

To know the sun

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To know the sun

by [IbecomewhatIbelieve](#)

Summary

It's Fall of 2014 and Ilya Rozanov has cut all ties with Russia. But there's no such thing as a clean break, and leaving isn't as simple as never going back.

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Basically a very self-indulgent fic about how hard it would be for Ilya to actually move on from the pain of the past and to go no contact with his family in a timeline where Grigori is still alive. Also, Ilya deserves to be known and loved by more people than just Shane and Sveta. Forced/Found Family here we come.

*Sequel to my canon-divergence fic "To only ever know the cold" (go read that first or this won't make sense!)

Chapter 1: The source of unhappiness

Chapter Summary

“The greatest happiness is to know the source of unhappiness.”

(Hollander family dinner does not go as planned)

Chapter Notes

A huge thank you to everyone still following along! Your comments made me really excited to keep going with this story. Stay tuned for more :)

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

November 2014

Watching Ilya with his parents never fails to put a warm glow in Shane's stomach. Ilya is like a little kid trying to be on his best behavior. Brings flowers. Doesn't swear. He starts off shy and reserved - and he usually lasts about 10 minutes before his personality bursts out of him.

Like now: they're spending a rare free weekend at Shane's parents' house in Ottawa. Ostensibly to make up for Canadian Thanksgiving, when they'd both had games. There's a roast chicken in the oven and the four of them are setting up Scrabble. Up to this point, Ilya has dutifully answered questions and helped arrange the table.

"Shane, trade letters with me. I have one I don't know."

Shane puts a protective arm between Ilya and his letters. "No. I know you know all the letters of the alphabet."

"Not true," Ilya pouts. "This is discrimination." Then he sets his sights on an easier target. "David, you are good host, yes?"

Shane elbows him. "Don't start on my dad. You're not allowed to change tiles."

Ilya ignores him. "Come on, David. I make you good deal."

Dad takes a sip of imported vodka (of which he now has a lifetime supply thanks to Ilya) and says, "I'm listening."

"Ok I have very good tiles. This is not exaggeration, I would not lie to you. There is only one that is challenging. But you are smart man. Read the New Yorker. You can handle challenging tile better than me, I think."

Shane rolls his eyes at Ilya's theatrics. "Laying it on a little thick, aren't we?" he teases.

Ilya puts up a hand to block him. "Sorry sir, this is closed negotiation." Then, to Dad, "How is this, I give you three tiles and in exchange you give me only two."

"I don't know, Ilya. That sounds like a non-regulation move." Dad tries and fails to keep a straight face.

Ilya pretends to think. "We will do under the table trade. No one will know."

"I am literally right here," Shane says. Once again, he is ignored.

After further negotiations, Ilya manages to convince Dad to accept a blind trade of three tiles each. He slides down in his chair to pass them off underneath the table. Shane isn't sure if he's being funny or if he actually doesn't know that *under the table* is figurative.

Mom returns right as he's shimmying his way back to seated. She fixes him with a look. "I always knew you were a bad sport," she says, with a fondness that makes Shane's heart hurt.

Ilya feeds her an expression of pure innocence. "No, not me. You must be thinking of someone else."

"I will personally deduct points from your score as penalty," Shane tells him.

The look of overblown betrayal he gets in return *almost* causes Shane to break. "You cannot play and also enforce the rules, Shane. This is conflict of interest."

"He's got you there," says Mom.

"Whatever. Let's just start before any more allegations can be made."

Dad goes first. He plays *affixal* for an instant 50-point bonus.

Shane groans internally. Of course Ilya gave Dad one of the highest-valued tiles. Ever since summer, whenever Ilya knows he can't win a family game he's made it his personal mission to ensure that *Shane* also doesn't win. *I don't need to win, I just need to make you lose*, he'd said after one particularly violent game of monopoly.

Shane levels a glare at his boyfriend. "I hate you."

Ilya winks.

*

It's after dinner that things go south. Shane is caught in a debate with Dad over the Montreal housing market. He's peripherally aware of Ilya making trips to and from the kitchen with

dirty dishes. Shane stood up at some point, plate in hand, with the intention of helping out. It's just that this new property tax Dad is talking about could be important . . .

"Here, I take for you," Ilya says, trying to pry the plate from Shane's hands.

"No, no I got it."

"I can do it."

There's an awkward moment where Ilya tugs, then Shane tugs, then both of them simultaneously relinquish it to the other, and the plate drops to the floor. It's one of the real China plates they only use for holidays which unfortunately means it shatters spectacularly. *Damn.*

He jumps back to avoid the spray of glass shards. It's a good thing they're both wearing socks.

The next few moments are so unexpected that Shane's brain lags to process them.

Ilya, insisting, "Sorry, was my fault. All my fault."

Dad, standing to survey the damage.

Ilya, lurching sideways, an arm thrown over Shane's chest. Pushing Shane behind him.

Dad, obliviously saying, "Let me get the broom."

Ilya, yelling, "He трогай его!"

The room freezes.

Shane clocks the tension in his boyfriend's body. Tight shoulders, knees braced for impact. Eyes locked on Dad.

His parents are stuck, staring at Ilya. Dad is all confusion. Mom's expression pinches with concern.

Dinner churns in his stomach.

Shane puts a hand over the one Ilya has pressed to his chest. He feels the tremors coming off of him. Ilya doesn't react. Still hyper-focused on Dad. Shane is infinitely grateful that his parents seem to have grasped the seriousness of the situation. And that Shane needs to be the one to handle it.

"Ilya, look at me," Shane tries. When he doesn't get a response Shane pushes against the hand bracing him.

"No," Ilya hisses. Still not looking at him.

Shane gets close enough to put a hand on Ilya's shoulder. He gives a firm squeeze. "Здесь ты в безопасности." *You're safe here.*

The message doesn't seem to get through. He tries again in English, "You're safe. We're okay here." From the corner of his eye he watches his parents trade startled looks at those words. Ilya stays locked on Dad.

Shane manages to keep his voice steady as he says, "Dad, can you sit down? Slowly. And put your hands on the table."

"Okay, bud." Dad does so. Shane is so relieved that they're keeping this calm. Because right now Ilya is terrified.

"It was an accident," Shane says, winding closer to Ilya. The pressure on his chest lets up. "Just an accident. Nobody is at fault. Nobody is getting hurt. Okay?" *There.* Ilya finally looks at him. His pupils are blown in panic. His jaw locked. His gaze trails from the broken plate, to his parents at the table, and back to Shane. All at once, he seems to recognize where he is.

"Sorry," he says, his expression shuttering.

"Nothing to be sorry about."

Shane knows this is an inadequate response. He wracks his brain for ways to help. Ilya likes touch, he will seek physical comfort from Shane often. Shane steps closer, into Ilya's space, and wraps his arms around him.

Ilya stands there and takes it. Like a statue. He doesn't hug back. Doesn't relax in the slightest.

Shit.

Shane pulls back. Ilya is all clenched jaw and furrowed brows. It dawns on Shane - *He doesn't want to fall apart in front of my parents.*

"We're gonna take a second in the living room," Shane hears himself tell Mom and Dad.

"Take all the time you need, sweetie," Mom says.

Shane guides Ilya out. He goes willingly with Shane's hand on the back of his neck. Allows Shane to settle next to him on the couch.

"Sorry," he says again, face turned away, body braced.

"It's okay."

That's a lie. Shane does not think this is okay. He harbors a burning hatred for Grigori Rozanov. It's so fucking unfair that Grigori can still hurt Ilya like this, even after months without contact. Even from across an ocean.

How did Shane not realize how scared Ilya is? Earlier he was thinking how cute it was that Ilya gets shy with his parents . . . now Shane wonders if that shyness was just fear. Shane squeezes Ilya's hand and, not for the first time, feels cosmically out of his depth.

We need to tell Mom and Dad, he realizes. So they can keep something like this from happening again. So they can react better the next time it inevitably does. Shane knows how much Ilya hates to talk about these things but he feels like he's failing him. Watching him fall apart over and over again. Letting the wound fester.

He needs help. He needs a playbook.

"I did not mean to ruin dinner."

Shane puts a hand to Ilya's face and turns him until they're forehead to forehead. "You didn't ruin anything. No one is hurt. No one is angry. Okay?"

"Okay."

Shane keeps him there for several long moments. He still has the sense that Ilya is holding himself together. Trying not to make it a bigger deal than it already is. Shane can sympathize with that. He despises attention anywhere off the ice. He'd hate for two people he doesn't know very well to see him emotional.

"If I ever meet your Dad I'll punch his lights out," Shane promises, going for a little levity.

Ilya snuffles in a way that's almost a laugh. "Yes, I am sure he will be terrified of two-time Best Sportsmanship award winner."

"Fuck you, I'm scary. I fought Scott, didn't I?"

"Mmm, scary like kitten."

He feels Ilya loosen an inch. *Good, this is good*. Shane can keep him talking, show him that this is normal and nothing to be ashamed of. He runs a soothing hand up and down Ilya's spine.

"No one will ever hurt you in this house. I promise."

Ilya draws back. "Yes, I know. I am sorry to overreact."

There's no point in telling Ilya to stop apologizing. Shane kisses his forehead and lets it go. He takes a minute to gather the right words before speaking. "I think we should tell my parents about your family. I know my Dad is kicking himself for upsetting you."

Ilya shakes his head emphatically. "Was not his fault. I know David is not . . . is not like that." He takes a deep breath. Still not looking at Shane. "But yes, we should explain. I do not want them to think they did something wrong."

"Do you want to tell them or do you want me to?"

"You. I cannot."

"Okay," Shane agrees. Part of him dislikes the idea of talking about Ilya. It feels wrong, even if Ilya agreed to it. But he doesn't know what else to do. "I won't tell them all the details. Just the gist of it."

"Gist," says Ilya, "This is a good word. I will use it next time we play Scrabble."

"Did you already forget? I'm never playing Scrabble with you again."

Shane pauses in the kitchen entryway. He hears the low murmurs of his parents' conversation. The sink is running. They must be finishing the dishes. He's mustering up the courage to have this conversation.

"Shane," Ilya whispers from behind, "I will go smoke."

"Oh. Do you want me to wait for you?"

"No. You tell them. I will come back when you are done. I . . . cannot listen to it."

Shane's throat tightens. He desperately wishes he could fix this for Ilya. He knows how much it weighs on him - the string of vitriolic texts when Ilya didn't show in Moscow, the hateful messages from his former agent, the hesitation in Ilya's eyes when he'd asked to make Shane his emergency contact. And that's only the pain of the last few months.

