to work with, a quintessential line cook who took a smoke break every half an hour, but a good guy who seemed to be fond of Yuna.

Alicia was a quiet, studious girl, but Shane did hear his mom say "Oh, probably not. He's got a boyfriend, hun" to her at one point as he came through the door from the kitchen.

It wasn't the first time he'd caught his mom telling someone, bragging really, that Shane had a boyfriend. And Ilya was not helping the bragging – he was waging a long distance campaign to get Yuna to like him even before meeting him. After one phone call where Shane told Ilya he'd purchased a bouquet of cala lilies for the front of the restaurant because they were his mom's favorite, Ilya had sent cala lilies every day. To the restaurant *and* the house.

"Ilya, it's getting a little excessive," he'd said after four straight days of flowers.

"Does your mother think so?"

She hadn't. Yuna thought her son deserved everything in the world, and that certainly included fresh flowers daily.

He was taking one of the bouquets to his mom's office when he noticed the mail on the desk in the small room. Two late payment notices. And a letter from a real estate developer asking for a meeting, saying he was glad she was finally open to talking about selling.

"Oh, there you are, honey, could you – "

"Mom, what is this?"

"Oh, that's nothing. Could you help me move this table, please?"

"This doesn't look like nothing, Mom. Talking about selling? You're behind on payments?"

"Shane, it's nothing you need to worry about."

Her voice was firmer, but Shane wasn't a fourteen-year-old getting lectured about trying to bleach his hair. And he wanted answers.

"Please tell me what's going on. I can help figure out a plan. Are you seriously *selling*?"

Yuna turned to shut the door of the office and took a deep breath before answering him.

"Shane, you worry too much about me. About this place. About trying to take care of everything and control everything. And maybe that's my fault – "

"Mom – "

"No, I know that you get it from me."

She smiled a little at this.

"We've just had a few not wonderful months. Maybe more than a few. I ended up taking out a second mortgage, it was going to help float us until things turned around, but…"

"Why didn't you tell – "

"Because I knew you would say you'll come up here and figure everything out. Am I wrong?"

"Maybe. Probably not. But you love this place, there's got to be something to do besides selling it."

"I do love this place, but Shane, honey, I've gone through every plan I can think of. Selling is the best option."

"Even though you don't want to do it?"

"Even though I don't want to do it."

Shane could feel sharp tears gathering in his eyes, and he looked up, blinking them away as best he could. If they didn't actually fall, it didn't count as crying.

"What if I came back and helped after graduation?"

"Shane, I am not about to let you get a doctorate and then come back here and spend your life marinating chicken."

"They're going to turn it into ugly apartments."

He knew how bitter his voice was, but Yuna just laughed.

"Maybe they will, sweetheart. But it will be ok. *I* will be ok. I need you to understand that."

"Do Anthony and Alicia know?"

She shook her head.

"Not yet. Let me tell them when it's time."

Shane bit the inside of his cheek but nodded.

"Why don't you go home now? There's probably another bouquet sitting on my front porch."

Shane didn't wait until he was home to call Ilya. His tears didn't spill until the Russian man's voice washed over him, the sound coming from the speakers of the Lexus was so crystal clear – he felt like Ilya could be sitting in the passenger seat.

He told Ilya everything. How much the restaurant meant to him. How his entire childhood was split between that place and the rink. How it was the place where he had done homework, where he filled out college applications, where he had agonized over the acceptance letters he'd gotten from Michigan and BU and NYU, where he'd decided he didn't want to go to a D1 school, where he'd sat by himself until late at night before finally deciding that a career hockey wasn't going to be his future.

"Moy solnyshko, I'm so sorry."

He finally pulled into the driveway, and parked, forehead leaning on the steering wheel.

"I just feel like there has to be something I can do."

"What does your father think?"

Shane didn't talk about his dad a lot. It made sense that Ilya didn't know.

"He's gone," Shane paused for a moment, trying to decide if he wanted to add to that. If he could talk about his dad without adding to the misery he felt.

"Shane?"

“He’s the reason I even started playing hockey. He played. All through college, a little bit in the AHL.”

“He sounds like he was very good.”

“He was,” that made Shane smile. “He was really good. But he got hurt a lot. And took too many hits.”

Shane swallowed hard. Ilya might have even heard it.

“I don’t know if the TBI contributed to his getting Parkinson’s, but I think it did. I was still young when he started having complications. My mom tried to keep me from hearing a lot of it; she never wanted the doctors to talk about anything when I was in the room. I barely remember any of that now. It just feels like one second my dad was teaching me how to skate and the next, he was gone. Time is just weird like that, I guess.”

“Shane, I’m sorry, I don’t know what – ”

“What to say?” He let out half a laugh. “Most people don’t. It’s ok.”

“I hate that you are feeling this way. That I can’t make it better right now.”

“You are. You are making it better… He’s why I decided not to try to play professionally, you know? Why I decided I’d rather be a trainer – be someone who could help with injuries.”

“You will be very good at it.”

“I hope so,” Shane’s voice was small now.

“He would be proud of you.”

His tears didn’t stay on his lash line this time, but he let them flow down his cheeks anyway. It was ok that this counted. He would let himself cry on the phone with Ilya.

“My mom opened the restaurant after he died. She put everything she had into it. It was like a lifeline for her, I think. And now it’ll be gone too.”

Shane’s voice caught in his throat.

“Ilya, please just tell me about something else, talk about anything else. Just… just talk to me until I can be done being sad. Can you do that?”

“I would do anything if you asked.”

*****

The last few days of Shane’s visit passed unremarkably. Yuna didn’t bring up the letters or tell Shane if she’d actually scheduled a meeting with the real estate developer. And Shane didn’t ask. He knew that if he brought it up again, the conversation would be less sad – that his anger that this was happening would spill over instead, and his mom didn’t deserve that.

Christmas came and went with very little fanfare. Ilya sent his mom the softest Hermes scarf, and she immediately demanded he ask Ilya how much it cost – insisting it was far too much. His mom had gifted him a small, framed watercolor of the restaurant, a sad smile on her face when she presented it. He'd love it forever.

It didn't come up again until Shane was packing up the morning he was planning to drive back.

He'd heard the knock on the door, but Yuna's footsteps followed closely behind the noise so he didn't bother going down to see who it was.

"Shane?"

His mom's voice carried up the stairs.

"I'm packing, what's up?" He called back down.

He had no desire to see whatever random neighbor or distant family friend was stopping by.

"I need you down here, please!"

Shane placed the last folded shirt in his suitcase, zipping it up and leaving it by the door, before he went downstairs. His mom was still standing by the door, a thick manila envelope in her hand, several papers pulled out of the envelope.

"Did they send an offer?"

Shane had to assume it was the final nail in the coffin of the situation.

"It was a courier. It's from a law office in Montreal."

There was something in Yuna's voice that he couldn't place. He'd never heard the tone before.

"Mom?"

"I don't understand."

"What is it?"

Shane held out his hand, and Yuna willingly handed over the envelope and papers she had plucked from it.

"But this is – "

"It's all paid. All of it. There's paperwork in there for a trust that's set up to pay associated taxes, too. It has to be some mistake."

Ilya. It had to be Ilya. Shane's heart was in his throat.

"I don't think it's a mistake. I think this means you don't have to sell."

Yuna laughed, a wet astonished laugh, tears at the edge of her eyes that Shane knew wouldn't fall.

*****

He had sat at the dining room table for probably an hour, going over every paper and detail with his mom before finally hugging her tightly and starting his trip back to New York.

He hadn't called Ilya. Shane wanted to see his face. Wanted to ask why he had done such an absolutely insane and completely wonderful thing. How was Shane ever supposed to thank him for it? Shane barely remembered the drive. Barely remembered parking near Ilya's Bright Beach apartment. He wasn't even sure how his feet had taken him from the asphalt to the plush carpet outside of Ilya's door.

It opened before he had to knock.

"Nikolai texted – "

He threw himself into Ilya's arms, burying his head into his neck. Shane had cried more during this break than he had in a long time, but he felt tears pricking his eyes again.

"Solnyshko," Ilya's voice was so gentle it made Shane's heart ache.

His arms wrapped around Shane instantly, one of his hands coming up to hold the back of Shane's head. He felt Ilya reach up with his other hand to shove the door closed behind him. Shane clung to Ilya's collar, to the fabric at his shoulder.

"I don't know how to thank you," he finally said, his face still pressed against Ilya.

"You do not have to do that."

"I do!"

Shane pulled back to look at Ilya, and the man's hands came up to cradle his face.

"I would do anything for you. Anything. If it brought you a moment's peace or a minute of happiness, I would do it. Without question. And you would never have to thank me ever."

Ilya pressed his lips into Shane's, earnest, deep, before leaning back and resting his forehead against Shane's.

"I love you."

Shane hadn't meant to say it. Hadn't mean to show his hand. He knew that Ilya cared for him, that he had plenty of money to throw around because he liked Shane. But it was crazy, wasn't it, for Shane to say that?

"You don't have to say it back, but I – "

“I love you, Shane,” his arms tightened around Shane again, holding him to Ilya’s chest like he would disappear if his grip loosened. “I love you so fucking much.”

Chapter End Notes

I've already given my apologies for how long this took me to upload, so let me say here how grateful I am for all of you who read this! It really is kind of crazy to think that somewhere out in the world are these people who want to read words that I wrote down and like a story that I made up and even leave me comments to talk about it! Humans are so cool.

I'll try to be more timely in my next update - we've got some danger waiting out there for poor Shane and Ilya still that needs to be dealt with!

Chapter 12: Ilya's POV

Chapter Summary

> Shane starts clinicals; Ilya tries to be ok with less hands on security. Things spiral quickly.

Chapter Notes

> Once again my deepest thank you to you all for your patience with my update delays! I appreciate all of your kindness with me!
>
> As in previous chapters, I've tried to indicate when characters have switched to Russian by fully italicizing though conversations.
>
> As per usual, fuck AI, we hate AI, zero AI has been used in the writing of this fic (you can tell by all the typos and spelling errors that escape my notice, I'm so sorry). Special thank you to the commenter who suggested some data center protest methods though!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I have to get back to work, Ilya.”

He loved when Shane’s voice strained into the needy whine that was coming out of him now. Ilya didn’t care if there were a hundred people waiting to buy cigarettes or scratch offs. He’d pinned Shane’s arms against the door of the small office behind the counter, devouring his mouth as though he hadn’t seen Shane in years. It had been a matter of a couple days, but he didn’t care – it felt like years. Time moved so slowly when Ilya had to do anything apart from be with Shane.

“You can see cameras on fancy monitors, is fine.”

“The monitors from 1998 aren’t fancy, and – ” Shane’s voice cut off with a moan. “And I’m not going to let you fuck me at my *job*.”

“But I think you *want* me to.”

Ilya moved Shane’s wrists so they were both held tight in one of his hands above the man’s head. The other hand ran down Shane’s shirt across his chest, his abs, before dipping down and lightly gripping his growing hard-on through his jeans.

“Fucking hell,” Shane’s voice was breathy.

“You need to hurry back to work, yes?”

His hand worked the button open, drawing the zipper down and sliding under Shane’s waistband, finding its way to wrap around his cock.

“I need to go back to work.”

It was barely more than a whisper.

“You will need to come quickly then.”

“Ilya!”

“Hands stay here or I will stop. Is easy, Shane, yes? You know exactly how to make me stop if you *want* me to stop.”

He pressed Shane’s wrists into the wall lightly before letting go and dropping to his knees. A shiver of a thrill passed through Ilya when Shane obeyed him – not moving his hands a centimeter as Ilya tugged his clothes just enough to free his dick.

“Ilya, anyone could come in right now.”

“Mm, yes, and I remember how much you like that idea.”

He wasted no time in taking Shane into his mouth, tongue swirling around his cock as Ilya focused on trying to make the man come as quickly as possible. It took hardly any time at all before Shane’s voice was a repetitive series of soft breathy curses.

“Fuck, Ilya, fuck, fuck, fuck – I’m going to – ”

The bell that sounded when the front door opened chimed out merrily, unaware that the man who was supposed to be dealing with whoever came in was otherwise occupied.

“Ilya, I have to – ”

Shane started to lower his hands before pushing them back over his head and pressing them back into the door.

“Hurry, please, make me come, please. I’m so close.”

Shane’s pleading voice – it was enough to make Ilya come just from that sound alone. Just as he heard the customer calling out a confused ‘hello?’ Shane pulled a hand down from where he’d been directed to keep it, clamping it over his own mouth as he spilled into Ilya’s. He happily swallowed everything Shane had to give him.

“Fuck, oh, fuck, oh my god.”

And then in a louder, shakier voice Shane called, “be out in just a minute!”

“Should have said ‘I’m coming,’” Ilya snorted at his own joke.

“Oh my god, you’re such an asshole.”

There was no heat behind the words, and Ilya quickly set Shane’s clothes to right.

“Go sell the impatient man his Camels, kotik.”

Ilya stayed in the office while Shane went out to attend to whatever someone might need at one in the morning. He pulled out his phone and frowned. He should have had an update from Mikhail by now, but there was no text or call.