I would bring her back for you, if I could, he thinks. I would go back in time and take your father's belt in your place. I would spirit you away the first day I saw you. I'd do it all differently - if I had known then.

"I love you," Shane tells him, because his feelings never seem to translate into words.

"I love you," Ilya says, and goes to put on his shoes.

*

"Do you want some tea?" Shane asks. He's not stalling. Well, he's a little bit stalling. He just knows it'll be impossible to have this conversation without something to do with his hands.

Mom takes him in, notes that Ilya isn't by his side. "Sure, tea sounds good."

Dad nods. "Make that three."

Soon enough they're back at the table with three steaming mugs before them. All traces of the broken plate have been cleared away. Shane grips his mug with both hands. He studies the grain of the wood - a pattern he knows intimately, and takes comfort in that.

"Thanks for being so calm about that. It helped."

"Of course," says Dad. "Is Ilya okay?"

"Yeah, he's outside smoking." Shane has been trying to get him to quit once and for all but, he won't begrudge Ilya his vices today. "He told me I could talk to you guys about it but he doesn't want to listen. It's -" *Fuck, it's way too early in the conversation to start choking up* - "It's really hard for him to talk about this stuff. Even with me."

Shane plays with the string of his teabag. Searches for where to start.

Mom has been remarkably patient so far. So of course now she plunges right in. "Shane, we can guess from how he reacted that Ilya has some childhood trauma to work through. You don't need to tell us everything but we'll need to know any specific triggers to avoid."

"It's not just -" Shane struggles with what to say. This isn't only childhood trauma. It's the very real fear that his father and brother might show up one day and hurt Ilya in ways that no person should ever be hurt. Faced with saying that aloud, Shane thinks he'd rather be outside smoking a cigarette.

Dad saves him. "Let's start with some basic questions. We don't want to assume but, did someone hurt Ilya as a child?"

Shane nods. "His dad and brother. Maybe his coach."

"That poor boy," says his mom - the very same woman who once called Ilya Rozanov every curse under the sun for being such an antagonistic, arrogant hockey player.

"It didn't stop," Shane spits out. At his parents' confused looks he manages to plow onward. "It didn't stop when he grew up. They still hurt him. And say awful things to him. And use him for money."

It's the first time in years that Shane sees Yuna Hollander at a loss for words.

"I need you to know this isn't like, buried childhood trauma. He hasn't had any time to work through it. The last time - the last time they hurt him was during the Olympics. When Russia got eliminated by Latvia." The table blurs in his vision. "He was really hurt and he called me for help. That's how I found out."

"That's some really heavy stuff," says Dad. "It must be hard dealing with it just the two of you."

Shane nods.

"He said he wasn't on good terms with his family but I didn't realize. Wow. Sweetheart," She reaches an arm out to take Shane's hand. "I'm so proud of you for being someone he could turn to."

"I wish I knew how to actually help him," Shane admits.

"I think you just love him," says Dad. "Give him a safe place to land."

"We need to protect him, too." Mom has her Business Voice on now. "I'm starting to understand why you two were so insistent on starting Ilya's American citizenship process."

But there's more we can do in the meantime. Get a restraining order for the dad and brother. He'll need a lawyer for that, and to help sort out his finances."

"Svetlana already fired his old agent and finance manager but, yeah, he probably does need a lawyer. I just don't think he's going to be ready to talk about this to a stranger. And I don't think you can file a restraining order on someone in another country."

Mom already has her phone out, typing notes. "Probably not but it doesn't hurt to check. As for hockey, I'll reach out to Farah about taking him as a client. Unless he has someone else in mind?"

"He doesn't. But I don't want to push him on that. You know he's not looking to trade anytime soon." Shane carefully avoids mentioning his own plan to trade himself closer to Ilya. Now isn't the time for that. "But maybe we should start on the lawyer stuff. It scares me thinking about them tracking him down or finding some way to force him back to Russia."

Mom types furiously. "I'll email you a list. Priority and non-priority items."

"Thanks." Shane feels a little dizzy. He takes a sip of lukewarm tea and grimaces.

"I don't want to overstep but have you boys talked about therapy?" Dad wrings his hands. "I have to be honest that it was heartbreaking to see him so scared of me. It'd be good to have a professional's input on how to not upset him like that again."

Shane won the lottery with his parents. He really, really did.

"I've been thinking about that, too. I'm waiting for a good time to ask. So much has changed recently and the hurt is still so fresh." He thinks of Ilya showing up to the cottage four months ago, right off a flight from Moscow and looking like his heart had been cracked open. Shane doesn't want Ilya to think he's being passed off to be a therapist's problem. He worries Ilya will stop sharing if he thinks it's become too much for Shane. He worries that Ilya -

"Has Ilya come back inside yet?" Shane is already standing as he voices the thought. He doesn't remember hearing the door. He strides down the hallway and opens the front door.

Nobody out front. Ilya's smoking spot by the mailbox is conspicuously empty.

"Ilya?" he calls back into the house.

"I'll check upstairs," Mom says.

Shane goes through the living room, expecting to find a sarcastic Russian curled on the couch. But it's just as empty.

"Not upstairs," Mom reports. Dad says the same of the backyard. The jeep sits innocently in the driveway. *Maybe he took a walk to clear his head?*

Shane knows he's probably more worried than is rational. Ilya is embarrassed. He probably wants some space. He . . . didn't take his coat. Shane fixates on where it hangs in the hallway.

It's a brisk, late-Autumn day barely surpassing 0 degrees. He whips out his phone and dials Lily.

Ilya's phone rings from the living room couch.

Shane's breath catches in his throat. *"Where the fuck did he go?"*

*

The cigarette doesn't make Ilya's head any clearer. He's floating somewhere outside his body, at the end of the Hollanders' driveway. The house sits in a cul-de-sac. There's one of those mailboxes with the red flag that Ilya associates with American movies. The street is very still. Very domestic.

Ilya does not belong here.

He takes a final drag of his cigarette and stomps it out. He cannot think about this right now. He needs to pull himself together and make sure he doesn't ruin the rest of the night.

The sound of the plate shattering replays in Ilya's brain. He knows he's freaking out over nothing. *He knows.*

Ilya shivers. It's fucking cold and, in his rush to escape the Hollanders' concerned eyes, he'd forgotten his jacket. He knows he could go back in and get it. He's just not going to do that.

He starts walking. Hopes it will warm him up.

Everything around him is too big. He's never liked the feel of these North American suburbs. Too much space.

A gust of wind whips through the empty street. Ilya shoves his hands into his arm pits.

The colder he gets, the fuzzier he feels. The echo of the plate smashing plays again and again.

Crash, crash, crash.

His heartbeat makes itself known. It's very loud and the rest of the world is so very quiet. There's a bad feeling clawing its way out of his chest and he needs somewhere safe to let it out.

He cuts through a yard at random. Ducks under a tree branch. A lake appears in the distance.

He's nine years old and he's been shut outside without his coat.

Ilya stumbles toward the cluster of trees by the lake.

Papa will not let him in if he bangs on the door. Papa will make the punishment worse.

This is a good place to hide.

Ilya slumps to the ground. His back scrapes against the tree's bark through his thin cotton shirt. The setting sun casts orange and red across the surface of the lake.

Time . . . slips . . . away.

Chapter End Notes

Не трогай его - Don't touch him

Chapter 2: Mercy

Chapter Summary

"Pain changes you, but it teaches. That is its mercy." -Dostoevsky

Chapter Notes

In case anyone is worried, I promise to finish this fic with a HEA <3

"It's only been twenty or so minutes," Yuna says, "He might have gone for a spontaneous run. Let's not jump to worst case scenarios."

"Hopefully he didn't roll an ankle out there," David adds. Privately, he thinks a rolled ankle might be the best case scenario.

His son doesn't seem to hear them. Shane shoves on his coat and pushes out the front door. He's fallen into a state of intense focus that flattens any inflection from his voice. "I'll head towards the highway. You guys go left towards the lake." He's jogging to his jeep before anyone else can give their input on the plan.

David thinks letting Shane drive on his own is a bad idea. His boy is so worked up he's bright red in the face. Still, David doesn't fight when his wife gets into the passenger seat of their trusty Buick, leaving him to take the driver's spot. In the rearview mirror, he watches Shane whip out of the driveway.

David has done the math. He knows why his son insisted they go in separate cars. And why Shane went alone.

First, because two cars can cover more ground than one. That's simple accounting logic. David doesn't contest this.

Second, because whoever finds Ilya first may need to help him out. The kid might be hurt and he's far too heavy for Yuna to carry.

Third, because Ilya is terrified of David.

Shane didn't say any of that aloud; he didn't have to.

"Do you really think he went for a run?" David asks.

His wife purses her lips. "No, honey. I don't."

He backs out of the drive. Shifting gears, he notices a single tear leaving a track down Yuna's make-up.

"We'll find him," he says, because even a professional hockey player can't have gone *that* far.

Yuna flicks away the tear. Always battling to be perfectly put-together, his wife. Her voice is tight as she says, "I know we will. I just can't stop thinking about all the awful things I used to say about him."

They make a right at the exit of the cul-de-sac, driving slowly so as not to miss a thing. David re-focuses his gaze on the road and the surrounding houses. He scans for a shock of blond curls.

David flexes his hands on the steering wheel. "We didn't know him then."

"It shouldn't have mattered. He was just a kid the first time they met. They're still kids, to me. And no one's been protecting him. No one's been taking care of him. God, David."

That sits heavily in David's stomach. It had been the shock of his life to learn that his son was dating Ilya Rozanov. It had also taken about five minutes of seeing him and Shane together to understand *why*.

"If I hadn't been so vocal about hating Rozanov, maybe Shane would have called us during Sochi. We could have helped. We could have made sure they weren't alone." Yuna does everything with her whole chest. This includes hating That Asshole Rozanov. It also includes feeling guilty.

David risks a glance away from the road to take his wife's hand. "They aren't alone now."

Yuna squeezes back.

David doesn't want to dwell on what could have been. "You know what I'm thinking about? I'm thinking that I'm really grateful they found each other. I'm thinking about how gentle he is with Shane. For someone who grew up with only the worst kind of role models, he's a damn good kid."

"He is." She says it the same way she declares who will win the Stanley Cup each season. With absolutely certainty. With a warning to anyone who might dare to contradict her.