He dialed the number, impatient at the delay.

“*You should have called me by now,”* the words flowed in Russian as soon as the call connected.

“I’m sorry. We thought we’d found something – a warehouse we didn’t know he owned before.”

“Ok, and?”

“He wasn’t there. No one was.”

“I’m fucking sick of this bullshit. It’s been weeks. How can you not find him? He is made of smoke?”

He didn’t wait for an answer before continuing.

“I want this over in the next week. Seven days. I don’t want to fuck around with this any longer. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Rozanov. I understand.”

Ilya hung up without acknowledging the statement. It shouldn’t be this hard to find one fucking man in this godforsaken city. He knew that Aleksandr was exceptional at being invisible when he wanted to be, but Ilya had paused so much to dedicate men to this. And wasn’t he watching Aleksandr before now anyway?

Maybe the other man was right. Maybe Ilya had gotten too soft. Had stopped paying attention.

“Are you ok?”

He hadn’t noticed Shane coming back to stand in the open doorway.

“Hm, yes, I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.”

Ilya crossed the tiny room and rested his hands on Shane’s hips.

“How do I look, solnyshko?”

“Worried.”

“Nothing to worry about. I’m just annoyed at phone call. Nothing more.”

Shane looked for a moment like he wanted to argue but stopped himself.

“Nikolai will stay rest of the night. You want him to bring you to my place when you are done or to your home?”

“I want him to bring me to you.”

Ilya pressed a gentle kiss onto Shane’s lips then his temple before leaving the store.

*****

“There was something I wanted to talk to you about.”

Shane’s tone sounded serious, and it made Ilya nervous for a split second. Anytime Shane got a little too serious, Ilya wondered if *this* would be the moment – the moment where Shane had finally figured out that Ilya was not worth any of this, not worth loving at all, and that Shane would be better off without him. He knew that if he voiced that out loud, Shane would huff at him. Would tell him that he was being ridiculous. But it was always in the back of his mind; a tiny voice that told him that Shane was too good to be true.

“You can talk to me about anything, dorogoy.”

“I go back to school on Monday.”

“I knew this already.”

Ilya had the date cemented in his mind. It was the date when *this* – just sitting on his couch and casually touching, running his fingers through Shane’s hair, talking about anything, breathing Shane in – would come to an end. Or at the very least, it would occur far less than it had in this week before Shane had to return to classes.

“That means starting clinical observations. And my advisor pulled some strings so I get to do that with the training staff for the Rangers.”

“I know this, too, my love.”

“I don’t want Nikolai to come when I do that.”

“Shane – ”

“No, before you say anything, let me finish.”

Ilya motioned at him to keep talking, but a sense of dread had already taken root in the pit of Ilya’s stomach.

“He can drive me there. And wait outside. And drive me back. But the arena *has* a security staff, and I can make up some story – tell them I’ve been dealing with a stalker or something. I’m sure if I needed you to, you could even get me some kind of restraining order to show them.”

“I could…”

“I really want to make a good impression here. I don’t want to be the problem student who has like a list of weird needs. I’m weird enough as it is.”

“Your needs aren’t weird. And being safe isn’t weird.”

“Ok, but what am I going to tell the head trainer? ‘Sorry, a large Russian man will also be following us around all day every day’? I can’t do that, Ilya.”

“Ok, ok,” Ilya raised his hands in mock surrender. “I understand. Just – Just let me think.”

It made Ilya nervous. He knew that there were plenty of times where Nikolai was in the exact position that Shane was proposing – somewhere near an entrance or exit, waiting, watching, but not overbearing. He was trying to find a balance in not making Shane feel suffocated but reassuring himself that Shane was safe.

It was easy to be ok with Nikolai doing that when it was a tiny dive bar or a coffee shop. The arena was so large though; there were so many ways to get in and out, so many staff members running around. It would be easy to pose as a janitor, a concession stand worker, a ticket taker, anything.

“Can I buy you a gun?”

“Ilya!”

“Ok, no, no, bad idea, I know. Just a joke, I promise.”

He took a deep breath.

“If Nikolai can take you there, bring you back. We tell security story that makes them be more… on alert. Maybe you get phone number for head of security for me or for Nikolai, just to have, just in case. Then, ok, yes, we can make that work. I can try.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Shane wrapped his arms around Ilya’s waist, his chest pressing against Ilya as he tilted his head up, silently asking Ilya for a kiss that the man willingly delivered.

“I did get you gift, though.”

“It better not be a fucking gun.”

“You’re so Canadian. This is America. Everyone has a gun.”

“Ilya.”

“It isn’t a gun!”

Ilya gave Shane another smirk as he produced a gift bag from where he’d tucked it behind his couch.

“You didn’t need to – Ilya, Prada?”

“Look inside, too.”

Shane carefully opened the leather Prada messenger bag and pulled out a sleek tablet. Ilya knew next to nothing about it – he had trusted the person at the electronics store when he told Ilya that it was top of the line. He’d called it the kind of thing a student would dream of having.

“I have a laptop, you didn’t need – ”

“The man says this is the best. I want you to have the best. And will be easier to have with you during clinical, yes? No bulky laptop.”

“You’re so good to me.”

Shane carefully set the bag and tablet aside and crawled fully into Ilya’s lap.

“I want to be good to you, too.”

His knees bracketed Ilya’s thighs. This position made him a little bit taller than Ilya and put his throat exactly where Ilya loved it – within easy reach of his mouth. Ilya loved being able to take Shane out of his head; loved taking control and loved the way Shane went pliable under his hands. But *this* Shane, who didn’t need to be distracted or let go, who wanted to be in control – Ilya loved when this Shane came out.

His hands threaded through Ilya’s curls, gripping tightly and pulling him off of Shane’s throat so he could kiss Ilya hard.

He felt Shane squeeze his thighs – holding Ilya in place as he started a slow grind against his hardening cock.

“Fuck, Shane.”

He stopped the movement just long enough to raise his hips and shove Ilya’s pants and boxers down, impatiently leaving them around Ilya’s thighs as he got his own waistband down enough to pull his cock out.

Shane spit in his hand before raising it to Ilya’s mouth, clearly wanting him to follow suit, which he gladly did. He took them both in his hand, spreading the spit as he started stroking

them. Shane's other hand crept below Ilya's shirt, running along his chest, and Ilya quickly tore it off and dropped it somewhere beside them on the couch.

He was being a little rough, fast. Ilya was pretty sure that his words switched to Russian somewhere along the way, but Shane was so singularly focused that he didn't ask Ilya what he meant.

"Fuck, you are so good to me. You're so perfect. I don't deserve you."

"Are you going to come for me, Ilya?

"I will do anything you want, fuck. I will do anything you tell me to do."

"Do it. Please. Come for me."

"Fucking hell."

It was the only English Ilya got out before coming in hot bursts over Shane's hand, shuddering as his hand kept moving to get himself off just a couple minutes after. They sat like that for a minute – Shane's forehead resting against Ilya's shoulder, his lips softly pressing against Ilya's skin.

Eventually he sat back, reaching for the shirt that Ilya had discarded and wiping his hand on it before dropping it back on the floor.

"That's fucking Balenciaga."

Ilya didn't really care even as the words left his mouth.

"I'm sure you can afford dry cleaning," Shane said with a laugh.

*****

Ilya was trying very hard to not go completely insane. He was not going to hide a tracker on Shane. He was not going to wait outside the arena for the six to eight hours Shane would be inside of it. He was going to go about his normal life, and he was going to trust Nikolai to do his job and trust Shane to not do anything rash or stupid.

The security at 2 Pennsylvania Plaza had treated the made-up stalking matter very seriously, and Ilya was thankful for that at least. He *did* produce a restraining order for Shane – he'd even included a photo of Aleksandr. It was an old photo, but Ilya didn't think the man could have changed that much in appearance over the years. Maybe that was a mistake, but Ilya wanted them to be able to spot him from a mile away. If he even came for Shane himself – and Ilya thought Aleksandr was just cocky enough to do so.

Ilya had spent most of the day pacing in his office. He stopped just briefly to sit and take a phone call. There was some issue with a bartender at a club that the manager had wanted to talk to him about. He told him to do whatever he thought best, what did Ilya care about some bartender at one of the many clubs he owned? But the man insisted he come down that night. As soon as he'd hung up the phone, he resumed his pacing. He knew that Nikolai would let

him know the moment Shane got into the car. He'd be informed again once Shane was safely home.

He knew that Shane himself would text these things to Ilya, too. But it was doing nothing to assuage his anxiety.

Ilya: First day going ok?

He knew that Shane probably wouldn't text him back right away, that he would be too busy for that, but just as the thought popped into his head, his phone pinged.

Shane: It's going great! Everyone is really nice. I'm learning a lot.

Ilya: I'm glad, solnyshko. Would have to burn the building down if they weren't nice.

Shane: Ilya…

Ilya: Only joking.

Shane sent him a single red heart, and Ilya assumed that the short response meant Shane was back to paying attention to whatever it was trainers did for professional hockey players.

"Sorry to interrupt."

He glanced up to see Mikhail in the doorway of his office.

"You have an update?"

"We found another house. He wasn't there, but he had been. Recently."

Mikhail held out an envelope; his name was scrawled in haphazard Cyrillic letters across the front of it. Inside was a single playing card – the King of Hearts, carefully cut in half, beheaded.

"He's laughing at me."

Ilya threw the pieces of the card down on his desk. It was a stupid threat. Theatrical and ridiculous. Maybe he'd gotten soft, but Aleksandr had always been so over the top, it was like he was a caricature. And Ilya was beyond tired of this.

"He's getting sloppy though. We will find him."

Ilya knew that somewhere in a warehouse near Brighton Beach, one of his men was currently doing unspeakably violent things to one of Aleksandr's men in order to make that statement true. He knew that was just a part of the trail of blood splattered in the wake of his search, and he knew that he never wanted Shane to find out just how stained his hands were with it. He knew that *he* should be the one to go down there, but here he was – pacing in his office.

“Go to down to the docks. See if our squealer is squealing yet.”

Mikhail gave a short nod as he was stepping out of the room.

*****

“You don’t work tonight, yes?”

“I have the next couple nights off. I wanted to adjust to clinicals and everything without worrying about work. Jake picked up the shifts for me.”

“I still need to send him nice gift, don’t I?”

“Oh my god, you don’t need to send Jake anything for working for me, you lunatic.”

“You are free though. Come to club with me then?”

Ilya couldn’t read the look on Shane’s face – something between confusion and disgust.

“I’m not really a club kind of person, Ilya.”

“It is one I own – ”

“You own a club?”

“I own a lot of things.”

Shane paused, standing in Ilya’s kitchen. Ilya knew that Shane always got weird anytime he flaunted having money, but he couldn’t help that he had it. Even if he didn’t have all the business dealings that he did, Irina Rozanova had made sure before she died that her younger son would be very comfortable. Most of that money still sat in an account, stagnating to the chagrin of the accountant that he paid handsomely to keep his both sets of his books, the legitimate ones and… the other ones.

“We don’t have to stay for long. Manager there has been on my ass all day about stupid little issues. It will make him feel better if I make appearance.”

“I don’t really have anything to wear to a club…”

*****

Close to midnight, he had Shane’s hand firmly in his as he walked through the doorway to the club – lights splashed in time with the beat of the music, painting Shane’s clothes in swathes of color that was otherwise missing from the all-black ensemble. Ilya had discovered back in the luxurious dressing room on Fifth Avenue that playing ‘dress Shane up’ was one of his absolute favorite games, and the results had him wanting to skip coming here altogether so that he could pin this man against a wall and fuck him until they both forgot English.

The late January night was biting cold, and Ilya had completed the outfit he put Shane in by draping his own black leather coat over him. He briefly wondered if bringing Shane here was

a mistake – though not a security one. No, Ilya was worried that the first double take someone did at the man would have Ilya seething with jealousy and making stupid choices.

He kept Shane close as he wove them through a sea of bodies – people floating out to the dance floor or mingling near the bar waiting impatiently for someone to get alcohol into their system so they too could float out to the dance floor.

Ilya nodded to one of his men situated at the foot of some stairs before leading Shane up to the small and unpopulated balcony. He deposited him in a plush leather love seat against a wall.

“I’m going to get drinks, ok?”

Shane nodded, and Ilya made his way back down to the bar, pausing again at the foot of the stairs to ask for his manager to be sent up to him. Ilya should remember the man’s name, but it was completely escaping him right now. He knew the man wasn’t Russian – he was someone that Sveta had worked with at one point. He was trustworthy and bland and saw nothing; exactly the kind of men Ilya needed to be running these places for him.

“Thanks for coming here tonight.”

Ilya sunk into the seat next to Shane, letting his body press against him and luxuriating in the way heat seemed to radiate from every point where they touched. He swung an arm up and around Shane’s shoulders as his other hand clung to a glass of ice-cold vodka and made a vague impatient gesture for the man to continue speaking.

“It’s the new guy, Max.”