An incoming call plays over the car's Bluetooth. Shane.

"Have you found him?" he asks the second they connect.

"Nothing yet," David says, "We're driving up Pine Ridge now."

The car speakers crackle. It's getting harder to see distinct shapes as the sun sinks lower. David puts on the high beams. He wishes he'd brought his reading glasses.

Shane asks, "Can we stay on the phone? So we know as soon as someone finds him?"

"Of course, honey," Yuna says. "We're right here with you."

*

"There! David, angle the light towards those trees."

The tires crunch over gravel as he maneuvers the car back. It's fully dark now. The headlights slide over bushes, reflecting off the lake's surface, and illuminate a curled body tucked into a copse of trees.

"Shane, he's here. East side of the lake. Near the boating dock." Yuna has the door open before he's even pulled to a stop.

"Coming," says Shane through the speaker.

He leaves the car running, knowing the light will help Shane locate them on the road. David watches Yuna cross through the high beams with a blanket in hand. He follows at a distance. Yuna goes right up to Ilya but David lingers 5 feet behind, out of the kid's eyesight.

He can't stand the thought of scaring him again.

"Let's get you warm, honey," Yuna says. She crouches down to where Ilya sits against a tree trunk. David can't see his face yet. Can't tell if he's hurt - or, more precisely, if this is a physical or emotional kind of hurt.

"Ilya, sweetie, look at me. We need to go home. Can you stand?"

No response from Ilya.

Yuna rocks forward to encase him in the blanket, her own hands rubbing up and down his arms to bring some warmth into the limbs. It's been maybe forty-five minutes since Ilya left the house - that's a hell of a long time to be out in near-freezing temperatures.

"Come on, up you go." Yuna straightens, tugging on Ilya's shoulders.

David draws closer in case Ilya needs help getting to his feet. Either Ilya isn't as out of it as he seems, or Yuna is stronger than she looks, because the kid wobbles to a stand.

Which means he's close enough to hear Ilya, sounding very small and confused, ask,
"*Mama?*"

Yuna's eyes lock with his over the kid's shoulder. Shit. David needs to back up before he startles Ilya again. He makes a careful retreat to the car.

David knows he's a big man. He's never considered himself a threatening one. A powerful shame washes over him - warranted or not. David never wanted anyone to be afraid of him.

He vows that Ilya will never feel this way with him again.

*

For the first time in his life, Shane can't keep his eyes on the road. He drives slowly to make up for the constant glances to the backseat. A bead of sweat drips down his temple, and he knows it isn't just because the car's heating is on full blast.

When Shane finally pulled up they'd already managed to get Ilya into the car. Mom has Ilya tucked into her side. No one insisted on seat belts.

Ilya hasn't responded to a single word he's said. He's awake. He's unhurt. He's just . . . gone.

They pull into the driveway. Dad's already got Shane's Jeep parked on the street. He's been carefully keeping his distance and Shane feels bad about that but he's also so worried and so grateful that he can't address it right now.

Ilya comes out of the car easily. He's perfectly compliant, more or less calm. He's also totally unresponsive to anything they say or do. That, more than anything else, confirms it for Shane.

Ilya needs to talk to someone. A professional. No more putting it off for later.

For months he's allowed himself to chicken out of what he knows will be a challenging conversation with the excuse that Ilya is happy. That *they* are happy. He's wanted to respect Ilya's autonomy. He read that therapy works best when the patient is open and willing. So he stomachached his concerns - every time Ilya woke up gasping, that night he sobbed out of nowhere in the shower, when Ilya smashed his phone because Alexei somehow got ahold of his new number. Shane told himself he was being a good boyfriend by not overstepping.

He was *wrong*. Shane takes full responsibility from now on. He will force the issue of therapy. He will do what he has to so that Ilya goes. Because ideally it would all be Ilya's decision - but Ilya isn't fucking *here* to make decisions right now.

Shane wordlessly takes over for Mom when they get to the stairs. He grips Ilya's waist, fighting flashbacks to that awful night in Sochi. Ilya's skin is ice cold under his touch.

"We're gonna take a hot shower, okay? Get you nice and warm." Shane talks in the hopes that his voice will comfort Ilya. He's desperate for a sign that Ilya knows where he is and who he's with.

Ilya doesn't fight when Shane strips him down. He doesn't react at all to the spray of the shower.

When Shane pictured Ilya Rozanov naked in his childhood bedroom, this is not what he meant.

Shane clutches Ilya to him. He doesn't care that he's mostly out of the water - and freezing for it. He doesn't care that he's still in his clothes. Shane takes the terror he felt for those thirty minutes that Ilya was missing and pours it into the hug. Ilya's head comes to rest in the crook of his neck and Shane revels in the feeling of Ilya's breath against his skin.

They stay that way until steam fogs the bathroom and Ilya's skin is pink with heat. Shane runs his hand up and down Ilya's back.

He feels a twitch. A small noise leaks from Ilya.

Shane pulls back enough to look at his face. "Ilya, are you with me?"

Ilya's eyes are as foggy as the bathroom mirror. His expression still slack and blank.

"Ilya, baby?"

A slow blink. The slightest fraction of a nod. "Tired," Ilya mumbles.

"Okay, that's okay. Let's go to bed."

They get situated quickly after that. Ilya allows himself to be moved like a doll. Shane skips his entire bedtime routine - even brushing his teeth is inconsequential - and tucks himself firmly into Ilya's side. He gets the smallest squeeze back, a murmured, "Shane," and it's enough to bring tears to his eyes.

"That's right, baby. I'm here."

Chapter 3: Overcome yourself

Chapter Summary

"If you want to overcome the whole world, overcome yourself." -Dostoevsky

Chapter Notes

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

December 2014

Ilya knows that Shane hasn't let go of the Therapy Thing. There's a good phrase in English for what Shane is doing: biding his time. Shane is, somehow, the most patient impatient person that Ilya knows. Shane treats biding time as a hobby.

Ilya thinks he learned this from Yuna.

In any case, they have entered a standstill on the therapy front. Ilya had said no. Shane had asked him to reconsider. And also for location sharing. As a "compromise". Ilya had accused Shane of not trusting him. Shane had pointed out that Ilya had lost his fucking mind over a broken plate and ruined things with his parents. (These were not Shane's exact words, Ilya is paraphrasing). But still. He understood the *gist*. Humiliated, Ilya had said something Very Bad in Russian, and has never been more grateful to be lost in translation. In the end, Ilya had promised to *think* about therapy. Shane has not brought it up in the two weeks since.

Watching Shane's bubble travel through midtown on his screen, Ilya privately admits that the location sharing is nice.

He also admits, in a whisper in his brain, that he is glad to have to share Shane tonight with Kip and his ancient boyfriend. Shane will not ambush him with Therapy over dinner. Ilya is safe for a few more hours.

Kip answers the door and doesn't waste time ordering Ilya about. "They're stuck in traffic. You can start peeling the potatoes."

"Yes sir," Ilya says, just to see if it will make Kip blush.

He gives Ilya an unimpressed glare. Of the group, Kip is hardest to get a rise out of. Which only makes Ilya want it more.

Kip wrinkles his nose. "That sounds wrong out of your mouth. Why do I get the feeling it's not *you* usually saying it?"

This surprises a laugh out of Ilya. He likes that Kip can dish it right back. "What, you think I cannot be good boy?"

Kip snorts. "Not even a little bit."

They get to work on dinner. Part of Ilya enjoys the domesticity of it. He likes the idea of being someone worth coming home to. The other part of him resents that he can't go watch his boyfriend play hockey even when they are in the same city. Ilya drove down from Boston to see Shane - but he watched the Admirals-Metros game from the hotel room.

Theoretically, he could have come earlier to watch with Kip. They might have comiserated together. But Kip *can* go to the games. As a friend, but he goes. Ilya hadn't been able to stand the thought of them watching together - playing WAG - as if the situation were the same. He didn't want to be upset at Kip for something entirely out of their control, so he watched Montreal trounce the Admirals on his own.

Anyway, it's nice to talk to someone who doesn't give a shit about hockey.

"I will come back to New York next month to do a shoot for Ralph Laurent. Will bring you samples if you tell me your measurements."

Kip's eyes light up. "Really? Which collection is it? Spring?"

Finally, Ilya thinks, *a homosexual with taste*.

*

Dinner is loud and good. Even if Shane is still biding time, he doesn't act like it in front of their friends.

"Ilya, if you keep driving that neon orange Porsche to and from NYC people are going to start noticing," Shane tells him. He has a plant-based meatball speared on his fork, which makes him hard to take seriously.

Ilya grins. "So we tell people I am visiting my good friend Scott Hunter and his young, sexy boyfriend."

Kip, without missing a beat, complains, "That makes it sound like you're our third."

"People would understand. You bring in young guy with stamina."

"What the fuck, Roz?"

Before Hunter can start a fight, Shane says, "I don't see how that solves the problem of *not wanting the general public to know you're gay*."

"Did not realize that only gay people can visit New York City."

"Ilya."

"Okay, okay," he pretends to relent. "Next time I take the Ferrari."

Shane throws his meatball.

*

Shane obviously has something on his mind. Ilya can tell from the way he folds his shirt before climbing into bed. Ilya is concocting increasingly elaborate distractions from the Therapy Thing when Shane says, "Do you ever think about coming out to your team?"

Ilya stares at him. "Are you a pod person? What you have done with Shane Hollander?"

"Fuck off." Shane folds his hands in his lap, entirely too awkward for someone who got his ate ass in this very bed not thirty minutes ago.

"No, I don't think about it."

"Not at all? Even hypothetically?"

Ilya learned this word *hypothetically* from Shane. Shane is very invested in hypotheticals.

Ilya feels caught in an unexpected trap. Of course Ilya has considered what his team's reaction might be. He thinks they would probably be fine about it. Confused and surprised, yes, but ultimately supportive. Ilya captained the Bears to a Stanley Cup this season. He thinks those guys would follow him into war if he asked it. But . . .

"I think they would be good about it," Ilya admits, "But I cannot do it."

"Because Russia?"

Ilya nods. "Because Russia." He risks a glance at Shane's face, searching for disappointment or worry. Months ago, Ilya promised his mama, and Sveta, and Shane, that he would not go back to Russia. It was one thing to leave. It's another to slam the door closed behind him. Once Ilya is out of the closet, it's no longer his choice to never return. There's a difference between emigration and exile - a difference that, despite himself, still matters to Ilya.