Ilya didn’t know a thing about a new guy. He owned too many places to be concerned with every little hiring detail. Isn’t that what he employed this guy for?

“What about him?”

“There’s something going on,” the man stole a glance at Shane.

“You can talk in front of him. But I don’t know what you have to talk about. He is weird? Why do I care? Does he show up? If yes, I *don’t* care. If no, fire him.”

“I think Aleksandr sent him here.”

“You could have fucking started with that,” Ilya sat up straighter as he spoke.

He felt Shane’s posture go stiff beside him, and Ilya’s fingers brushed soft circles into his shoulder trying to soothe him. Where there had been delicious heat radiating from every touch point between them, there was now a sour tang of anxiety.

“This bartender. He is here tonight?”

The manager nodded.

“Bring him to me.”

It took only minutes for the manager to leave and return – a thin young man in tow. The undersides of his wide eyes were stained a sleepless purple. The older man left the bartender to Ilya, stepping out of the space but lingering near the top of the stairs. It looked like he was ready in case the kid tried to run, and Ilya appreciated him taking the initiative. It lessened his annoyance marginally.

“Max?”

“Yes, that’s… that’s me. Did I do something?”

The accent was faint – so faint that Ilya almost missed it, but he was sure it was there. Everything about the bartender screamed American – from his New Balance tennis shoes to his floppy haircut. It was a carefully constructed image, but Ilya was sure it was purposefully constructed. Maybe his parents had been Russian, but he hadn’t lived there long? He decided to test his theory and slipped into his mother tongue.

“And what is Max short for?”

The man’s eyes gave him away – a brief flash of anxiety-ridden recognition that he didn’t work fast enough to hide.

“I know you understand me. Answer.”

“Maksim.”

“I like that better than Max.”

“It was harder to fit in as Maksim.”

“I hear you fit in well with a crowd I don’t care for.”

He could see the catch of breath in the young man’s throat, the harsh swallow that took him too much effort to get through.

“No, I – ”

“He thinks you maybe work for not just me.”

Ilya jerked his head toward the manager.

“I don’t. I’m not. Ok, look,” the young man was wringing his hands together now. *“I did. Ok? Not anymore. My parents knew Aleksandr. My father did. I don’t work for him now. I’m… I’m scared he’s going to come for me because I left.”*

“Why the fuck do I want you on my payroll then? Leave.”

“Please, I know you’re looking for him. I can help.”

Ilya made a mental note to find out who was running their mouth about business within earshot of this baby bartender.

"Help? How? Quickly."

"I can get an address. It will take a day or two, but I can. I can get it."

"And how could you possibly do that?"

Max – Maksim – looked like he was on the verge of tears. But Ilya wasn't swayed. Many men cried in front of him when they thought their lives were about to be made much worse by him.

"Aleksandr… he doesn't do anything to inspire loyalty. He treats most everyone poorly. Some of the guys are just waiting for someone to ask them for information. I know which ones. And I can ask. They'll give it to me."

"And why would you do this for me?"

"I want to be kept safe. I want you to find him."

Ilya paused to consider, leaning back once more so he was flush with Shane again. Shane's anxiety was still coming off him in waves, but his face was a mask of neutrality. The drink Ilya had handed him was sweating condensation onto the knee of his pants.

"Maksim here says he can find Aleksandr for me."

Ilya switched to English – addressing Shane even as he kept his eyes on the pale young man in front of him.

"I assume he wants something from you in return?"

Shane slid a hand onto Ilya's thigh.

"Yes, he wants to be kept safe from Aleksandr. I'm trying to decide if I can trust him."

"He seems sincere. And he looks terrified. Would you keep him safe, if *I* asked?"

Ilya finally tore his gaze away and met Shane's eyes. The colorful lights of the club were reflecting in the dark brown Ilya found there, his pupils wide with nerves. He could see the way Shane's breath was still faster than normal.

"If you asked, yes, solnyshko."

"Let him help. And don't let anything happen to him if he's telling the truth, please?"

He turned to Maksim once again.

"I will agree to this. But if you're lying – "

"If he's lying," Shane interrupted. "Then I'm not asking for shit. Do what you have to do."

Ilya's head whipped around to face him. It was so matter of fact. He knew Shane was good. That Shane was kind. He'd showed it by asking for Ilya to show kindness to this guttersnipe. But Shane's face right now showed no trace of the emotions running through him – and he as good as told Ilya to kill this man if he was lying. He dropped his hand from Shane's shoulders to his waist, tugging him closer until he was half on Ilya's lap.

"Go. Ask who you need to ask and get me what I want."

As the manager and Maksim retreated down the stairs, he pulled Shane fully on top of his thighs.

"Ilya," he said through gritted teeth. "We're in public, Jesus."

"No one can see you here."

His hand ran up Shane's thigh, but the other man grasped it before Ilya could move it any further.

"Come home with me."

"You are very bossy tonight, Shane Hollander."

"I think you like it."

"Mm, I thought *I* was in charge here."

"Then take me home and show me just how in charge you are."

*****

Even though Ilya's attention was on how much of Shane he could touch as they stumbled up Shane's front stoop, he couldn't miss it – a single cream-colored envelope, shoved so that it was awkwardly half sticking out of the screen door jamb.

"Oh, I bet Mrs. De Rossi – "

Ilya snatched it as Shane's hand was reaching up. Now that it was in his hand, he could see that it was bulky, heavier than he thought it was going to be.

"Ilya?"

It wasn't his name scrawled across this one – it was Shane's. More fucking theatrical bullshit. He ripped it practically in half and a single brass bullet fell into his hand.

"Ilya, what the fuck is that?"

Nikolai was up the steps and ushering Shane into the doorway before Ilya could answer, but he followed closely behind – rapid Russian falling from his lips as he issued instructions to Nikolai who only nodded and then went back out the door.

“Ilya?”

“I promised I would never let anything happen to you. And I won’t, dorogoy. I won’t.”

“He’s leaving bullets at my door.”

“He’s a fucking clown.”

“He’s leaving bullets at my door,” Shane repeated it quietly as he collapsed onto the edge of his bed.

“Ilya,” his voice was quavering now, and Ilya couldn’t stand it.

“I’m here.”

He crossed the room in two strides, pulling Shane up tightly into his arms. The man clung to him.

“Shane, I love you. I will not let anything happen to you.”

“I love you,” Shane paused. “I’m scared.”

“That’s ok, solnyshko. I will keep you safe.”

It took a few hours for Shane to be calm enough to fall asleep, and Ilya didn’t think sleep would ever come for *him*. He sat up staring at Shane as his chest rose and fell evenly. He would not let anything happen to this man.

*****

Maksim had said getting the location might take a day or two, but Ilya’s patience was already paper thin before his promises. He was snapping at everyone in sight, annoyed that Shane was too busy to answer texts, and lying to himself about how his heart was beating in his throat with anxiety.

It had been torture watching Shane get into the back of the car and leave this morning. Ilya wanted nothing more than to lock him in a room in his beachside apartment and not let him out of his sight until this whole thing was over.

But scared as Shane may have been, he insisted on going about his life, and it made a wave of adoration mixed with anxiety sweep over him.

Shane: Day 2 is fine. Super busy. About to head out to the car.

The bubble of dread in Ilya’s chest shrunk a little. After an hour passed, his phone lit up with Nikolai’s name, and the bubble inflated to gargantuan proportions.

“Nikolai.”

“Ilya, he never came out. The security staff is looking, but – ”

“Nikolai,” Ilya was going to throw up.

“He has to be here. He is here somewhere.”

“Fucking find him. Now.”

“I will.”

Nikolai hung up, and nausea clawed its way up Ilya’s throat. Shane was somewhere in the building. It was just large. He had gotten sidetracked. He stayed late. He was an overachiever. There is no way Aleksandr or anyone who worked for him could have gotten into that arena. They had been careful. He couldn’t be –

His phone vibrated again, lighting up this time with a photo of Shane beaming, his name scrolling across the top of the phone as the incoming call rang.

“Solnyshko, what the fuck, you scared – ”

“I told you that you’d gone soft.”

An icy chill ran down the length of Ilya’s spine at the sound of the Russian voice coming out of his phone.

“Aleksandr, you fucking bastard, I swear to god – ”

“I hear you have been looking everywhere for me. For his sake, you should hope you find me quick.”

The call disconnected before Ilya could respond.

Chapter End Notes

Eeeee, things are getting very dicey! I am going to do my absolute best to update fairly quickly and not leave this on a cliffhanger for too long. If I have stressed you out - rest assured, this WILL have a HEA. We're just going to trod through some angst together to get there!

A million thank yous for reading! Your comments put oxygen directly into my lungs, they are always so kind. I hope that if any of you are experiencing the various and sundry heatwaves that seem to be plaguing the entire northern hemisphere that you stay safe and cool!

Chapter 13: Dual POV

Chapter Summary

Shane has a not great time. Ilya looks for him.

This is a dual Shane and Ilya POV chapter.

Chapter Notes

TW this chapter for mention of Irina's death as well as some violence in this chapter. I tagged minor violence because I feel like I don't get too graphic, but proceed with caution - Shane is not having a good time.

I also realized while I was writing this that I don't write a whole lot of action-y scenes so if this is just a big cheeseball of a chapter, please give me grace and go with it 😂

As per usual - I don't use AI to write, for brainstorming, for editing, for checking grammar and spelling (lord knows, I don't check that practically at all, and I probably should.), no AI used for aaaanything.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shane

Shane had had exactly one concussion in his life. It was average – he'd read all the studies, knew all about how it was likely for a hockey player to have one concussion every three to four years. He knew that his odds were better because he didn't play for a D1 school. He had the grades of concussion, the associated symptoms, and the projected recovery timelines for all of them memorized. He'd gotten a little obsessive about it for obvious reasons.

He remembered how he'd felt like he was moving through water as they'd helped him off the ice. The way that his head throbbed was a crystallized memory in his mind – parts of it sharp and clear, but at the same time an opaque block of nothing. The nausea. The confusion. He had indexed every feeling and put it in the folder in his mind where all the research he'd done lived. Because no research could prepare him for how symptoms that looked so straightforward on his laptop screen could feel so awful when they coursed through his body.

And it was how he felt right now in this moment.

Opening his eyes was as much effort as a bench press, and for a moment he panicked that he couldn't see anything before realizing that the room was pitch black. He registered a faint, dull light trickling in from a small hopper window that seemed too high, too close to where he thought the ceiling must be – he had to be in a basement.

He tried to raise a hand to rub at the ache throbbing across his forehead and radiating into the rest of his head but found that he couldn't. His wrists were sticky, sweaty, and attached to whatever he was sitting on by thick layers of duct tape. Trying to move his legs garnered a similar realization. He was trapped, fucking taped to a piece of furniture, with no idea where he was or how he was going to get out of this.

Ilya could come for him. Shane knew he would. But he wasn't about to play the damsel in distress if he could figure out a way to free himself first. As his eyes adjusted to the dark, he tried to take stock of what was around him. Surely there was some exposed pipe or rough edge of brick sharp enough to rasp through the tape that he could try to scoot toward. An experimental attempt to move in any direction proved fruitless, and he didn't want to knock himself backwards and hit his head again.

There was nothing covering his mouth at least, but what would calling for help accomplish apart from alerting anyone else above him that he was awake now?

For a moment, alone in the dark space, the fear was overtaken by the relenting feeling that he had been so *stupid.*

Shane just hadn't thought. Maybe if he had taken twenty seconds *to* think when the custodian asked him for help wheeling a heavy bin to a dumpster, he'd have said no, sorry, someone is waiting on me. But no, Shane was a polite Canadian boy. Raised with manners. Always trying to be helpful. Maybe if he'd taken a minute to think, he'd have thought to text Nikolai what he was doing. And if he'd thought to text Nikolai, the man no doubt would have dead sprinted to the dumpster just to have eyes on him.

And then Nikolai would have been there when a figure Shane didn't see grabbed him from behind and plunged a needle in his neck. Maybe Nikolai would have caught him when he collapsed, and he wouldn't have the pain that was currently throbbing in his head and the back of his neck.

He wondered briefly if the custodian was a plant. If he was working for Aleksandr, or if Shane was just wildly unlucky that someone happened to guess he was going to be back by the dumpster. He must have been sent. They must have found a way to get him a uniform and get him into the arena.

He had never thought about what it would be like to have his life be in danger – why would he? Even knowing that Aleksandr was openly threatening him, Shane had been scared but didn't once consider what would happen if Aleksandr actually took him. Nikolai wasn't going to let that happen to him. Or he wouldn't have… if Shane had stopped to think. Shane had often thought about what it would be like to suffer the same injuries that his father did – concussion after concussion, broken bones, fractures that he still played hockey on despite knowing the damage it would do. But this was a situation that his imagination had never conjured.

Maybe that was why the fear felt like an undercurrent, a hidden riptide that was pulling him further out to sea, instead of a violent tidal wave.

Or maybe there was just so much adrenaline coursing through him that there was no physical room in his body to be more panicked.

Ilya would come. Shane knew he would. Max would deliver, and Ilya would come. And if he couldn't find a way out of this then Shane just needed to figure out a way to stay breathing until then.

The creak of a door revealed a splash of yellow, warm light pouring down a set of wooden stairs. He tried again to take stock of what else was in the room, but the narrow stretch of light didn't lend much of a helping hand.

He'd expected someone a little larger, more brutish to be making his way down the stairs and coming to stand in front of him. But the man who reached up to yank at a pull chain and flood the room with more light was thinner – tall and lithe, almost like a ballet dancer would be. Shane kept his eyes on the back of the figure as he pulled a chair from somewhere on the other side of the stairs and dragged it until it was in front of Shane.

He slumped lazily into the chair and stared at Shane.

"Nice of you to join us," his accent was heavier than Ilya's, his voice a slightly tremulous tenor.

"Well, you know, losing consciousness."

Shane meant to sound more brash than he actually did. Maybe if he was insolent and kept the man talking, it would buy Ilya more time.

"Yes, propofol. Very effective to make you go down, but tricky to get dosage right. Could have killed you, wouldn't that have been a shame."

"Isn't that what you plan to do anyway?"

There, that was a little bolder. His voice shook a little less. He tried to think about what Ilya would do, what he would say. How he was scoff at the man in front of him and issue challenges and spit vitriol at him.

"Well, yes, but not right away. Would have robbed me of the pleasure if the drugs took you out. And would be too peaceful a death. I think first I will want to – "

"Look," Shane interrupted. "Look, I know you want to do the bad guy thing. And tell me all the ways you plan to hurt me…"

He swallowed thickly, willing the fear to stay somewhere in his sternum and not reach his voice. It shook a little anyway.

"But I would appreciate if you could be less boring about it."

Aleksandr's hand was sharp, open palmed against his face, making made his head whip to the side. His cheek was a thousand white hot pin pricks, a burning sting to go along with the dull throb in his head.

"You sound just like him," Aleksandr sneered at him, but took his seat again.

Shane didn't respond this time – the fear starting to take over whatever measure of brashness he had found and rendering him quiet. There was a slight tremor running through his whole body, and he knew if he spoke, the shaking would find its way to his voice. And he was *not* going to give this man the satisfaction of knowing just how scared he was.

"I must say, I'm a little disappointed."

"Oh?" was all Shane said in response.

"I had hoped that there would be more begging, more pleading, more asking me why I am doing this. Maybe that will come later when I've spilled more of your blood."

The back of Aleksandr's hand now came across the same side of Shane's face that was already hot and tingling. Something sharper scratched across his face, and he looked up to see Aleksandr wiping at a gaudy ring on his hand.

"You got blood on my favorite ring. I am going to clean this now. But I will be back."

Aleksandr yanked at the pull chain again, leaving Shane in the darkness, and walked up the stairs almost like he was bored. It was only after he heard the click of the door at the top of the stairs that Shane let his breathing race like it had been trying to the whole time. Hot tears stung his eyes, and he tried to wipe them away on his shoulder but only managed to make the cut across his cheek sting more instead.

Ilya would come. He would.

*****

Ilya

The only time Ilya had ever felt this sick to his stomach; he had been twelve years old not understanding why his mother wasn't waking up from her nap. Not understanding why, when he shook her, her skin was so cold. Not understanding the empty pill bottle that he accidentally cracked under his foot as he stepped backwards away from her bed.

Twelve hours. Shane had been missing for twelve hours. It had only taken about twelve minutes for Ilya to go completely insane with anxiety and rage. He'd called Nikolai and was instantly grateful that he had such a competent man at his right hand.

"I have surveillance from the arena. Squealer at the docks gave us two addresses, Mikhail and the others are going to them now. I am on my way back to the apartment, five minutes away."

He had given Ilya a rundown of everything the second that he picked up Ilya's call.

“Have someone call the fucking bartender – Maksim. He said he would know where Aleksandr is – ”

“Already on it.”

Ilya had held out hope that there could be some way to track Shane’s phone, but it went to voicemail with a single ring every time Ilya tried to call it again. Aleksandr had turned it off. Or destroyed it. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he wished it was Shane’s voice on the message instead of an automated one. Just so he could hear him. Just so he could calm down a little.

He forced himself to sit, shooting off several texts to Mikhail about what he wanted done with Aleksandr when he was found – keep him alive, save him for Ilya to deal with, but what condition he was kept alive in hardly mattered. He reviewed the footage from the arena as he waited for Nikolai to arrive.

He could hardly contain his rage as he saw Shane, beside a janitor and helping to push a bin of garbage. Someone had been standing beside the door, hidden by it as it opened. So, Shane never saw the man who grabbed him, jabbing something into him. Ilya wanted to throw up as the man stepped back and let Shane take two shaky steps before his body fell to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut. The janitor had run as soon as the man grabbed Shane, but Ilya had no doubt that he had been paid handsomely to get Shane outside.

He would send someone to find the janitor once Shane was safe in his arms.

Ilya couldn’t *do* this – this sitting here and waiting; waiting for other people to accomplish something, anything. He wanted to be in the street, ripping the city apart brick by brick until it gave Shane back to him. The hysterical thought that he wished he had done something insane like microchip Shane bubbled up in his mind and tore half a laugh, half a sob out of him.

He heard Nikolai at the front door. He let out a single sharp exhale and shook his hands once, trying to shed the anxiety before going to speak with the man, He tried to remember that he was Ilya fucking Rozanov.

He couldn’t do anything to save his mother. He had been a child, under the oppressive thumb of his father just like she was. But he could save Shane. And he would.

*****

Shane

Shane couldn’t be sure how much time had passed. The small window near the ceiling of the basement still wasn’t letting much light in, so it must still be night. Maybe it was the next night. Had he been here for an entire day? He felt like he had been here for weeks.

The stinging pain on the side of his face hurt marginally less, so he figured it must have been at least an hour or two since Aleksandr had gone back upstairs. He could hear footsteps above him and tried to track how many people might be up there, but they were too chaotic to

be able to count. And what was he supposed to do with that information even if he could figure out how many of them there were?

He hadn't registered falling asleep until he felt pressure on his forehead, and his drooping head was being pushed back upright.

"So sorry to have left you alone for so long. You get bored and fall asleep. Very poor manners."

Shane didn't think he could find any brashness right now. He couldn't channel Ilya anymore. He was so tired. His head still hurt so much. All the adrenaline coursing through his body had crashed, and all he felt now was a bone-deep weariness and a desperate need for water wrapped in an immoveable blanket of anxiety. He felt like he was hanging on to his composure by a thread, but he was not going to cry in front of this asshole. He refused.

"Nothing to say to me this time?"

Aleksandr moved to stand directly in front of him, towering over him.

"Fuck you."

Shane tried to spit the words out with as much vehemence as he could muster, but it admittedly wasn't much.

Aleksandr's hand gripped his chin roughly, his thumb rubbed at the scratch he'd left on Shane's cheek, and Shane tried to jerk away.

"Sweet of you to offer, but I'm afraid you aren't my type. I'm not a soft little boy like Ilya."

"He's going to kill you."

Aleksandr laughed, a high-pitched thing in his face that made Shane try to wince away from his hand. There was something in his other hand that Shane couldn't make out, but the wind was knocked out of him as Aleksandr's arm jerked forward, hitting him squarely in the gut with whatever it was. He leaned forward, trying to breathe, too close to Aleksandr who still had a vice grip on his face.

"Oh. Disappointing that I did not hear any bones crack. That fucking… zasranets will do nothing to me."

He let Shane's face go, but another cracking backhand across his face reopened the shallow cut that had stopped dripping blood down his cheek. It might have put another gash across his face, Shane couldn't tell.

He had almost managed to breathe normally when Aleksandr hit him again. Was it a club? A piece of pipe? He couldn't get himself together long enough to see it clearly. Shane didn't hear or feel any ribs break. Would he know if they did? He was sure he would.

"Please."

He hadn't meant to say it. It just tumbled out of his mouth. He hated himself a little bit for saying it. But he couldn't catch his breath, and he couldn't stand the biting pain at his wrists from trying to twist out of the layers of duct tape keeping him still, and he couldn't stop the dull aching in his head or the stinging of his face.

Ilya would come. He would come for Shane.

"*That* is what I have been hoping to hear. A little begging. I hope to hear much more. I plan to take my time. Leave you to have little goodbye with your precious Ilya before I finally end you both."

Aleksandr moved around behind him, and Shane could hear something heavy and metallic – the sounds of him maybe rifling through tools. A toolbox? A crate? He couldn't tell.

"I'm a little parched. You too, probably? Too bad for you."

Aleksandr made an exaggerated frown at him. He yelled something up the stairs in Russian and moments later a man came down the stairs with a bottle of water in his hands.

If Shane had been scared before, he didn't have words for the wave of terror that washed over him as the man stepped into the light.

Maksim.

Maksim, here. Maksim, handing Aleksandr a bottle of water. Maksim, who was supposed to be telling Ilya exactly where to find the asshole standing beside him.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Shane couldn't stop the panic now. His wrists burned as he struggled. He had lied to them. He wasn't going to tell Ilya shit. Shane had to fucking get out of here himself, or he wasn't getting out of here at all.

"Oh, you've found a little fight again! I like this."

"*Aleksandr!"*

Another voice drifted down the stairs.

"I will be back. Then we can start some real fun."

Maksim stayed frozen where he was as Aleksandr went back up the stairs. He didn't look at Shane.

"You lying *fucking* bastard. I told him not to hurt you. I told him to keep you safe."

The words poured out of Shane as his breathing got more frantic and shallower, struggling fruitlessly against the tape.

"Please, keep your voice down, he will hear you."

Maksim's eyes darted to the staircase, but no one appeared. His hands were anxiously tapping at his leg.

"Keep my fucking voice down? Keep my *voice* down?"

"I told him," Maksim hissed.

"You little – you fucking – you what? Told who what?"

"I told Ilya. I told him. I had to come back. I had to make him think I was crawling back to him. But I told Ilya. He knows. He's coming."

Shane's mind was racing with confusion, with hope, with anger all at once.

"He's going to make me to hurt you."

He whipped his head up to look at Maksim.

"I have to prove that I am back for good. That I won't leave him again. That working at Ilya's club meant nothing."

The younger man was on the verge of tears. Shane couldn't have him falling apart when Aleksandr came back down. He would know something was going on – would figure out that Maksim had double crossed him. Then he would move Shane, and they'd all be fucked.

"Hey, hey, hey, Max, look. Look at me."

His voice was ragged; his throat was so dry. Maksim's wide watery hazel eyes met his.

"It's ok. It's ok – "

"No, I can't – "

"You *have* to. Do whatever the fuck he tells you. He's going to know if you refuse. He'll figure it out. You have to do whatever he says."

Maksim nodded jerkily, rubbing at his face roughly with a sleeve to brush the tears away.

Ilya was coming. He was on his way.

*****

Ilya

"*You have to hurry. If he finds out, he will kill me. I'm hiding in a bathroom to even be able to call you. Please – "*

The words came out of the speaker of Ilya's phone in a flurry of whispered Russian.

“I had to make him think I was coming back to him. I don’t want to. He’s going to make me. I can’t – ”

“I understand, Maksim. We’re coming, ok? I’m coming.”

“Please, you have to hurry.”

Ilya heard a voice calling the man’s name, and the call disconnected without a word. Ilya had already been in the car when he saw Maksim’s incoming call on his phone. The fucking infant bartender had delivered. Ilya had hoped, had maybe even prayed, that he would come through; but he had his doubts. But the man had come through. Ilya would happily fulfill his promise to Shane to keep Maksim safe.

He had sent Ilya an address in Red Hook. It was late. Or early. Somewhere around 4am, and he knew that he could make it there in less than twenty minutes, and his knuckles were white as he gripped the steering wheel. Nikolai was somewhere behind him, and Mikhail should be coming up from Brighton Beach now.

He pulled up to a squat two story building minutes later. It was shoved between an abandoned bodega, and a fenced off lot – the stench of dumped garbage drifting from over the chain link fence. The dull siding of the building had probably once been white, but years of disrepair had tarnished it. Nikolai was out of his car and had already slipped through a gap in the fence and was peering through the one window that light was spilling out of.

“Five or six. Enough that I can handle. I don’t see Shane or Aleksandr. Or Maksim.”

Ilya nodded at him; the man was already quietly screwing a cylindrical silencer onto a handgun he’d pulled from a holster around his shoulder.

“I don’t care what happens to them. Keep Aleksandr and Maksim alive.”

Ilya let Nikolai kick the back door in – six cracks sounded in quick succession, and Ilya walked into a bare kitchen. He ignored the carnage around him and quickly went through the rest of the first floor.

He was just about to go upstairs when he heard it – the cut off shout of his name. In Shane’s voice.

“Fucking basement,” Nikolai was speaking, but Ilya had already found the door handle – wrenching it open.

He stopped dead in his tracks, Nikolai close behind him as he got to the bottom of the stairs. Aleksandr was there – Maksim cowering in a corner. And Shane, *his Shane*, in the center of the room, blood on his face, Aleksandr standing behind him with one hand around his throat.