Shane is not surprised by his admission. He nods thoughtfully, like he'd assumed as much and only needed confirmation. Ilya realizes this conversation is possibly not about him at all.

"Are you thinking about coming out to your team?" He can't keep the surprise out of his voice. Shane treats the closet like a nuclear fallout shelter.

"No. God, no." His fingers twist in the top sheet. "I mean, only hypothetically. Like, in a scenario where we get outed I've wondered how they would take it."

Ilya rolls onto his side to face his boyfriend. He takes one of Shane's hyperactive hands in his own. "And?"

Shane visibly cringes. "I don't think they'd take it great. But, it's hard to say what hockey team would. I know you said the Bears would be good but, we won't really know until we

know."

Privately, Ilya has faith in his team. LeClaire is a fair coach. Boston is a progressive city. And Ilya has no trouble standing up for himself in a locker room.

Shane, though . . . "What makes you ask this?" Ilya asks him. "Has your team said something?"

"No, not the team. I'm mostly thinking about the New York teams."

Ah, Ilya understands now. Shane's brain works two, sometimes five years ahead when it comes to their plans. He has decided to change teams at the end of the season, so now he must also imagine which team would be hypothetically the most accepting if they ever came out.

"New York is a very gay city," Ilya says, trying not to sound like too much of an asshole. Luckily, Shane doesn't detect the hint of sarcasm.

"Not so gay that Scott feels safe coming out."

He hums in reluctant agreement. "Hunter is out to Kip's family and friends. That is not nothing."

The thought it so obvious on Shane's face: That Hunter has a support system outside of hockey. That Hunter is the most universally palatable of the three of them - White, media-trained, home-grown American. That Hunter is much older than them and will retire in the next ten years. That New York City *is* gayer than either Boston or Montreal.

He sees the same stupid hope reflected in Shane's eyes. It prompts Ilya to say, as much to himself as to Shane, "We cannot ask him to go first."

"I know that," Shane says, with the same disappointment that Ilya feels. Then, "Is it selfish of me that I don't want to be the first?"

"No, *milyy*, you are not selfish." Everything Shane does is for the sake of his public image. To be the best role model. The perfect minority poster boy. The good son. Ilya cannot think of anyone less selfish.

Even if that wasn't the case, Ilya would not push Shane to come out right now. His Shane is sensitive. He's a good captain but maybe not a social one. From what Shane has said, Ilya suspects that the Montreal locker room would not be friendly to a gay teammate. He wants to protect Shane from that pain, the way Shane protects him from the looming shadow of Moscow.

"Maybe secret fourth gay will come out instead," he jokes. "Maybe the most homophobic sport is secretly the gayest."

Shane huffs. "Dallas Kent talks about cocksucking a lot for a straight man."

"Exactly. First him, then Troy Barret. We can come out third."

Shane gives a quiet laugh, settling into the mattress beside him. "Okay, I guess for once in our lives we'll have to be okay not coming in first."

"Well," Ilya grins, "you are used to coming in second."

Shane thwaps him with a spare pillow.

*

It's only as Ilya is drifting into sleep that he realizes: Shane didn't bring up therapy. He's breathing deeply into Ilya's side, more relaxed than he ever is awake (except for those precious moments when Ilya has him fucked out, soft and sated).

It dawns on Ilya that this isn't some cold war for Shane. That he isn't lying in wait for Ilya to let his defenses down and go in for the kill. Ilya knows that Shane still wants him to go to therapy but . . . maybe his silence on the topic isn't a manipulation tactic. Maybe it's just space.

Ilya hates being controlled by anyone. He chafes at the very idea of it. This is part of what made him such a party animal those first few years in Boston. He had some pathological urge to express his newfound freedom by doing what he wasn't supposed to do.

So, the idea of going to therapy because someone tells him to . . . that's worse than chewing glass. At the Hollanders' house, the morning after his freakout, he'd burned with humiliation. Like a child who had done wrong and this was the prescribed punishment. His hackles went up instinctively.

Now, though. Now Ilya thinks about it.

*

After a sleepy goodbye from Shane, Ilya is back on the road to Boston. He pulls through a drivethru and orders the largest, sugariest coffee combination possible, then sends a picture to Shane with the caption *Proud to (soon) be an American*.

Shane sends a barf emoji back.

The drive is long and rage-inducing. In between the honks and the lane changes, Ilya considers the Therapy Thing anew. He understands, objectively, that it isn't normal for people to lose time, or forget where they are, or whatever other embarrassing things Ilya did that he can't even recall. He also understands how scary that must have been for Shane to witness.

Then there's Yuna and David. They've been kinder to Ilya than he ever expected. And he returned the favor by breaking their fine China and losing his shit for no reason. The fleeting moments of domesticity he's had with the Hollanders . . . it's all Ilya has ever wanted. Can therapy teach him how to not ruin it again? He honestly doesn't know. Nobody talks about therapy in Russia. Even his mother only went for "treatment", and Ilya has no clue what that entailed.

He could ask Shane more about therapy but, he thinks Shane might be biased. It's hard to imagine any of the Hollanders understanding what Ilya is really asking. Because therapy probably works great for people with too much work stress or whose loved ones die from cancer, or any number of mundane *Canadian* problems. But will it work for someone like him? All jagged edges and open wounds. Is Ilya too fucked up for therapy to fix? Is he too far gone?

Well, there is one person he can ask.

*

Scott looks at his phone in disbelief. The ringing is too loud in his earbuds - still in from his morning run. Scott sets the spatula down to answer.

"You better be dying because I know I didn't sign up to deal with your ass two days in a row," he says.

"Aww, you miss me already?"

Scott gives his scrambled eggs a vigorous stir. "*You* called *me*, Roz."

"Yes, wanted to make sure you are not too heartbroken. Now that Kip has seen there are much sexier hockey players out there."

"The two of you are way too much like children for Kip to find you sexy."

"Ah, so it *is* a daddy thing."

"Roz," Scott growls. This fucking kid knows exactly how to push his buttons. Scott would be impressed if he wasn't constantly questioning the life choices which led to him accepting a phone call from Ilya Rozanov at 8:15 on a Monday morning. "If you called me the day after consuming my boyfriend's food and half my stock of wine just to chirp me then I'm hanging up on you," he threatens.

"You are too easy, Hunter. But no, I am calling for a reason. I need your elderly advice - what is the word?"

"Wisdom?"

"Yes, this."

By now, Scott can brush off a chirp about his age without much fuss. He won't tell but, pretending to get offended by Roz is half the fun. So Scott neatly ignores the entirely uncreative insult to be, well . . . pleasantly surprised. Roz is, in the most irritating way possible, *asking for his advice*.

"This better not be a sex thing," Scott warns.

The asshole laughs. "Who has ever called *you* for sex advice?"

Very few people call Scott for advice period. But Scott isn't going to say that.

"Forgive me for not wanting to hear about you deflowering Hollander," he spits out.

"You would be so lucky."

Scott has officially burnt his eggs. He takes them off the stove and resigns to eating them with a fuckload of ketchup. Leave it to Rozanov to ruin his breakfast.

"What do you want?" It comes out harsher than he intends.

"It is bad time?" Hesitation creeps into Roz's voice. That's how Scott knows he actually does need advice, and he's nervous to ask. Scott forces himself to ease up.

"Not a bad time, kid. What's up?"

"You have done many interviews, yes? Some for winning hockey awards. Some for charity awareness, these things. I would not watch but you are hard to avoid."

Scott rolls his eyes and waits for the kid to get on with it. Between him and Hollander, it's like Scott and Kip are socializing a pair of feral cats.

"In these interviews you talk about your parents. You say you went to therapy. Is it true or just something you say for press?"

Scott swallows. In his speeches, he tends to leave out the year and a half it took him to finally agree to therapy. Or that the Aunt who took him in threatened to kick him out if he didn't go. (An Aunt he has since cut all ties with).

"Yeah, I went. Two separate times, actually."

"And?"

Scott wants to prod at Rozanov for being so difficult about this. *And what?* he wants to snap. But he knows what the kid is getting at.

"The first time wasn't great, honestly. I was seventeen and I mostly went because the guardian I lived with put her foot down. I went, said what I needed to say, and forgot about it. The therapist treated me like a kid and I hated that." If he didn't have any parents to help him out, Scott figured he at least deserved to be treated as an adult.

"Why go again later if it was bad?"

"I got drafted," Scott admits, "And I didn't want to be the Rookie nobody wanted to room with because I was constantly having nightmares and crying in my sleep."

"Ah," says Rozanov, "Yes, you know about the nightmares."

"Yeah," Scott says, "I know."

They've never talked about that night in Sochi, and what Scott saw. Sometimes, Scott thinks he made a mistake not bringing it up sooner. He remembers what it's like to be the person hurting, and how desperately he didn't want to ask for help.

"Do you still have them?"

There's silence on the other end for long, painful seconds. "Sometimes. Less now than before."

"Yeah, same here. But a lot less. My therapist basically said it's like your brain is trying to process something. If you don't talk about it, all that processing happens in your sleep instead."

More silence from Roz. "What about other things? More than nightmares."

Something pinches in Scott's chest. "You can search for a psychologist based on different criteria. Some of them have specialties in trauma and loss, like mine. Or you could find one who specializes in family stuff. Whatever sounds good."

A frustrated noise. "No, I mean. I don't know if the talking can fix it. Is not just sad. Not just nightmares."

Scott puts down his fork, suddenly nauseas. "What do you mean?"

Roz's voice is stilted. His English more broken than usual. "Few weeks ago. Was at Shane's family for dinner. I freak out about something and, was like I forgot where I was. No control over my body. I lose time. Does not happen often but, Shane was very worried."

Scott takes a deep breath in through his nose. He remembers how comforting it was for his therapist to simply listen and not react. He can have his feelings after the call. "I'm sure he was worried. You must have been scared, too."

"Is . . . is it something therapy can fix?"

He hears the hidden meaning behind Roz's question, and for the hundredth time Scott wonders how Ilya fucking Rozanov manages to keep breaking his heart. Roz is afraid of therapy. He's afraid of being told that what's wrong with him isn't something that can be fixed.

Jesus *fucking* Christ.

"Therapy isn't really about fixing," he cautions, "But I do think it would help you feel better."

"Do you feel better?"