“Don’t be a fucking idiot,” Ilya spit at him. *“Nikolai will have a bullet in your head before you flex your hand once.”*

Aleksandr’s eyes darted around, an animal caught in a trap.

“It’s over. You lost.”

“I could still kill him.”

Nikolai made it to the bottom of the stairs. He wasted no time with bargaining or threats – instead he crossed the room swiftly and took Aleksandr down with one quick hit from the butt of his gun. Ilya took pleasure in watching him collapse – a retribution for having to watch Shane fall into a similarly crumpled heap.

“Ilya.”

Shane’s voice was shaking, small.

“Solnyshko,” Ilya dropped to his knees in front of the man.

He pulled a knife out of his pocket, wrenching it open and cutting the tape that restrained Shane. He pressed his lips to the red, tender skin at his wrists. Ilya was about to reach up to see how bad the cut on Shane’s face was when he half fell out of the chair and into Ilya’s lap, clinging to him.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Ilya repeated it like a prayer, but he knew he would only ever worship Shane.

“No, you came for me. I knew you’d come for me.”

The scrape of Shane’s voice made Ilya’s heart ache.

“Maksim, I need water for him. Go.”

Ilya heard Mikhail and the others above them now – they would be busy cleaning up the mess that Nikolai had made.

“Nikolai, take him somewhere. I don’t fucking care where. Just keep him there until I come.”

Nikolai moved to where Aleksandr was still lying in a heap.

“Solnyshko,” Ilya tilted his head back, trying to get Shane to make eye contact with him. “Please look at me, please.”

“Please just take me home, Ilya.”

*****

Shane

Shane wasn’t sure how he got up the stairs or into the car. Ilya might have carried him. He might have walked. Hell, he may have floated up there for all he could remember. The sun still wasn’t up, and Shane still wasn’t sure what day it might be.

He held one of Ilya's hands between the two of his, letting his head fall back into the leather seat as Ilya weaved through traffic. Neither of them said anything, but Ilya kept bringing Shane's hands up to his lips, pressing into them like he wanted to reassure himself that Shane was solid, that he was really there.

The doorman didn't blink at Shane being half carried, face bloody, to the elevator. Only a "good evening, Mr. Rozanov" left his lips.

Shane had not cried. He hadn't cried through the entire night. He hadn't let a tear fall when Ilya stormed down the stairs. But as Ilya finally opened the door to what Shane had come to think of as *home*, he finally cracked. Shane was on the floor; Ilya half dragged down with him. His breath came in gasps, tears flowing steadily down his face.

"Shane, it's ok, I have you, you are safe now. I'm so sorry. I love you. I'm sorry, moy dorogoy. I'm so sorry."

A stream of apologies and reassurances fell from Ilya's lips as he worked his hands under Shane's thighs and hoisted him up, letting him lean against Ilya's body. He brought Shane to the bathroom, setting him on the counter and turning to flip on the shower.

Shane's breathing was starting to return to normal as Ilya gently peeled his t-shirt off of him. He saw Ilya pause at the rip that Shane hadn't noticed in the collar of the shirt. It must have happened when he got grabbed outside. Ilya's fingers ran over the jagged fabric before he dropped the shirt to the floor and guided him to stand up. He kept his hands on Ilya, feeling the muscles of his shoulders move, letting his fingers thread through his hair, as the man knelt to tug his jeans and boxers down.

Ilya didn't break contact as he guided Shane into the shower and followed him, still fully clothed.

"Ilya, your clothes," Shane whispered.

"I don't give a fuck about my clothes."

Shane's heart was aching at the gentleness that Ilya handled him with – slowly lathering Shane with soap, moving from his shoulders, down his arms, across his chest. He stopped there briefly, holding his hand over Shane's chest.

"Just need to feel your heartbeat, solnyshko."

He moved lower after a moment, but Ilya paused again, staring at the bruises starting to bloom scattered across Shane's abdomen. He probed lightly as he swept over them with the lightest of touches.

"Not broken."

He pressed his lips to Shane's hip as he moved to kneel once more.

He never stopped the steady flow of words – half English, half Russian, all hushed in tone and so soothing that Shane felt like he might fall asleep standing here in the combined

warmth of the water and Ilya's care.

Shane let himself be dried and directed to sit on the counter once more as Ilya quickly stripped off his own wet clothes and wrapped himself in a towel.

He tilted Shane's face to the side so he could gently clean the broken skin slashed across his cheek. A sharp hiss left his mouth as Ilya touched his face with a wet washcloth.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'll be gentle, I'm sorry."

Ilya's hand cupped the back of Shane's neck, holding him still and supporting him at the same time. Shane felt his tight muscles of his neck relax under Ilya's hand as he carefully blotted the dried blood off his face.

"It was a ring."

"What, solnyshko?"

"He had on a ring when he hit me. Twice. And it cut my face."

He didn't know why it was a detail that he felt like he needed to share. As though Ilya was concerned about the minute details surrounding the injury. He winced a little as Ilya carefully applied two small butterfly bandages on his cheek.

"I will make him pay for every mark on you."

His lips pressed into Shane's bare shoulder.

"For every bruise."

They pressed into the hollow of his throat.

"Every tear."

Ilya finally pressed softly into Shane's own lips.

"I love you, Ilya."

"I love you, too. I love you so fucking much."

He pulled a bottle out of the drawer beside where Shane's legs rested and dropped a pill into Shane's hand – a glass of water quick to follow.

"For the pain, ok?"

Shane nodded and swallowed it before draining the rest of the water. He picked Shane up again.

"I *can* walk."

“Oh, there you are,” Ilya said with a slight smile. “I knew my stubborn Shane would come back out.”

Shane snorted but still threw his arms around Ilya and rested his head on the man’s shoulder. He let himself be carried through to their bedroom; let Ilya put him down on the soft sheets and pull a blanket over him, but then he turned away and a pang of panic hit Shane’s chest.

“Where are you going?”

“Just to turn off the lamp, solnyshko.”

“Leave it on, please?”

Ilya looked at him with something he couldn’t quite identify – some mix between abject guilt and complete adoration.

“Of course.”

Ilya slid into the bed beside him, and Shane instantly turned into his chest, Ilya’s arms wrapping tightly around him.

“I am never letting you out of my sight again. This is my fault.”

“It’s not.”

“It is, Shane.”

“No, it’s mine.”

“We are not having little whisper argument right now.”

Shane couldn’t help the laugh that escaped him. He wanted to say more things to Ilya. He wanted to tell him how much he loved him, how safe he felt with him, and relieved he’d been the second he saw his face. But he was so tired. Ilya saw the fight he was waging to try and keep his eyes open.

“Sleep, solnyshko. I’m not going anywhere.”

Chapter End Notes

Holy crap, guys, I can't really believe that this has so many hits? I don't know that I had paid a whole lot of attention because I try to just write for fun and not look at any stats, but I just saw them tonight and was VERKLEMPT.

Thank you, thank you, thank you for reading, for your kudos, for your comments. It all seriously means so much to me.

I've been flying by the seat of my pants here, but I think I've got roughly two chapters left until I call this one done. I do have a few other ideas floating around in my head for a mafia Shane and maybe a cute little bodyguard AU so like... watch this space, I guess? If you like my writing enough to read other stuff, that is!

Chapter 14: Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Shane works on healing, maybe the both of them do.

Chapter Notes

Once more, I am here apologizing for how long this took. It's been a bit of a time these past couple weeks. Also school supplies are back in stores. Why? I feel like we just got out for the summer. (I know I shouldn't complain, working at a school and even getting a summer break is so freakin' nice).

My disclaimer as per usual - I do not use AI for anything. Not for writing, not for editing, not for proofreading, not for brainstorming. You will note my copious grammar and spelling mistakes - behold how very human I am. (I also realized I messed up a continuity thing last chapter, and I may edit to fix, but right now it's just there, taunting me. Please don't try to find it, I will cry.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shane didn’t like feeling so… fragile. He wasn’t made of glass, but he felt very breakable lately. Logically, he knew that he hadn’t gotten physically hurt *too* badly. The cuts on his cheek weren’t deep enough to need stitches and probably would only leave a whisper of a scar. The bruising around his abdomen was only marginally worse than bruising that could have happened in hockey.

But he had been jumping at shadows, and he still didn’t want the lamp off in the bedroom at night as he fell asleep.

Ilya had called his boss and his advisor at school and told them he’d been mugged and would be taking a few weeks off to recover. They were both understanding and effusive in their ‘get well’ wishes.

“You didn’t need to do that,” he’d told Ilya.

“I would do anything for you, solnyshko.”

“No, Ilya, I mean. *I* could do that. And I don’t need a few weeks. I can go back to work, and I don’t want to miss class or observation for too long.”

“Shane.”

“I’m going to get behind, and then I’m going to wind up repeating a semester, and I’m risking funding if that happens – ”

“Shane.”

“And I know, I’m sure you’d just love it if they fired me so then I wouldn’t work at that dingy little store anymore. I know you hate it, ok? But like. It’s *mine*. And I’m allowed to have things that are just mine, and I’m – ”

“Shane,” Ilya grabbed his shoulders as he said his name again.

Shane hadn’t realized he was pacing in front of the plush couch, and he wasn’t sure when his breathing had gotten so fast. All he could think about was the deep spiral that he saw laid out in front of him that no doubt would end with him flunking out of school and losing everything. And Ilya wouldn’t want a loser who had flunked out of school, so he would lose him too, and –

“You are having panic attack. Breathe.”

Ilya’s words cut through the spiral, and he brought a hand up and pressed his palm flat on Shane’s chest, his other hand grabbed one of Shane’s to press it to Ilya’s own chest. He closed his eyes and leaned forward, Ilya coming to meet him and letting Shane’s forehead rest gently against Ilya’s lips.

When his breathing finally evened out, Ilya grabbed the hand that had been resting on his chest and brought Shane’s palm up to his lips.

“Something bad happened to you, Shane. And I will be apologizing for it for the rest of my life. But you can be not okay right now. And boss and school and whatever can wait. They have already said they *will* wait.”

“I don’t want you apologizing for the rest of our lives.”

Shane noted that Ilya had just said ‘my’ though. He hadn’t said ‘our.’ There was something about it that Shane didn’t like at all, but he wasn’t sure exactly what it was; and he wasn’t sure that he wanted to bring it up right now.

“I hate feeling like this.”

“I know. I’m sorry, Shane. I’m so sorry.”

“What did I *just* say?”

“Right, right no apologizing. Sure.”

Ilya pressed a gentle kiss to his lips, and Shane immediately opened his mouth to the man, trying to grab at his shoulders, burying a hand in Ilya’s hair.

“Woah, ok – ”

Ilya took half a step back, and Shane instantly mourned the closeness while his anger flared. Ilya had been so gentle the last few days, and Shane loved it. He did. But he *wasn't* made of glass, and he needed Ilya to act like that now.

“Ilya,” he whined. “I want you to take me to bed.”

“Ok,” Ilya reached a hand out to caress his face, and it was Shane’s turn to step away.

“I want you to stop treating me like I’m going to break.”

“Shane – ”

“No. I want you, I *need* you, to throw me on the goddamn bed and pin me down and fuck me like you own me.”

“Fucking hell, Shane Hollander.”

Ilya’s lips found his with a feverish desperation before he moved to Shane’s jaw, his neck, the point behind his ear that always made him let out noises he didn’t know he could make.

“Please, Ilya.”

“Tell me, tell me what you need. Tell me everything you want.”

He grabbed at the hem of Shane’s shirt, pulling it up and off of him before his fingers turned to Shane’s zipper.

“I want you to be in charge. I want to not think. I want you to take me out of my own head.”

Ilya walked him backwards until his back hit the wall beside the open bedroom door before letting out an impatient huff and half carrying Shane into the room. Ilya had stripped him before he realized what was happening and did exactly as Shane asked – almost carelessly throwing him on the bed before climbing on top of him. His hands were around Shane’s wrists, holding them still above Shane’s head, pressing them into the bed.

“Already dripping for me. You’re such a needy little slut, aren’t you.”

Shane frantically agreed, a breathy “yes” falling out of his mouth repeatedly. He would have agreed to anything Ilya called him at that moment. It was the most settled he’d felt in days, Ilya’s still clothed body covering him, his warm hands holding Shane still, his thighs pressed at the outside of Shane’s legs, and his mouth unrelenting in its memorization of Shane’s skin.

Ilya stood up straight and slid off the bed, and Shane whined at the sudden loss of warmth and contact. He watched as Ilya took his time removing every item of clothing, letting them all drop carelessly around him.

He kneeled back on the bed, dropping a knee between Shane’s legs, bracing himself with his hands on either side of Shane’s neck. Without thinking, Shane reached out to grab at his hips,

to pull him closer, but Ilya didn't give in to the pressure of his fingers.

"Ilya, please."

"If you want something, use your words, not your greedy little hands."

"I want – "

Shane was cut off with a gasp as Ilya moved flush with him, letting his cock drag lazily against Shane's. He only did it once, and Shane was desperate for the touch again, for any kind of friction to offer him relief.