Scott still has control issues. Routines and superstitions that his therapist said were a way for him to try to manage the unmanageable. He still wakes up sweating, remembering that terrible night - usually when he least expects it. He still has days where the grief hits him like a sledgehammer and he wonders if it would have been better for the car wreck to take him, too. But that isn't most days. Not anymore.

"Yeah," Scott says, "I feel better."

"Good. That is good."

There's the sound of a car blinker, muffled, through the phone. Scott wonders if he should push, tell Rozanov that he really, definitely needs to give therapy a try. He doesn't get the chance.

"Thanks Hunter," Roz says, and hangs up.

Scott stares at his eggs. Then he bends over and laughs weakly into his hands.

Chapter End Notes

milyy - darling

Chapter 4: No love otherwise

Chapter Summary

"To love is to suffer and there can be no love otherwise." -Dostoevsky

Scotty-saurus: Rozanov

Scotty-saurus: Why the fuck are you buying my boyfriend designer clothes?

Ilya: You don't want your boyfriend to have nice things?

Ilya: Red flag

Scotty-saurus: Says the walking red flag

Ilya: yes but I am red like communism

Ilya: you are red like angry man yelling at children to get off lawn

Scotty-saurus: It took you 10 whole minutes to type that out and you couldn't think of anything better?

Moya lyubov: I'm lost

Moya lyubov: Is this an actual argument or are you talking about Formula 1 again?

Scotty-saurus: There's like \$10k worth of Ralph Lauren in my living room

Moya lyubov: You didn't answer my question.

Kipstopher: Do you think Ralph Lauren is an F1 driver???

Moya lyubov: Context clues are telling me to say no.

Kipstopher: It's concerning how little you know about life outside of hockey.

Ilya: Shane is on facetime with me now

Ilya: I thought screen was frozen

Ilya: But no

Ilya: He is buffering in real life

Ilya: Brain does not compute "life outside of hockey"

Moya lyubov: fuck off

Scotty-saurus: Can we get back to the point?

Scotty-saurus: Rozanov gifted my boyfriend thousands of dollars of luxury clothing

Scotty-saurus: and no one else thinks that's weird??

Moya lyubov: Ilya is very generous.

Moya lyubov: That's like the third most extravagant gift he's given this month.

Moya lyubov: I really wouldn't read into it.

Ilya: Also was free

Ilya: Remember I did photoshoot

Kipstopher: cheapskate

Ilya: No my skates are very expensive

Kipstopher: Sure bud

Kipstopher: Also Scott why are you mad?

Kipstopher: We wear the same size

Ilya: No

Ilya: I forbid this

Scotty-saurus: Too late

Scotty-saurus: What's his is mine and vice versa

Scotty-saurus: Your fault for forgetting that, Roz

Moya lyubov: I'd like to report that he's banging his head against the wall

Kipstopher: oh good

Kipstopher: because he needs another concussion

*

Ilya has not told anyone about the texts from Alexei. Especially not Shane.

The first time Alexei got ahold of his American phone number it was like WWII for the Hollanders. Lots of making new accounts, and password protecting, and texting everyone he knows his new number. It was annoying and embarrassing. It made Ilya feel like a child.

And if Ilya doesn't block Alexei now? His friends are all only children. They would not understand. None of Scott or Kip or Svetlana or Shane have siblings to fight with.

Marley has lots of siblings. Ilya gets the impression that things weren't so easy at home. Marley's dad is a deadbeat he hasn't spoken to in years. But he and Marley don't really talk about these things unless they're drunk enough to "forget" it by the morning. And anyway, Marley is the oldest of his siblings. He's the protector of the family. Ilya has never been that.

None of them understand that, for some people, family is the only place you're allowed to be mean. Fighting with his brother is a kind of condoned violence. A brawl that he doesn't have to feel bad about. Cruelty that comes so easily because he knows he'll get only cruelty back. They've scarred each other too many times to count. When Ilya fucked Alexei's girlfriend. When Alexei stole Ilya's car. When Ilya called him a coked-out loser. When Alexei called him a selfish fag. Every time Grigori beat one of them and the other watched. What's one more bad thing? There's no guilt with Alexei, and he's drowning in guilt with Alexei, and there's no escaping either of those things.

Sometimes, Ilya thinks Alexei is the only person who knows the truth of him. That the Ilya that Shane and everyone else sees - it's all a front. Alexei's Ilya is the real one. Just a scared, selfish, pathetic creature - forever nipping at his brother's heels. Only Alexei grew up with him in that house. Only Alexei knew him before he learned how to hide. Only Alexei came running home the day Ilya found their mother's body.

So Ilya doesn't block the texts. And, more often than he's proud of, he answers them. It's his secret shame - his outlet to be the most awful version of himself - for many months. It's something he doesn't even tell his new therapist.

Until he forgets to hide his phone around Svetlana.

*

"You have your own house, no?" Ilya asks, gesturing to the way Svetlana lies sprawled across his sofa. She let herself in with the key he gave her but that's beside the point.

"This is no way to treat a guest, Ilyusha." She types on her phone without sparing him a glance.

Ilya grabs her foot, yanking her over the cushions, and she squeals and kicks him. This is what they do: annoy each other and pretend to hate it and never admit how glad they are for the company. He could toss her over his shoulders and tickle her until she pees a little, but he holds himself back.

Ilya has a boyfriend now. A boyfriend he loves to make jealous but - not about Svetlana. Some kind of fragile peace formed between her and Shane that night in Sochi and Ilya doesn't want to fuck it up. Settling on the couch across from her, his hand in a box of cereal, he's not

lying to say there isn't an ounce of attraction between them. If he really thinks about it (which he hates and his therapist loves) Ilya might say that the habit of sex he and Sveta fell into was always more about intimacy than attraction. Seeking comfort from each other the only way they knew how. He thinks Sveta might even be relieved that he doesn't seek that kind of comfort from her anymore.

"You're still seeing the model in LA?" he pesters, because he knows it pisses her off.

"If by 'seeing' you mean I let him bring me to parties then yes."

"He is very pretty," Ilya comments, then shoves a handful of dry cereal into his mouth.

Sveta finally looks his way with an icy glare. *"If you're going to chew that loudly I'll go home."*

Ilya crunches louder. Sveta retaliates by turning on the TV. Hockey - a playback of last night's Tampa vs. Toronto game.

He fishes his phone out of his pocket to check for messages from LeClaire. Ilya has morning skate in an hour and no interest in thinking about hockey until then. He drops the phone on the coffee table and wanders to the kitchen for a cup of coffee.

The TV is off when he comes back.

It's obvious something has happened from the way Sveta sits. That girl is never upright unless she absolutely has to be. And now she's rigid, holding his phone over the coffee table. Her jaw tight.

"Don't read my sexts," he says, hoping to distract her.

"How long has Alexei had this number?" Her tone gives nothing away.

Ilya shrugs.

"It's not a big deal. I can block him easier than I can get a new number."

That line might have worked on Shane. It absolutely doesn't work on Sveta.

"Is this some kind of self-punishment thing?"

"No."

"So you just enjoy being called a 'cocksucking disgrace' and berated for money, hm?"

"He doesn't always ask for money."

Sveta gives him a look that says he's full of shit. *"Okay, what does he want then?"*

"Money," Ilya admits. *"And for me to call papa."*

"Grigori is getting sicker?"

"That's what Alexei says. I don't know."

"Will you call him?"

"I don't know." Yes. Probably he will.

"Him being sick doesn't make him a good person." There's heat in Sveta's voice now. When her mother died of cancer five years ago, it made Sveta furious to hear people talk about her like a saint. *Just because she had cancer doesn't mean she wasn't sometimes a shitty person.* Liliana Vetrova wasn't difficult in the way that Grigori is difficult, or sad the way Irina was. She was just too American, too young when she married Vetrov, and too self-centered to care about the culture she'd married into. Ilya thinks their mothers probably bonded over how much they hated living in Russia.

Ilya picks his words carefully. *"If papa is really sick then he needs someone to take care of him."*

"That someone doesn't have to be you."

"You think Polina or Alexei will do it? Even if they wanted to, they're all fucking bankrupt." That's why Ilya hasn't called yet. Because he knows they will ask, and he knows he will give in, and he'll be furious and ashamed as if it wasn't fucking inevitable.

"So you will call him," she says. Not a question.

He wants to say *Don't tell Shane* but doing so will only push Sveta in that direction. Sveta will do what she thinks is best whether Ilya likes it or not. And she won't tell Ilya what to do with himself, even when he wishes she would.

"You don't seem surprised," Ilya says instead.

"Ilyusha, we both know it was always going to be a long goodbye."

He swallows. Nods.

Svetlana hands him back the phone. *"You need to get going to practice."*

It's not a reprimand. It's not a convenient excuse to get rid of him. It's not anger. It's the kind of acceptance that comes from witnessing the same car crash day in and day out for more than twenty years.

*

Ilya: *I will speak to papa. Only him. Understood?*

Unsaved number: *Still a coward then*

The phone vibrates in his hand. An incoming call shows from an unsaved number. Ilya slides the arrow across the screen to answer.

His thumb hovers over the red phone icon. Waiting to see who speaks. If it is Alexei, he will hang up immediately.

"Is that you, Ilya?" says Grigori Rozanov.

Chapter 5: Precious memories

Chapter Summary

“Indeed, precious memories may remain even of a bad home, if only the heart knows how to find what is precious.”

-Dostoevsky

Chapter Notes

Conversations in Russian are denoted in italics (not to be confused with my general overuse of italics lol).

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

"Is that you, Ilya?" says Grigori Rozanov.

Ilya almost chokes on his cigarette. He hadn't allowed himself to believe that anyone other than Alexei would be on the line.

"Yes, Papa," he manages to say.

Grigori's voice is thin and hard to hear. For the first time Ilya can remember, his father sounds his age. Last time they spoke, Grigori Rozanov still had the countenance and commanding presence of a KGB general. Now, at 71, he sounds frail.

"When are you coming home?" Grigori asks.

Never, Ilya thinks. He is afraid to say it. If Papa is in his right mind he will be furious. If not, he will be even more confused.

"I am very busy," Ilya hedges. *"It is the middle of the season."*

"Yes, you will come home then. For New Year's."

Ilya's throat tightens without his permission. *"No, Papa. I cannot."*

"Nonsense. You will come a few days early to help me put up the tree. You know how your mother gets when there is no tree."