"Yes?"

Shane reached for him again, and this time Ilya grabbed his wrists again.

"I said no greedy hands. You can't listen tonight?"

"I can, I can listen, please."

"Mm, I think you need help with following directions."

Ilya climbed off of him again, and Shane barely recognized the needy whine that escaped his lips. He was back within moments, though, and Shane's breath caught when he realized what Ilya meant by him needing help following directions. He crawled back over Shane, grabbing Shane's wrists and wrapping a silk tie around them – held fast by a knot that Shane could easily get out of if he really wanted to. He didn't want to.

Ilya pushed held his bound hands for a beat.

"This is ok?"

His voice was gentle, half worried through the incredibly haze of *want* that was covering them both. Shane nodded frantically.

"You tell me if it starts being not ok."

"I will, I will, I promise."

It was all the promise Ilya needed before he shoved Shane's bound hands above his head – the place where Ilya had wanted them to stay in the first place.

"You keep these here. Or I tie you to the headboard next."

"Fuck, Ilya, please."

"Now tell me what you want. With your pretty mouth. Not your fingers."

"I want more. I want you inside me."

Ilya smirked at him. He wrapped a hand around the back of Shane's neck, pulling him up slightly.

"Spit."

Ilya's other palm cupped under Shane's chin, and he instantly obeyed. He stared into Ilya's eyes as he let the spit drop out of his mouth into the waiting hand. Ilya let go of his neck, and he fell flat on his back on the rumpled bed again, his now moistened hand wrapping around Shane, roughly stroking him, spreading his own spit along the length of his cock, and drawing a sharp intake of breath from him.

"Spread your legs," Ilya tapped at one of his thighs. "Keep them open for me like a good boy."

Shane was obedient, his legs falling open further. It was so easy to follow Ilya's instructions. To let himself exit his own mind and just let Ilya's words supply what he needed to do. To focus on the feeling of the silk looped around his wrists, the strain of his arms as they stayed stretched out above his head.

The thought that he felt so *exposed* hit his mind for a moment. It wasn't embarrassing like some of the encounters he'd had – he liked this, he liked being flayed open for Ilya, being vulnerable underneath him.

Ilya's lube-slick fingers teased, circling around his sensitive opening with a level of patience that was going to drive Shane insane.

"Please – "

"You will take as much as I give you."

The pressure of Ilya's finger entering him made him arch his neck back with a gasp. It disappeared for a moment, but before he could whine at the absence, Ilya came back into him with two fingers.

"You open so easy for me, so ready for it, aren't you?

"Yes, yes, ready for you, please."

He writhed against the mattress, trying to push himself further onto Ilya's hand.

"You will be still, or I will stop right now."

Shane didn't think there was any way Ilya would stop. He could hear the man's quick, shallow breaths. He wanted this just as much as Shane. But he tried to still his hips anyway – not willing to test the man when he was so close to getting what he wanted.

"Good boy."

"Fuck, Ilya."

“You’re so perfect,” Ilya was pumping his fingers into him steadily now, as unrelenting as the open-mouthed kisses that he was pressing down Shane’s neck and across his chest.

“But so impatient,” Ilya’s teeth bit harshly at one of his nipples and drew a half-cry out of his mouth.

Ilya took his fingers out of Shane, but before he could whine yet again at the loss, he heard the click of the cap to the lube, the slick sounds of Ilya spreading it over his own cock. He was so desperate that for a minute it doesn’t register to him that he still had fucking socks on – white, Nike fucking socks still on his feet.

Ilya’s weight over his body wiped the thought from his head before he could do anything about it. He was holding as still as he could, arms aching above him, thighs spread, open, waiting. Shane lifted his head as much as he could so he could watch Ilya slowly press into him. His skin felt like it was buzzing – pressure and need and impatience fizzing over his body.

“Is this what you needed?”

“Yes, god, fuck, it is.”

His eyelids fluttered shut as Ilya drew back and then insistently pressed into him again.

“No, no. Eyes on me.”

He grabbed Shane’s legs, guiding them to wrap around Ilya’s waist and his hands started to move, trying to find some contact with Ilya, some stretch of his skin he could get at.

“Oh, you forgot I was in charge?”

Ilya held the tie where it was knotted between his wrists, yanking them roughly back in place at the same time as he finally thrust in earnest, snapping his hips in a filthy, percussive rhythm. All Shane could register was the pressure on his wrists, the pressure inside him, the pressure of Ilya’s body above him – everything displaced the fear and anxiety inside of him until it was replaced with Ilya, Ilya, Ilya.

“This is what you need?”

Ilya’s breath was ragged.

“Yes, harder, please, I need more.”

It was Ilya who instantly obeyed the request now.

“Fuck, Shane, you are so fucking beautiful.”

Ilya said it like he was making a confession, reverent and hushed. Shane felt the heat in his face and the battering thunder of his heart, and Ilya’s lips came down to meet his – claiming his mouth with desperate kisses. Shane’s mouth moved against his, begging to come as he clenched his eyes shut and saw pinpoints of light behind his eyelids.

“You can come like this. I don’t need to touch you. I know you can. Come for me.”

Shane would do anything Ilya told him to right now. So he did – coming *hard*, barely able to keep his arms from jerking, crying Ilya’s name. He felt his own cum streaking across his stomach, splashing between himself and Ilya.

“Come in me, please, come in me, I want you to, I’m yours, please.”

Ilya’s hips stuttered for a minute as Shane continued to beg for it – he wanted it inside of him, he needed it. The friction was starting to border on the edge of painful, the overstimulation almost too much, when Ilya finally thrust hard into him, and Shane felt himself being filled.

Ilya dropped half onto him, still inside of him, and Shane didn’t even care that he had fallen into and smeared Shane’s cum between them.

Their panting breaths were starting to even out when Shane turned his head, burying his face into Ilya’s curls, pressing soft kisses to his scalp, the shell of his ear, his temple, wherever he could reach without moving his body too much.

He was still floating somewhere above his own body as he registered Ilya gently pulling out of him, soft whispers in Russian streaming out of him as his hands ran through Shane’s hair. His wrists were carefully untied, Ilya’s lips pressing into the skin there over and over. Shane felt the damp warmth of being wiped off, cleaned before arms gathered him into Ilya’s chest – a place that he nestled willingly, happily. He was fairly sure that he might have whispered ‘I love you, Ilya,’ but sleep took him so fast that it may have just been a thought.

He only half-registered that Ilya had turned off the lamp. But that felt ok right now.

*****

Shane woke up with half a gasp, half a scream. There was darkness around him again. He couldn’t tell where he was. Could he move his arms, his legs? Was someone coming back down the stairs, was Ilya coming, where was –

“Shane!”

He felt hands on his arms, his movement restricted, and it made metallic panic rise in his throat. He felt cool floor under his feet before a light turned on and his eyes focused. Ilya, standing on the other side of the bed by a lamp, his hands outstretched like he was approaching a feral cat.

“Shane, you’re ok. I’m here. You’re at home.”

Shane’s head jerked around, taking stock of the room. It was their room. It wasn’t a basement. Ilya was there. It was just dark, and he hadn’t been able to tell. It was just the dark. It was fine. Ilya came around the bed and tentatively reached a hand out; Shane went willingly, leaning his head against Ilya’s shoulder and letting out a breath.

“I was having a dream, I didn’t – ”

“You don’t have to explain to me, solnyshko.”

He hadn’t really had nightmares that clung to him like that before. Not like that one. Usually the light was turned on when he opened his eyes, so there was no confusion when he woke – it was easy to register where he was, to let the safety of being beside Ilya wash over him before any leftover panic could take over.

“This is so stupid,” he said with his lips grazing Ilya’s skin.

“What is stupid, dorogoy?”

“I’m, like, scared of the fucking dark. That’s something a fucking child would be scared of.”

“Shane. I know that you know how these things are different. You are not child.”

“I just feel like one.”

“Ok, well, you are not one. It’s fine that you got scared when it was dark. It will not be like that always.”

“It feels like it will though. It feels like I’ll always be like this.”

Ilya gentled guided him back into the bed, straightening the sheet and blankets that he had twisted in his frantic race to stand up. He scooted back once Ilya got in, pressing his back into Ilya’s chest, reaching for the hand that had come to wrap around his waist.

“Do you have nightmares ever?”

He had never asked Ilya for any details about any of the things he knew the man must have done in his…line of work. Shane had never asked if Ilya had hurt someone or been hurt by someone. Shane noticed scars littered across Ilya’s body. Sometimes he would take an extra moment to press his lips to them – trying to somehow communicate that he loved all the parts of Ilya, even parts Ilya might think are ugly. But he never asked what they were from. He hadn’t asked if Ilya had taken lives. He *knew* logically that the Russian must have done these things, and that he probably had been subjected to awful things in turn. But Shane didn’t need to know details. And Ilya didn’t volunteer any.

“Sometimes.”

“About being hurt?”

“Hm,” Ilya paused. “Sometimes about that. Most times about my mother. Lately, about you.”

“About me?”

He felt Ilya nod above him.

“What about me?”

“I don’t know if we should talk about this right now, solnyshko.”

“Will you tell me in the morning? If I asked again?”

“Yes, my love,” Ilya tightened his arms around Shane. “If you asked.”

*****

Shane was getting increasingly frustrated. As his nightmares and bruises faded and his face healed, Ilya didn’t change. He was still acting like Shane was made of glass. Walking more softly, keeping his voice moderated, not taking Shane with the kind of force that he wanted until Shane begged him for it.

He knew that Aleksandr was being kept somewhere, but Shane wasn’t sure where. And any attempt to try and talk about it made Ilya shut him down completely. He knew that the man had to be alive out there still. Ilya hadn’t left his side, and he knew that as soon as he felt like he was able to leave Shane alone, he would be going to wherever Aleksandr was to take care of him personally.

“I want to see him.”

He made the request again while he and Ilya were sitting down to eat dinner.

“That’s not a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Why would you want to see this man, Shane? He hurt you. He wanted to kill you.”

“So, I can see that he’s not out there somewhere. So I know he could never do that to me again.”

“I do not want to talk about this right now.”

Shane let his fork drop back down to his plate with a clatter. It was on purpose. He wanted it to make noise. He pushed back from the table, letting the chair scrape across the floor.

“Solnyshko…”

He’d only made it as far as the edge of the couch before Ilya was behind him, catching his hand so he couldn’t do something like shut himself in the bathroom and pretend he was taking a shower when he was really sulking in his annoyance. If Ilya didn’t want to talk about it then *fine* he wouldn’t talk about it.

“What.”

“What is this? What is going on?”

“Nothing.”

“It doesn’t seem like nothing, Shane.”

“You don’t want to talk about it.”

Ilya rubbed roughly across his forehead and sighed.

“I’m sorry. We can talk about it. I was being unfair.”

“I want you to stop treating me like a goddamn porcelain doll!”

“Shane – ”

“No. Ilya. I mean it. I’m not broken.”

“No, you’re not broken, but you *are* healing.”

Shane’s agitation was starting to spread to the other man; he could see the way that one of the muscles of Ilya’s jaw was starting to flex.

“Healing from shit that I could have gotten in a rough hockey scrum. The cuts are better; they’re going to be the lightest scar I even have on my body in like another week. My head feels fine. My ribs are better.”

“You’ve been having nightmares – ”

“Ok, and that will take longer to heal than the bruises but even those are happening less so fucking come *on*.”

“I am just trying to fix this. Because it’s my fault, is my responsibility to fix.”

“No. Don’t do that. It’s not on you to fix it. I love you, and I want your support. But I just need you beside me. I don’t need you trying to carry me, to carry all of it, right now, Ilya.”

He was breathing heavily now, the anger of the entire situation starting to pour out of him – not just his irritation at Ilya for treating him with kid gloves, but his desperate anger at the man who did all of this to him to start with. Ilya kept blaming himself – apologizing over and over, and Shane couldn’t get him to see that it wasn’t his fault, it was fucking Aleksandr’s fault. No one else’s.

“And stop fucking apologizing to me! I am so sick of hearing you say you’re sorry and it’s your fault when it’s fucking not!”

“Ok, but it is,” Ilya’s teeth were gritted as he spoke. “It *is* my fault, and if we stay together and something like this happens again *that* will be my fault, too!”

“What the fuck do you mean ‘if’?”

Shane felt a cold knife of panic slash through him.

“I can’t fucking change, Shane!” Ilya’s voice was raised, the words burst out of him, but it seemed like his frustration was only directed at himself. “Maybe when I was young, and I had half a chance at it, but I can’t change this now. And it could put you in danger again.”

“I’ve never once asked you to change for me, Ilya.”

“You say that, but you’re acting like you love me and isn’t that asking me to change?”

“Acting? Who’s fucking acting, Ilya? I *love* you. Are you only acting like you love me?”

“No, I love you. Fuck, that’s not what – I just can’t – I need you – ”

He stopped and took a deep, shuddering breath. Shane saw a tear gathering on the edge of Ilya’s eyelash, dropping slowly and quietly down his cheek.

“I’m not acting. Never. I love you. I just need you to be safe. I have lost everyone that mattered in my life, and I can’t lose you. Ok? I can’t lose you.”

Ilya collapsed into a living room chair; his voice broke on his last couple words. Shane crossed the room and sank to his knees in front of the man, reaching up to hold Ilya’s face between his hands.

“Ilya, I love you exactly as you are. Right now. And I would love you if you decided to be, like, a fucking insurance salesman. And I would love you if you opened a falafel cart in Central Park. I will love you until you tell me to stop.”

“I won’t tell you that.”

“Good, I wouldn’t really stop even if you told me to.”

Ilya reached up, laying his own hands over where Shane’s were still holding his face.

“What if something like this happens again? What if I fail again?”

“You didn’t fail me. You came for me. You saved me. You took care of me. You even called my fucking faculty advisor, for Christ’s sake, Ilya.”

Shane let out half a laugh as he said it, and a slight smile played across Ilya’s lips for a fleeting moment.

“Solnyshko – ”

“You know I love when you call me that, but I’m not the sun, Ilya. You are. And I’m never going to pull out of your orbit. You’re it for me. Forever. Do you not get that?”

“Forever. It’s you forever for me, too.”

*****

It took a few more conversations before Ilya finally agreed that Shane could see Aleksandr. He obviously wasn't thrilled about it and kept asking if Shane would possibly change his mind, but he hadn't. He wanted to look at that smug motherfucker straight in the face and tell him that he *lost*. That all his stupid bad guy monologuing was for *nothing*. That *he* was nothing.

There was someone else Shane wanted to see before that showdown, though, and that was why he was once again following Ilya into the club he owned – this time right before it opened. Instead of flashes of colorful light and pounding bass notes, there was a dull wash of fluorescent overhead lights and the tinny sound of folk music being played on a phone somewhere.

Maksim was standing behind the bar, cutting a small pile of limes into quarters and dropping them into a plastic container.

"I need to talk to my manager. I will be right back, ok?"

He knew that Ilya was trying. Was loosening his death grip on Shane, and he appreciated the effort.

"Go do what you have to do. I'll be here."

Max didn't notice him right away; not until Shane sat down on the bar stool in front of you.

"Shane," Max's face turned white. "I'm so sorry. I should have told you that – I should have – oh my god, it's just – "

"Max. Breathe."

"Right, right, sorry."

"Are you ok?"

"Am *I* ok?" Shane, what the fuck."

"I already know that I'm ok. I want to know if you're ok."

"I just," Max paused. "I want to apologize to you. I never wanted you to get hurt. I never wanted to hurt you."

"Max," a smile played across Shane's mouth as he spoke. "You hit like a grandmother. You didn't hurt me."

Maksim had been right – Aleksandr had shoved him at Shane, told him to prove himself. He'd hit Shane a single time before Ilya had come down the stairs. And Shane wasn't lying – the punch Maksim had landed on him had about as much force as a play shove from his mom after he was a little too sarcastic with her. He didn't even think Max was trying to pull his punches; he was pretty sure the boy had just never hit someone before.

"You should let Nikolai teach you how to actually throw a punch."

“I never want to hit another person again. I’m so sorry again – ”

“No more apologies, ok?”

“I will need to apologize to Ilya – To Mr. Rozanov, I mean – I should – ”

“If you hadn’t called him, I’d probably be fucking dead, Max."

Saying it out loud hit Shane like a bulldozer. He was struck by how lucky he had been the entire time. Lucky that Aleksandr was an idiot and wanted to spend too much time talking. Lucky that Max was able to call Ilya. Lucky that Ilya got there so quickly.

"You have no apologies to make. We both owe you, really.”

Ilya came up behind him, an arm wrapping protectively around his waist.

“Yes, my Shane is right. I do owe you. I promised to keep you safe; you are safe. What else can I give you?”

Maksim hesitated for a moment before a story flowed out of him – more sentences than Shane had ever heard come out of the boy before revealing that he had only started working for Aleksandr in the first place because his parents knew him but they were gone now - Shane felt Ilya's hand flex against his hip as Maksim shared that. He was now the only one supporting his younger sister. It was obvious how much he loved the girl – the only family he had left.

Shane and Ilya left after Ilya made copious promises to make sure both Maksim and his sister were taken care of – to make sure Maksim would never have to work for someone like Aleksandr again.

Shane wondered briefly if Ilya wished there had been someone to do that for him. Someone that could have made it possible for Ilya to walk away from this way of life before he was so far down the path that he couldn’t turn back.

He wondered if this was Ilya’s way of trying to heal that part of himself. Shane hoped that it *would* help heal that part of him.

*****

The building was nondescript – a simple brick building that looked like nothing from the outside. Maybe there had once been some kind of business on the first floor; a deli or a hair salon or something with an owner that lived on the floors above. Ilya opened a squeaky metal door to reveal that the inside looked like nothing too. Whitewashed metal I-beams were scattered through an empty room that made an echo out of every step Shane took.

“This way, solnyshko.”

Ilya gestured to an elevator that Shane would have assumed was no longer operational, but the doors opened with a chime after Ilya pressed at a button.

They had agreed that Shane would go with him when Ilya finally decided to go take out the trash that was Aleksandr. He didn't want to stay for any of that part. Didn't want to see what Ilya would do to the man that had dared to lay a hand on what belonged to Ilya. Nikolai would take him home before any of that. But he would go. He didn't know what he would even say, if he said anything at all. Maybe he just wanted to make sure that Ilya actually had Aleksandr contained.

"You're sure you want to do this? I can hit emergency stop right now."

"Then we would just be stuck in an elevator."

"Mm, imagine everything we could do if we were stuck though."

Ilya's hand had slid around his waist; he pressed a kiss into Shane's neck that tickled just enough to make him snort a laugh and shove at Ilya's shoulder.

"I want to do this. I want to see him. And you'll be there the whole time."

"Yes, the whole time."

Nikolai was the first person he saw when the elevator doors opened to a cavernous room. Cardboard covered half the windows that ran along one of the walls, but there was plenty of light to see everything – Nikolai standing patiently, a table with some kind of case on top of it, and Aleksandr. Aleksandr sitting much as Shane had been not that long ago – hands taped to the arms of a chair, legs restrained.

Blood was smeared across his face, and Shane couldn't tell if it had originated from his nose or his mouth. His satiny button-down shirt was dirty, splashed with dark stains that let Shane know that his face wasn't the only part of him that had been bleeding.

"You brought a friend to see me!"

Aleksandr had an air of mirth, but Shane could see the strain in it.

"I'm not your friend."

"Oh, but we had such a good time together!"

He didn't answer right away. Ilya let Shane decide what he wanted to do; gave him ample space and time to just stand there for a moment, looking at the man. Ilya himself moved to the table that Nikolai was standing beside, opening the black case that was on top of it. Shane could see now that there was a thick protective foam in the inside of the case – it cushioned a slate grey handgun and an extra magazine.

Ilya took it out, removing the magazine already in the gun and locking the slide back to inspect the chamber. Shane knew that Ilya wasn't the kind of person to put a gun up before cleaning it, he was too careful a man for that. He guessed that Ilya just needed something for his hands to do in the interim.

"I just wanted to see how pathetic you looked," Shane finally said.

“Well, now you have. How does it feel?”

Aleksandr’s voice was huskier than it was the last time Shane heard it. He’d lost some of the lithe, melodic quality.

“Feels nice.”

“Does it?”

Shane just nodded.

Ilya had reloaded and set the gun down on the table with a dull thunk. He was leaning on the table now, arms folded, eyes not leaving Shane.

“I do not think it does.”

“What do you know?”

“I have been watching for many weeks. For months maybe. I know you now.”

“You don’t know the first fucking thing about me.”

“No, I do. Is why I know that if I beg for you to let me go, you will.”

“Fucking beg then, see what happens.”

“You are too kind for this. For this life. It will break you.”

Ilya picked the gun back up and almost absentmindedly turned the safety off with a quiet click, letting the gun rest in his hand as he stared at Aleksandr. The sound drew Aleksandr’s eyes, and Shane saw the panic grow in them. His arms tugged at their bindings. Shane thought briefly that he should feel guilt over how satisfying this role reversal was, but he just didn't.

“You are good man. You do not want Ilya to do this. To bloody his hands.”

Shane stepped closer to Ilya, one hand reaching down to grab Ilya’s free hand.

“They look clean to me.”

Ilya raised Shane’s hand to his lips, pressing a quick kiss to the back of it.

“That's all I wanted, I think. Nikolai, can you take me back now?”

“Shane, wait, wait, please…”

He turned to walk away but stopped when Aleksandr started begging, actually begging.

“Please, just... let me return to Russia. I will not come back. I will promise this. I will go, you will never see me again.”

“Even if I believed you, that’s not up to me. That’s up to Ilya.”

“Please, please believe me. It's truth. He will let me go if you want it. He will give you whatever you want.”

Shane knew it was true - Ilya would give him anything he wanted. Ilya was still as a statue beside him – not interjecting in the conversation even though Shane was close enough to feel the shift in his breathing as he grew more angry. The gun was in his right hand, safety still off, but his finger was firmly off the trigger.

“Ilya?”

“Yes, solnyshko?”

He could hear the tightness in Ilya’s voice.

“Would you let him go, send him away to Russia, if I asked?”

Ilya’s head whipped around to look at him, his eyes flashing confusion then rage – but Shane knew it wasn’t directed *at* him.

“Shane.”

“Would you? If I asked.”

He could see the slight flare in Ilya’s nostrils, the compulsive flex in his jaw and twitch in his lip. Shane could see the way he was trying to tamp all the rage he had at Aleksandr down - trying to pack it somewhere to be contained if Shane was going to ask this of him. He quietly engaged the safety on the gun.

“If you asked... yes. If you asked, I would send him to Russia.”

Nikolai started forward, but Ilya held a hand up. Shane nodded slowly. He pressed a quick kiss to Ilya’s still twitching face, and it made the man relax marginally.

“Good to know. But I’m not going to ask. I’ll be at home, don’t be too long, please.”

“Brat,” Ilya said, but his voice was fond.

Shane heard the noise of the safety clicking off again and turned to follow Nikolai, ignoring Aleksandr shouting his name.

Chapter End Notes

My darlings, you will notice I've set a chapter count now. I think that I will likely finish this with one more chapter - two at the very most. I cannot tell you what immense joy you all have brought to my heart with your kudos and your comments, and just your very reading of this little story.

I had really fallen out of love with writing for an awful length of time, and it really makes me so happy to be picking it back up and finding joy in the writing itself again; and it makes me doubly happy that you all seem to like it 😭
I said in the notes on the last chapter that I had a couple ideas kicking around, and I do currently have the first two chapters of a little bodyguard AU sitting in a doc along with like 4 separate notes full of related ramblings and bits in my phone's notes app too. I may put that out soon! Until then, my deepest deepest thanks - I hope that your socks never slip down in your shoes and that your pillow is cool on both sides.

Oh, also, maybe a little easter egg - one of the Russian diminutives for 'Aleksandr' is 'Sasha'. Yes, I did that on purpose. Do with that what you will.

Chapter 15: Epilogue in Vignettes

Chapter Summary

A smattering of scenes from the next couple years of Shane and Ilya's lives.

Chapter Notes

I wasn't altogether sure how exactly I wanted this to end, but I feel like once our main obstacle is taken out that Shane and Ilya's lives fall into very easy routine. These are some glimpses of that routine, a bit shorter than a lot of the chapters, but it felt correct. I hope this ending isn't too incredibly disappointing; I am neeeeervous about it.

As per usual, we hate AI, no AI got used here. (If you've been following along in my battle to keep data centers out of my community - we had a HUGE victory this month, and no centers are currently approved to be built now!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ilya

"If it brings you comfort before you go – most of your men ran. I assume they're already in Moscow at this point. I don't really care."

Ilya toyed with the gun in his hand as he spoke to Aleksandr. He had waited until he heard the elevator ding to indicate that Shane was safely far away from this place. He didn't need to see or hear any of what Ilya was about to do.

"Fucking cowards," Aleksandr spat out.

The bravado had crumbled into pieces, and all Ilya saw was a scared boy. He didn't care.

"I think we have had a misunderstanding."

Aleksandr's eyes betrayed a modicum of hope.

"A misunderstanding?"

"Hm, yes. You have mistaken my mercy as weakness. And did not understand it was the only thing keeping you alive."

The hope vanished as quickly as it appeared. Ilya knew that he was just taunting the man now. It was the reason he kept clicking the safety on the gun, too. It served no purpose. He just wanted to see Aleksandr squirm.

"Ilya – "

"Mercy breeds loyalty. My men would go to war for me. Yours ran. Or gave you up. You see what being cruel has gotten you?"

Aleksandr didn't answer him. He didn't need an answer anyway.

"If you had just left me alone, you could have done as you pleased. Expanded into fucking Long Island for all I cared. But you couldn't leave well enough alone. And now you will bear the consequences."