Ilya takes a long pull of his cigarette. The rush of nicotine does nothing to steady him. His mother did get sad the year there was no *Yolka* - the traditional tree, similar to an American

Christmas tree. Ilya remembers his parents fighting over it. He was only little, and it was one of the first times he saw his father strike his mother. The next day, the *Yolka* arrived. This was back when Grigori - albeit rarely - deigned to make apologies.

There has not been a *Yolka* in the family home since his mama died.

"Alexei will help with the Yolka," Ilya finally says. "I will remind him to do it."

"Bah, Alexei is no help. He has become lazy. Just like you."

Ilya's stomach drops. Has Alexei truly stopped checking in on their father? Can Ilya trust anything from the mouth of a confused, old man?

"Papa, who is with you now?"

"No one, you stupid boy. Why else would I call?"

Ilya's chest hurts. It hurts like he's been running and running and running at full speed. He tries to respond - can't.

"When are you coming home?" Grigori asks again.

"Soon," Ilya chokes out - not knowing if it's a lie. *"Is anyone there with you now?"*

"I am tired now. I will rest until you arrive."

"Yes, okay."

Grigori ends the call.

*

Ilya: *Is Papa dying?*

Unsaved number: *You would know if you were here*

*

Scott hopes he's managed to put a normal expression on his face. It's one of those moments where he genuinely feels like a machine rebooting.

"I can forge a doctor's note if you need me here," Kip is saying, even as he pulls on his coat.

"Not a chance. You have two final exams today and that meeting for the group presentation." It's unfortunate timing but, it's nothing he can't handle. Shit timing that the Admirals have the day off from practice, too. Scott will be left with nothing to distract himself - but he isn't about to make that Kip's problem.

Kip stops fighting his coat zipper to take Scott by the shoulders. "An exam isn't more important than you."

It sends warmth all through his body. Scott leans in and presses a kiss to his boyfriend's mouth. "Kip, babe, I'll be okay. I promise." He thinks he sounds pretty convincing.

"Pinky swear?" Kip kisses him again, which Scott knows mean acquiescence. They rest their foreheads together, content to share space.

"My pinky promises," he murmurs, which makes Kip laugh. It amuses Kip that Scott doesn't seem to know common expressions (and if Scott plays it up sometimes to get a smile from his boyfriend well, that's no one's business).

"I'll bring home some take-out for dinner, okay? So we can eat and cuddle on the couch." Kip still sounds worried but at least he's not arguing about skipping class anymore. It's Kip's first semester of grad school. Scott won't let his academic experience suffer.

"I love you," Scott says, "Now go before you're running so late I have to call you an Uber."

Kip blushes. For some reason he gets particularly awkward about Scott paying for his rides. Some strange city-boy pride about public transit. It's exceedingly cute.

"I love you, I'll see you tonight," Kip shouts over his shoulder, and disappears behind the closed door.

Scott lets out a long breath. He isn't lying. Or, he doesn't think he is.

It's been more than 15 years since his parents died. Over half his lifetime. He can handle being alone.

After all this time, it should be like any other day.

*

Even on days that aren't the anniversary of his parents' death, Scott is bad at having nothing to do. Worse, he doesn't feel like doing the few things he *should* do. There's breakfast dishes in the sink. He's been meaning to call about the issue with the shower drain in the guest room. But none of that interests him.

Scott tries to cut himself some slack. Today doesn't need to be productive. He just needs to survive until Kip comes home.

After twenty minutes of trying to read his Golden State Killer true crime book, Scott gives up. Focusing is too hard. He considers leaving the house but he doesn't want to interact with strangers. The idea of putting on another fake smile makes his skin crawl. Flipping idly through TV channels, he lands on a re-run of jeopardy.

His mom liked jeopardy. They used to get practice quizzes in the mail and do them together. His Dad pretended he didn't care but would end up joining and arguing over the answers.

Pressure builds in his throat. Scott has the insane urge to throw the remote through the TV screen.

The doorbell chimes.

Strange. Packages go to the receptionist in the lobby. *Probably the Mormons again,* he decides.

He opens the door. Not a Mormon - the farthest possible thing from, in fact.

"What the fuck. *Rozanov?*"

Ilya Rozanov is sporting a backwards cap, a bro-tank with the armpits cut out, and egregiously orange slides. He's got a six pack of beer in one hand. He smells like cigarettes and he's grinning in a way that most people in the NHL would describe as *distinctly punchable*.

"Good morning, sorry for late arrival. New York State Police did not appreciate my interpretation of the speed limit." Roz says this very casually, as if they had, you know, *planned to hang out*. He makes an impatient gesture with his free hand. "I come in now, yes?"

Scott is caught unawares. Defenses breeched. Rozanov enters the apartment unimpeded. Half in shock, Scott closes the door behind him.

"Oh, I know this show!" Rozanov declares, kicking off his slides and tossing himself onto the couch. "Mister Trebek."

"Yes, come in, make yourself at home," Scott grumbles. He doesn't put much effort into it. He's not gonna tell Roz but, the kid's arrival probably saved Scott from a deeply humiliating crying session over fucking *Jeopardy*.

What is The Monroe Doctrine? A player answers. (Low-hanging fruit, in Scott's opinion).

"What are you doing here?" Scott asks, unwilling to sit back down until he has a grasp on what the fuck is happening.

Roz shrugs. "What, you had other plans?"

Scott's entire plan had been to disassociate the day away and then pretend to be fine with Kip by dinner. "Well, no but . . ." He can't bring himself to say that it's not a good day for Rozanov's antics. He doesn't want to explain what day it is. Doesn't think he's even capable of saying that out loud.

Something shifts in Roz's expression. "Kip has exams today. He told me this. But today is not a good day to be alone, Hunter."

It takes a long moment to sink in. Rozanov knows what day it is and *he doesn't want Scott to be alone*. He drove from Boston for this - and Scott didn't even have to ask. It's so monumental and utterly unexpected that Scott is actually speechless. He feels faintly weak in the knees and joins Rozanov on the couch.

Roz plows on, "You have things you normally do today? Routines?" The way he asks it is so straightforward. It's such a fucking *relief*. Direct. Unpitying. Without expectation.

"I don't usually think about it in advance," Scott admits. He never wants it to be a Big Deal.

Roz takes this in stride. "Okay, so we watch Jeopardy."

And they do.

A few rounds of questions pass before Scott fully settles. He's not used to sharing space with anyone but Kip. Luckily, Roz has turned down the chirps and charisma for the moment. Scott doesn't think he can handle the Ilya Rozanov show right now. But just sitting with Ilya . . . it's surprisingly nice.

"What is beagle?" Rozanov pipes up, responding to a question on the screen.

"It's a kind of dog," he explains, and pulls it up on his phone. "And it's pronounced beagle, not bagel."

Roz clicks his tongue. "Is the size of a bagel. I don't understand why people like these tiny dogs."

"Good size for an apartment," Scott argues, because he can't not argue with the kid.

"No. This is not a dog. When I get one it will be big and strong. Like hunting dog."

"You're such a liar. I know for a fact you pet every dog you see. If you go to the shelter and see a beagle then you'll end up adopting a fucking beagle."

Roz makes a face. "Slander!" Then, "Yes, okay. I would name him Bagel."

Scott laughs.

A few minutes later: "These questions actually make sense to you?"

It takes Scott a second to realize it's not a chirp. "Some of them are tricky, obviously but, we watched a lot of Jeopardy when I was growing up."

"Ah, Old Man personality is genetic trait."

"Fuck off."

It's such an unbelievable relief to joke about these things. Scott didn't know he could talk about his childhood without feeling so . . . heavy.

"You know," Roz says conspiratorially, "When I first moved to America I heard about this show. I thought it would be a good way to learn English. Then I heard the questions and I thought *maybe I don't speak a word of English after all*."

Scott laughs. "Yeah, the word play is tough even for us native speakers."

Roz hums in agreement. "But seriously, you cannot know these answers."

Scott can't let a challenge like that go unanswered. For the rest of the episode he shouts the answers before the contestants can. It makes Roz's eyes bug out and soon he's cackling with glee.

"Oh my god you are like a dictionary! This is incredible." The kid is fucking delighted.

They finally hit a question Scott doesn't know the answer to. "Uhhh -" he clams up.

Roz makes a buzzer noise. "No, our millions of dollars! Hunter we are bankrupt," he declares, then dramatically slides off the couch cushions to the floor. He fixes Scott with a look that can only be described as *scheming*. "Seriously though. You need to get on this show. I will call Mister Trebek and tell them. Scott Hunter must be a Jeopardy star."

Then Roz actually starts googling *Alex Trebek's phone number* with enough seriousness that Scott has to wrestle the phone out of his hands.

*

They've managed to get through a second episode of Jeopardy and demolished a massive order of Thai food when Scott realizes there is, actually, something he wants to do today. Roz agrees easily.

"You gonna let me drive it?" Scott says when he sees the glossy black Lambo.

Roz glares at him. "Nice try."

Scott gets in the passenger seat.

He waits until they're on the road, Rozanov's focus on the traffic, before saying, "I never really go to their graves. It's too fucking sad. And too fucking far."

The first year he played for the Admirals, Scott had made the 6 hour drive to Syracuse, New York to stare at the gravesite. He'd spent a miserable, endless night in a shitty motel nearby, and promised himself to never do that again. That solitary road trip to the cemetery . . . it was the closest he'd felt to wishing he were dead, too since the accident happened.

"Is only a place," Roz agrees. "They are not really there." He doesn't sound entirely convinced, though. Scott gets hit with the gut-wrenching reminder that Ilya never plans to return to the country where his mother is buried.

He scrambles to explain himself. "It's more like . . . I get tired of being so sad all the time. I don't want to spend the whole day - my whole life - thinking about the fact that they're dead. You know?"

Roz nods. "Yeah, I know."

And he does.

*

The tide is low and the beach is empty this time of year. With the breeze off the ocean, and the setting December sun, it's bone-chillingly cold. Scott and Ilya sit shoulder to shoulder in the sand.

"We came here the last summer they were alive," Scott says. "I remember throwing a fit about it initially. I didn't want to miss hockey practice to go to Coney Island. But my parents wanted to visit my aunt who lives around here, and they promised we could ride all the rollercoasters. It was so much fun. I wish I'd been more grateful."

"I wish that too," Ilya says. "I would have told her thank you a lot more, if I knew."

Seagulls swoop overhead. Scott shivers in his winter coat.

"I wasn't that young when I lost them. Like, I have plenty of memories of them. It's just . . . I don't have anyone else in my life who knew them. And I start worrying - what if I forget? Coming here, where I remember them so clearly - it helps me feel like they were real."

Roz pushes his shoulder more firmly into Scott's. "I am scared of that, too. The forgetting." He clears his throat. "What were they like?"

So Scott talks. He talks about his family house. How his parents gave him the basement room at 13 with a window that opened to the yard - and how he suspects they wanted him to be able to sneak out, be carefree, be a kid outside of the hockey rink. He talks about his Dad working the night shifts and always falling asleep on the Lazy-E Boy in the living room. About his mom's collection of rubber ducks that he still keeps in a box in his closet. He talks about all the mundane, stupid details that no one could possibly care about - and that no one alive but him could possibly remember. He pulls these details out one at a time, like a little kid showing his rock collection, and presents each precious memory like a jewel.

"Sometimes," Scott confesses, "I can't remember something and it makes it so angry. Like, there's no one in the world to tell me if we went to iHop after my first hockey game or if I'm mixing it up with another memory. If it isn't in my brain it's just gone." He doesn't think he's making sense. It's just fear and grief and regret clawing out of his throat. But it unburdens him to say it, all the same. "Sometimes it's like I lost myself with them. For so long there was no one else in the world who remembered me. It felt like I wasn't real, either. And -" Ah, fuck, here come the tears - "*And I just really fucking miss them.*"

Rozanov throws himself at Scott with enough force to knock the wind out of him. Scott has to catch himself with one arm. The other arm has somehow wrapped itself around Ilya Rozanov, who is squeezing Scott in a full-bodied hug. The kid *clings*. It's like every reassurance turned into physical form. The hug says: *You're real* and *I hurt like this too* and *I'm sorry* and a million other things.

Normally, Scott hates to be comforted about his parents. It makes him feel weak and pitied and as if he's fishing for attention by talking about being an orphan. But it's different, coming from Ilya. It means something.

Even if Rozanov is hugging him so tightly that Scott can hardly breathe.

"Jesus, kid," Scott wheezes out, "You're gonna break my ribs."

"Sorry," the kid stammers, loosening his grip. "Shane likes to be squeezed."

It occurs to Scott that Shane is probably the only person in the world who gets hugged by Ilya Rozanov.

Shane Hollander, and now him.

"Yeah, well, my bones aren't as young as Shane's." But Scott tightens his own grip - makes sure the kid doesn't pull away.

Roz's ears go pink. "Yes yes, Old Man. I'll be gentle."

*

On the drive back, Scott asks, "What was your mom like?"

Enough time passes that Scott thinks Ilya won't answer. Scott knows the wound is fresher for him. He knows the circumstances of Irina's death were not the same.

"She was beautiful. And funny. She always made me laugh." Ilya's fingers flex on the steering wheel. "She was so kind. So caring. Even to people who did not deserve it."

Scott waits for more but, that's all Ilya has for right now. It's okay. He understands.

"You take after her, then," Scott says.

He'd never dare call attention to the way Roz wipes his eyes.

*

Kip: Did you know your boyfriend was coming to New York today?

Shane: no?

Kip: [An image of Scott and Ilya passed out on the couch (suspiciously close to cuddling), empty beer bottles scattered around and Jeopardy on the TV]

Shane: Kip, thank you.

Shane: So many blackmail opportunities.

Shane: :))))))

*

Since his visit to New York, Ilya thinks of his mama more frequently than usual. He remembers telling Scott about her kindness. It twists his gut to think of. Somehow, reliving

the happy moments of his childhood is always the hardest part to stomach.

He'll never know for certain why Irina never stood up to Grigori. Never hit back. Was she cowardly? Did she think Grigori would hurt her boys in her place? Did she simply have no stomach for violence? Did she hold herself back out of duty, love, fear?

During one of the nascent Russian Federation's more tumultuous political moments, he recalls his mama massaging Grigori's shoulders each night by the fire. This wasn't something Grigori would ask for - he demanded to be served, not to be cared for. But Mama noticed his stress and worked the knots out. It was a gesture of pure kindness for a man who was constantly cruel to her. Ilya thinks that kindness - more than the hollowed-out sadness, more than the biting humor, more than anything - *kindness* was his mama's core. He wants to believe it, and so he does.

All his life, Ilya has been terrified of becoming like his father. Cruel. Retaliatory. Selfish. Mean.

He wants to take after his mother. He wants to be a good man - a kind man - even if maybe his family doesn't deserve it.

This is what Ilya is thinking about when he authorizes a payment of \$70,000 to his brother's account.

Chapter End Notes

Scott Hunter finally gets his hug :)

Chapter 6: Something to live for

Chapter Summary

“The mystery of human existence lies not in just staying alive, but in finding something to live for.” - Dostoevsky

Chapter Notes

Hello Hayden Pike

(Translations in the end note)

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

Unsaved number: *What part of urgent don't you understand?*

Unsaved number: *You think Papa's medical bills pay themselves?*

Unsaved number: *You think the nurse will stay for his fucking charming personality?*

Ilya: *The bank says the wire bounced. I don't know why.*

Ilya: *I am trying again but it is the holidays here. Many banks are closed.*

Unsaved number: *Papa is freezing with no money to pay the heating bill and you are whining about banks being closed.*

Unsaved number: *You abandon our family and you cannot even do this right.*

Ilya: *I told you I'm fucking trying. Do you think I control the bank?*

*

This is Ilya's first family Christmas in more than a decade and he's determined not to fuck it up. He puts his phone on silent in the car from the airport. After Svetlana, he doesn't need anyone else getting curious about the unsaved number in his messages.

He's at the Hollanders' house a few hours before Shane, thanks to the timing of his flight. David and Yuna greet him warmly and Ilya puts his things in Shane's childhood bedroom. He and David sit down for a puzzle and pointedly do not bring up the last time Ilya visited.

(When he broke a plate, threw a fit, scared everyone, scared himself, ruined every- No. Galina says not to think this way. No spiraling over broken plates today.)

It's a little awkward but mostly good. Ilya can't help that his heartbeat kicks up randomly around David but he thinks he does a decent job of disguising it. Yuna brings him a hot chocolate with little rainbow marshmallows in it. A fuzzy sensation settles in his chest as he drinks it.

David's phone rings in that too-loud way of Boomer cell phones. He takes the call saying, "Hey Shane, are you headed this way?" Shane had morning skate at 9 but is supposed to be on the road to Ottawa by now. Ilya watches David's forehead furrow before he holds out the phone.

Ilya stares, confused.

"He's asking for you," David says.

Shit. Ilya's had his ringer off.

He takes the phone. "Shane, you are okay?"

"Ilya." Shane's voice is tinny and strained. Something is not right.

Ilya is already standing and moving to get his shoes. "You are still in Montreal? I will come."

"No you don't - I just needed." Shane swallows roughly. "I told Hayden. About me being gay. And about you. Now I'm kind of freaking out."

Fuck.

"He was good about it? You are safe?" Ilya clocks David and Yuna's shared look of alarm.

"Yeah, yeah. He was fine. I don't - I don't know why I'm freaking out. Can't seem to calm down."

A wave of relief crashes over him. *Shane is not in danger. Someone knows Shane is gay but he is not hurt.* "Okay, that's okay," Ilya reassures. He turns to Yuna and David to say, "Shane is having anxiety moment. It will be better if I go get him. Can I borrow your car?" Normally, Ilya would never dare ask to use his boyfriend's parents' car but this is not for him. This is for Shane.

Yuna is already handing him the keys. "Of course, sweetie. Do you want one of us to come with?"

Ilya hears Shane panting through the phone. He is close to shutting down. And Shane hates for people to see him when he shuts down.

"No, just me I think. Will be quick, promise." Ilya gives them what he hopes is a believable smile. Then he bounds down the steps and into Yuna's SUV. The phone connects to the car and Shane's wheezing echoes through the vehicle.

"I am on my way, Shane, keep breathing for me," Ilya says.

"I'm sorry," Shane says. "I thought I could do it before Christmas break. In case it went bad and he needed space."

"Is fine, moya lyubov. No sorries needed." He puts his blinker on and eases onto the highway. Foot to the gas pedal. "I am coming. Will be with you very soon."

"I didn't mean to make you drive to me."

"You do not make me do anything."

"I don't wanna talk," Shane murmurs. "My tongue feels too weird in my mouth."

Something in Ilya overflows. "That's okay, milyy, I will do the talking. Did you know I am driving your mother's SUV? And there is an asshole tailgating me as if I am not going 20 miles over the speed limit." Ilya narrates everything around him and keeps his voice calm and steady. He imagines that he is Shane's personal nature documentary - if the nature documentary were about shitty Canadian drivers.

He's halfway to Montreal when he realizes he still has David's phone.

*

Shane's body is a bloated corpse floating in water. His skin feels puffed up, rotten. Disgusting. He hates every point of contact between his skin and the fabric of his clothes. But if he touches his own skin by accident while removing the clothes then he is going to throw up. He *hates* throwing up.

Ilya's voice comes over the speakerphone. Shane isn't sure what he's saying anymore but the low hum of it is nice. Ilya's voice is one of the few sounds that helps when the world gets unbearable like this. Sprawled in a starfish on his kitchen floor, Shane focuses on the voice and stays perfectly still to make certain his fingers don't brush.

Eyes closed, Shane braces himself as the waves of prickly-bloated-itchy discomfort roll through his body. The feeling eventually leaves his skin and settles under his sternum. It's like a pill caught in his throat but multiplied by a thousand. If Ilya doesn't come soon Shane thinks he'll start crying. And then he'll be upset over the texture of his own snot because he's so fucking *pathetic*.

Hayden took it fine! So why is Shane acting like the world is ending?

The front door slams open. He hears the thuds of Ilya's shoes flying to the wayside and then the soft patter of his boyfriend's feet. Shane's eyes are closed but he senses the moment Ilya spots him - spread eagle on the ground.

"Solnushko," Ilya breathes. Shane knows when Ilya kneels at his side. He's so attuned to Ilya Rozanov it's a miracle they haven't started mind reading.

Ilya asks, "Touching is bad right now? Or you want smush?"

Shane is still currently at war with his tongue but he is a brave soldier and he manages a whiny, "Smush."

The weight of Ilya settles instantly overtop of him. Palm to palm. Chest to chest. Their cheeks pressed together.