Nikolai had already seen to it that every injury Shane had sustained was visited on Nikolai five times over. The blood on the other man's face was plentiful and sticky evidence of that. It didn't stop Ilya from hitting him across the face with the butt end of the gun in his hand.

"You harmed something of mine. That was foolish."

Aleksandr spit a mouthful of blood towards Ilya's feet but missed him by inches.

"I am going to end this now, Aleksandr. Slowly. Without the mercy that you think makes me so soft."

*****

Shane

"I thought I told you not to be too long," Shane called out when he heard the door open.

Ilya didn't respond right away, and Shane wondered if maybe Nikolai had come in for something instead. He stepped out of the kitchen, turning toward the front door and froze. Ilya *was* standing there, back leaning against the front door, eyes staring unseeing across the room. Shane noticed that there was a dark splatter diagonally across his shirt. Dark stains on his hands.

"Ilya?"

The man blinked hard a single time before he turned his head to focus on Shane.

"I'm sorry, I am going to just…"

The sentence trailed off as he started toward the bedroom door, Shane following close behind.

"I just need to wash my hands, solnyshko. Or probably shower."

Shane didn't say anything, coming to stand in front of Ilya and wordlessly unbuttoning the front of his shirt. He moved slowly, listening to the sound of Ilya's even breathing like it was a guided meditation. When he'd finally gotten the buttons undone, he slid the shirt up and over Ilya's shoulders, letting his hands caress the skin he was exposing.

"Shane, I'm disgusting right n – "

"Shh."

He knelt at Ilya's feet, untying his shoes and tapping his shin so Ilya would cooperate with his mission to leave the man barefoot. He stayed on his knees while he loosened the belt around Ilya's waist. The room was silent except for the occasional quiet kiss that Shane pressed to Ilya's shin, his hip, the dip of his waist.

Shane led him to the bathroom, turning the shower on and letting steam settle in the room as he stripped himself and then led Ilya to stand under the flowing water.

"Shane – "

"I thought I said shh?"

Ilya smirked but closed his mouth again. Shane didn't miss a single inch of Ilya's body as he lathered the man with soap. He ignored the way that lather was tinged with pink as he held Ilya's hands in his, making sure every line and crease of his palms was clean.

"Can I say something now?"

He nodded, hands still moving over Ilya's skin, still solely focused on worshipping at the altar of Ilya's body.

"I love you."

The quietness of Ilya's voice, the hushed whisper that he used, made Shane finally meet his eyes; surprised to find them glassy with choked emotion.

"I love you, too."

His voice was just as quiet. Shane felt a warm reverence – a strange kind of sacredness washing over him. He basked in it for as long as he could, long since done with the act of washing Ilya's body, and now just holding him close until the water started to cool and the steam dissipated from the room.

Neither of them bothered putting clothes on, simply toweling dry and slipping into their bed. Ilya wrapped himself around Shane instantly, and it would have been so easy for him to turn in Ilya's arms, to ask him to put Shane through the goddamn mattress. But he liked the quiet warmth still residing in his chest. He intertwined his fingers with Ilya's and fell asleep in the perfect warmth of being unconditionally loved.

*****

One Week Later

“Dude, you just like disappeared off the face of the earth. Me and Jackie were about to send a search party.”

“That’s a little dramatic. I texted!”

It felt good to be sitting across from Hayden and Jackie in their usual little dive bar. Shane felt like he’d lived an entire lifetime since they were last here together. The bruises of his encounter with Aleksandr were all but gone now. The cut on his face had finally faded from an angry red and was starting to heal over – another scar to add to the collection he’d accumulated through more mundane activities like jumping out of trees as a kid or scuffles during hockey games. Soon, maybe it would be as commonplace to him as any of those ones were.

“I told you I got jumped, Hayd. It took a second to feel human again.”

“That’s just so scary,” Jackie chimed in. “I mean, like, you’re not a small guy, and it still happened to you. They must have been terrifying.”

“I didn’t really see whoever it was.”

“And the cops didn’t do anything?”

“What were they gonna do? I didn’t see the guy so there wasn’t anything for them to go on.”

Hayden nodded in concession as he sipped his beer. Jackie still looked troubled by the lack of activity on the police’s part. Shane knew that he could sooth that worry by telling her that he knew exactly who attacked him, actually; and that man wouldn’t be doing any attacking anytime soon. But he knew that would just raise different concerns.

“So,” Hayden said. “You’ve just been somewhere shacking up with the Russian, hm?”

“Jesus Christ. He has a name, you know? I’ve told you before. More than once actually, I think.”

“He’s just annoyed that he couldn’t play nurse himself. Aren’t you, baby?”

Hayden’s face turned a bright red as he sputtered.

“No, that’s not it – I just – that guy is still so – oh, whatever, Jackie.”

Shane couldn’t stop the laugh that he and Jackie were sharing now. He’d missed the way it was so incredibly easy to rile up his friend. The way that Jackie could easily turn the man into a blushing, stuttering mess with a little teasing.

“So, when are me and Hayden finally going to get to meet this mystery man?”

“Soon, I think.”

“I mean, give me a calendar date or something, Shane, I’m dying here.”

Jackie wore an exaggerated pout as she continued.

“You’ve been gushing over this man for ages – ”

“Jackie,” Shane tried to interrupt.

“No, I’m serious, you talk about him like the sun shines out of his ass – ”

“Jacks,” he tried again.

“She’s right, you are so far gone for this guy. I’ve never seen you talk about someone like him. Or defend someone so viciously. Not even on the ice, man.”

“Solnyshko, you defend my honor?”

Shane let out an exasperated sigh as Ilya walked up behind Hayden and Jackie. He thought Jackie’s eyes might pop all the way out of her skull when Ilya came around, one hand curling around the back of Shane’s neck as he leaned down for a kiss.

“Your ego is already too big for your own good.”

The usually painfully awkward process of trying to introduce someone to his friends was eased by the charm that Ilya oozed so naturally. Jackie was obviously enamored; even if Hayden was eying the man with suspicion.

“So, when you said soon…”

“Yeah, I meant very soon. Imminently, even.”

“Ok, calm down, SAT words.”

“I’m from Canada… I didn’t take the SAT.”

Shane had been nervous when Ilya offered to meet him at the bar. He wanted this – he wanted Ilya integrated into his life so thoroughly that he couldn’t unweave it if he tried. But Shane knew that there was so much he couldn’t talk about; parts of his life that would always be compartmentalized. But Ilya had been more than willing to do what he could to lessen that burden, and that meant the world to Shane.

“So, Hayden Pike,” Ilya’s accent wrapped around the name mischievously. “I hear you think I am awful, abusive man who keeps Shane caged like an animal?”

“I never – ”

“No, no, it’s best that I know what you think of me.”

“That’s not – I don’t – ”

“Is partially true. I have had Shane tied – ”

“Ok!” Shane interrupts. “I think that’s enough of that, thank you!”

Jackie was barely containing her laughter, and Hayden was frantically throwing glares at her.

“I’m glad that you like to look out for Shane.”

Ilya said it sincerely now, smoothing a hand over Shane’s thigh underneath the table, and Jackie decided that Hayden had suffered enough; jumping in to take over the conversation.

“So, Ilya, what do you do?”

It was a simple question. A very normal question to ask your friend’s partner. Shane made himself very busy focusing on the beer in front of him.

“I’m in real estate.”

As he sat at a dinged-up table in a dive bar in Greenwich Village, Shane was so happy to have been nervous for nothing. Ilya stayed for a while – charming the pants off Jackie with stories about Russia and tales of Tatyana the babushka, tormenting Hayden with an ease that set the man’s girlfriend into hysterics – before he gave Shane a kiss and let him know Nikolai would be ready to take him home whenever Shane wanted to come home.

“Oh, so his place is home already, hm?”

Jackie could barely contain her glee as she asked, and Shane knew there was a smile painted on his own face.

Yes, Shane thought, *home.*

*****

One Year Later

“Solnyshko, you will not be late, can you please just breathe?”

Shane had been rushing around the Brighton Beach condo for what felt like an hour, half getting dressed but still just in a button down and boxer briefs – trying to find his phone without realizing it was still in his hand, looking for a pair of shoes he *swore* had been next to the bed earlier this morning, snagging a sip of the protein smoothie sitting on the kitchen counter any time he passed it in a blurry rush.

“It’s kind of a big day, sorry,” he snapped back, but instantly felt guilty about it. “Sorry, I’m sorry, I just – ”

“Shane.”

Ilya’s hands gripped his biceps, stopping his frantic shuffle around the place.

“Sit.”

He walked Shane backwards until his legs hit the edge of the sofa and Shane sat. He had been looking forward to this graduation for god knows how long, and now that it was finally here, Shane felt nervous, unprepared, and positive that he was going to be late and miss his own ceremony or do something equally as embarrassing like forget to put on pants before he left.

It was ridiculous, he knew. He didn't even need to leave for another hour. Ilya had already sent Nikolai to pick up his mom from the airport – under strict instructions to remember that Nikolai was just "a driver that Ilya's company uses regularly." Shane had snorted at the backstory, but he understood.

"We have some time before you need to leave, yes?"

Shane nodded, distracted by the seemingly never-ending list of things he needed to do before he left.

"So, we have time to do something to calm you down, no?"

"Ilya, what do you – "

He was cut off by Ilya roughly tugging his boxers down to his thighs and taking Shane's soft cock in his mouth.

"Ilya, we don't have ti – oh fuck – "

He wanted to protest, to say they would be late, but all of the blood that would normally be making his brain operate was suddenly occupied elsewhere.

Shane's head fell back against the sofa, one hand reaching to grip Ilya's curls as he moved his mouth up and down, pulling off of him just to run his tongue along Shane's cock like it was a fucking popsicle before taking him back in his mouth. It felt like both seconds and a full hour before Shane was letting out a quiet stream of words – cursing, chanting Ilya's name, completely unintelligible things – and coming down Ilya's throat.

Ilya stood and collapsed onto the sofa next to him. Shane lay there panting for a moment, dress shirt still open and unbuttoned, boxer briefs around his thighs. He must look absolutely wrecked, and he hoped Ilya left him enough time to both return the favor and put himself back together. But as he yanked up the briefs and moved to get on his knees, the man grabbed his bicep and pressed a kiss to his lips.

"Later. Go finished getting dressed. I will find the shoes you were looking for."

*****

Six Months after Graduation

He still had the bank bag with all the cash Ilya had mindlessly thrown at him while he was still working at the convenience store. Shane just hoped it was enough for what he had in mind. Even if it wasn't, he knew that he could put the rest on a credit card. He also knew that Ilya would no doubt try and pay the bill for that card before Shane had a chance, but that was something he could argue with the man about later.

“Nikolai, I need to go somewhere, and I need you to not tell Ilya.”

Nikolai’s face was a blend of suspicion and confusion before it settled back into neutral.”

“You do not want me to tell Ilya?”

“It’s a secret.”

“You want me to keep secret from him?”

“For now. It’s not a bad one, I promise.”

“Where do you want me to take you?”

Shane pulled his phone out, showing Nikolai the photo that he had saved months ago.

“To pick this up.”

“Ah. Yes, I will keep this secret.”

Shane sat in the passenger seat next to Nikolai; it always felt a little weird to him to sit in the back when it was just Shane by himself, and he thought he had been around long enough that Nikolai wouldn’t push back about it. Shane stepped out of the car onto the bustling Manhattan street and pulled open the now familiar doors.

He pulled up the photo one more time – a satin finished platinum band, one single baguette cut diamond in the center.

“Claire, I need you to help me find this.”

*****

Six Months Later

“Ilya, did you see where I put my – ”

Ilya held the jacket out before Shane could finish the question. He slipped it on, smoothing the dark blue fabric before zipping it up to his chest, his fingers running across the shield-like patch at the left side of the jacket, just over his heart.

The Rangers weren’t *his* team really. As a Canadian, Shane knew that he would be disowned by the country at large and by his own mother if he claimed an American team as his own. But it felt right to have their logo sitting on his chest.

He had been so nervous near the end of his observation with them – anxious to ask if there was any future where they could see Shane working with them full time. The offer was in his inbox before he walked down the graduation aisle.

“Solnyshko?”

Shane realized he had been standing there, fingers running over the patch, for a touch too long.

“Just thinking.”

Ilya approached him, wrapping his arms around Shane’s shoulders.

“You are nervous?”

“I don’t think so,” Shane shook his head. “Excited though.”

Ilya pressed a soft kiss to his lips.

“You’ve worked hard for this, Dr. Hollander.”

“That’s Hollander-Rozanov soon.”

Ilya’s eyes sparkled at the correction.

“My mom’s flight gets in – ”

“She already texted me.”

“I should have predicted you would wind up being her favorite son.”

“I’m very loveable, solnyshko.”

“Yes. Yes, you are.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, you all have my utmost gratitude and adoration. This is the first thing I've written in quite a while, and everyone has been so kind and encouraging. Your kudos bring joy to my heart, and your comments put air into my lungs.

If you feel so inclined to read anything else I write, I did start on the bodyguard AU that I had been swishing around in my head. You can find that here - **with you, beside you**

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!