Ilya's skin reminds Shane's own how skin is meant to feel and the awful bloated-puffy-bad sensation fades. The compression is so perfect. Something about Ilya's solidness makes him human again. An involuntary noise of approval escapes him.

The muscles in Ilya's cheek move against his own as he smiles. "*Moya malen'kaya razdavlennaya vinogradinka*," Ilya coos.

The terrible feeling in his sternum slowly squeezes out of him. His heartbeat settles to a non-emergency level.

Shane takes a deep breath, reveling in the effort of expanding his chest with the weight of Ilya atop him. He curls his hands and threads his fingers through Ilya's.

"I'm okay," he says.

"Yes," Ilya says, unable to keep the laughter totally out of his voice, "Being starfish on the floor is sign of being okay."

"Hey," Shane grumbles, "You're starfishing too."

"Only because you did it first. I am like one of those flightless birds around you."

Shane scrunches his nose. "A lemming? Are you talking about the birds that jump off cliffs? Because that's a myth."

"Oh, I forgot you are bird expert. You are fluent in flightless bird too or only loon?"

Shane huffs. "Just loon."

He can't express the relief each time Ilya sees him at his least palatable and treats him exactly the same as before. If Ilya stopped chirping him - if he acted like Shane was fragile as glass - if he stopped seeing Shane as his *equal* but rather as a *liability* - that's possibly the worst outcome Shane can imagine. Even worse than telling the whole NHL that he sucks his rival's dick.

"Okay," Shane says, "We can get off the floor now."

Ilya hums. "I am not on the floor. My pillow is very comfortable."

Shane goes to toss him off but can't. He's bracketed by Ilya in a way that would be all-too-tempting if he were fully connected to his body. Shane hooks his feet between Ilya's knees and rolls them over. Ilya grunts. They grapple until Ilya puts Shane in a headlock.

"Asshole!"

A brief scuffle later, they've made their way to the couch. Ilya kisses Shane's head and goes to bring him a glass of water. It's sweet how Ilya cares for him, and made sweeter by the fact that Ilya's attention is so *doting*. He doesn't view Shane as a child unable to care for himself - rather, Ilya clearly derives pleasure from the act of caring for him. In moments like these, Shane is all too happy to let him.

"Do you still feel the shutdown?" he asks, handing Shane the glass. It's room temperature. Just what Shane needs right now

Shane takes a sip. "Not really. Just the aftermath, kind of." These things leave him shaky and oversensitive. He's a cut wire. All frayed edges. Embarrassment creeps in. "I'm sorry. That was such a stupid thing to freak out about."

Ilya cuddles up next to him. Rubs his thumb in circles on Shane's wrist. "Is not stupid. Telling Pike is a big deal."

The tone almost makes Shane laugh. "You're surprised."

"No," Ilya deadpans, "Shane Hollander is famous for being spontaneous. And for talking about his private life to fellow hockey players."

Shane shrugs. "I've been thinking about it for a while. The longer we do this, the more likely that someone finds out by accident."

"Ah, you wanted to know how he'd react."

"Yeah. I mean, my parents are one thing but, another hockey player?"

Ilya presses a kiss to the inside of his wrist. "What happened?"

"I, uh told him after practice. In the parking lot. Figured quicker was better." Just remembering it has the *stuck-in-my-throat* feeling crawling back. "He took the gay bit fine. He was surprised. Which I guess is a relief after my parents said they'd suspected. I thought maybe everyone suspected but, no." Shane gives into his impulses and burrows his nose into Ilya's collarbone. "The *Ilya Rozanov* of it . . . he doesn't understand. But, like, that's to be expected. He doesn't know you. And he said he wants me to be happy so. Yeah. It didn't even go *badly*. I don't know - I don't know why I'm freaking out."

Ilya is quiet for a minute. Thinking. "Not bad isn't the same as good. You shared something vulnerable and he did not give reassurances. It's normal to be anxious after this."

"You think he doesn't mean it? That he doesn't support me?"

"No, I think he is a dumb hockey player with too many concussions who has never met a gay person in his life." Another kiss to Shane's temple. "I'm sorry he was not better about it. But I'm glad you felt safe enough to tell him."

"Logically I know I just need to give him time to get used to it. Like with my parents." Shane stops himself there. He doesn't want to share the thoughts terrorizing his brain. *If Hayden can't accept it then no one in the league will. If this is how my own teammate reacts, how bad*

would it be with a brand new team that doesn't even know me? Shane knows it isn't exactly fair to use Hayden as a litmus test for the rest of the NHL but . . .

"He was probably surprised. Maybe he didn't know what to say in the moment." It's surprisingly generous, coming from Ilya.

"Yeah," Shane says warily. "Maybe." He can tell Ilya doesn't like that answer.

Ilya scans him. There's something hard and protective in his gaze. But all he says is, "You are packed and ready?"

"Yeah, let's go."

*

Ilya doesn't tell Shane about the pit-stop until they are in Hayden Pike's driveway.

There's a distinct note of panic as Shane asks, "Ilya, what are we doing here?"

"Five minutes, you stay in the car." Ilya gives him a peck on the lips and hops out before Shane can protest. He strides to the Pike's front door with a knot of fury in his chest. Rings the doorbell once. Twice. Three times.

"Hello, we hear you!" Montreal's 15th best player shouts through the door. It swings open to reveal Pike and a lovely, extremely pregnant brunette. "What the *fuck*."

"Shane is watching so smile and let me in." Ilya nudges his way into the entryway as Pike scrambles to form a thought.

"Are you here to give me a shovel talk or something?" Pike says.

Ilya has no idea what shovels have to do with this. He ignores it. Looks Pike directly in the eye. "Shane told you this morning, yes?" Then turns to the woman, who must be Jackie Pike. "And I assume you also know now?"

Jackie nods. "Yes, I know." Her mouth is a tight, guarded line.

"Good. Now listen -"

Pike interrupts, "I don't have to listen to you, Rozanov. And I don't remember inviting you to my house."

Ilya gives his most withering Slavic glare. "You are right." Pike's eyes go wide. "You don't have to listen to me. You don't have to like me. But I think you care about Shane, so you will want to listen to this."

Pike seems like he'll argue again but his wife puts a hand to his arm. "Hayden," she says warningly. Ilya instantly likes her.

"Do you have a problem with Shane being gay?"

"What?" Pike stammers. "No! No dude I told him it's fine."

"Yes this is the fucking problem, Pike."

"What do you mean? I told him it's cool and I accept him and everything. Is he - is Shane not okay?" Pike gets some small points for appearing genuinely concerned.

"No he is not fucking okay," Ilya spits. "He tells you his biggest secret and you say fine, cool, *whatever*. So he goes home and has a two hour panic attack to me over the phone while I drive from Ottawa to come calm him down."

The blood drains from Pike's face.

"No - he seemed fine when he left." Then, defensively, to his wife, "I swear I didn't say anything bad about him being gay. I wouldn't. I mean, I maybe made a joke about him doing better than Rozanov but -"

"No!" It bursts out of Ilya, sharp enough to cut glass. "No, you do not fucking say that to him. I don't care if you think I am asshole. I don't care if you fucking hate me. You say that shit to me, not to him. You know him. You know how scared he is. The pressure he is under. In his brain right now you represent all of hockey. If you reject him then hockey rejects him. You cannot just accept it. You have to be supportive. You have to show him that you are happy about it. Fucking fake it if you have to. Because if you don't then Shane will hide himself away forever. He will never tell anyone again. His greatest fear is to lose hockey over this. Do you fucking understand?"

Pike's mouth hangs open. Shell-shocked. He looks like a big dumb fish.

It's Jackie Pike who finds her words first. "Ilya, I don't want to start this off on the wrong foot. You're very important to Shane and it's clear you care about him a lot." She glances at her husband. "I think we all want to do what's best for him."

Pike swallows. "Yeah, listen man, I really didn't mean to give Shane a bad impression. I was just so surprised and - yeah, I feel pretty dumb for assuming he wouldn't freak out over it. But we do support him. Of course we do."

"We'll make sure to find ways to show him that," Jackie adds.

"Good." Ilya doesn't let up on the glaring.

"Are you both spending Christmas with his parents then?" she asks.

Ilya nods. "Yes, we will go to Ottawa now. David will be wanting his phone back."

"Why do you have -" His wife's elbow cuts Pike off. Good. Ilya doesn't have the patience for inane questions right now.

"Can we wish Shane a merry Christmas before you go?"

How the hell did Pike get a wife so obviously out of his league in both looks and intelligence? Ilya wants to chirp him so badly about it. But he will refrain. Just for today. For Shane's sake.

"You will not upset him again?"

"Of course not," says Pike mullishly. It makes Ilya want to grind his teeth.

So the three of them go out to the car. Shane climbs out when he sees them coming but his gaze stays fixed on the driveway. Ilya keeps a careful eye on the Pikes as they tell Shane how much they love him, how happy they are to know about his boyfriend, how they support him always. Ilya is still angry. But he believes the Pikes when they say these things. So he shoves the anger down and plays happy boyfriend long enough to wish them a Merry Christmas and herd Shane back into the car.

He gets a great deal of joy from Shane's embarrassment when Ilya buckles his seatbelt for him.

Then, turning back to the Pikes, he says as sincerely as he can muster, "Thank you."

"You don't gotta thank us for this," Pike says, "We love him too."

*

After the day they've had, Ilya is beyond grateful to eat his weight in chicken parmesan. Then he snuggles up with Shane on the couch and drinks another cup of cocoa with the tiny rainbow marshmallows. In bed that night, he whispers how proud he is of Shane and presses open-mouthed kisses to his pecs. He rubs their noses together and smiles into Shane's mouth and revels in the fact that he can be *soft*. That Shane is soft with him.

Shane pulls back a little. Looks him in the eyes in a way that says *this is important*. "Do you remember over the summer when you said your body feels safe around me?"

"Of course." After that hellish flight back from Moscow, being with Shane felt like being unplugged. Like Ilya could finally rest.

"I want you to know that you do the same for me. You make me feel so safe, Ilya."

Emotion wells up in him and Ilya swallows it down with a kiss. Their mouths slick together. He relishes in the string of spit connecting them.

"Always," Ilya promises, "You are always safe with me."

Moya malen'kaya razdavlennaya vinogradinka - my little squashed grape

Enjoy some comfort and fluff here, things with Alexei are about to get intense :)

P.S. I absolutely adore seeing your comments and read every single one (even if I don't always reply) so thank you thank you thank for them!

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