The Great Pretender

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/84483691.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Categories:	F/M, Gen, M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV), Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationships:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov, Wyatt Hayes & Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Ilya Rozanov, Shane Hollander, Wyatt Hayes
Additional Tags:	Crack Treated Seriously, The centaurs think that Ilya is a widower, Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander, LIKE- SO MUCH, They are so soft for each other, Ilya Rozanov Needs A Hug, Depressed Ilya Rozanov, Ottawa Centaurs as Family (Game Changers), Good Friend Wyatt Hayes, Dumb Hockey Boys, Shane Hollander Calls Ilya Rozanov "Baby", POV Luca Haas, Miscommunication, Misunderstandings, 5+1 Things, POV Outsider, POV Zane Boodram, POV Troy Barrett, Racism, Implied/Referenced Homophobia, POV Brandon Wiebe, POV Wyatt Hayes, Is it really crack fic if it explores loving someone you must keep secret, and mourning them while they're still alive but out of reach?, Idk chat, Depression, Angst, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Implied/Referenced Suicide, like actually a surprising amount of angst if you didnt get that, English Is Not the Author's First Language, And tenses are her personal enemy, Comedy of Errors, Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov Relationship Timeline Reveal, it's brief but there, Relationship Reveal, Coming Out, Established Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov, overuse of the sunshine metaphor- idc if it's cringe i love it, Boxing Day party fix-it
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of my hollanov
Collections:	Emeralds_Late_Night_Reads, Zulie's Best of Heated Rivalry, Best of Hollanov, *Heated rivalry melts my heart*, My favourites, Rain Recs, greenlight
Stats:	Published: 2026-05-08 Completed: 2026-06-02 Words: 31,278 Chapters: 6/6

The Great Pretender

by lady_st4rdus7

Summary

Ilya Rozanov is in love, closeted, catastrophically lonely, and apparently incapable of referring to Shane Hollander in present tense.

The Centaurs come to a- given the circumstances- reasonable conclusion.

Or:
Five times the Centaurs thought Ilya Rozanov was mourning his dead wife, and the one time they discovered his wife was actually Shane Hollander.
Shane, for the record, is alive and *really confused.*

Notes

timeline detail: in my fic they get engaged before the plane accident because they are in love and don't need a near death experience to realize how important they are to one another!!! (And definitely not because I forgot it happened after)

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: The empty bed

Chapter Notes

> i think Ilya's mind is just shots of Shane, like in the montages of the dead wives in 2000s movies, so this is fitting.
> this story is not beta'd so every mistake is my mistake.
> I apologise about the misspelling of Ottawa, I promise I'll get around to fixing it once uni is not so exhausting, please stop pointing it out!
>
> this is a work of fiction, none of these characters belong to me!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The funny thing was that Ilya was good at pretending.
Great at it, actually.

He had spent most of his life doing exactly that, pretending not to care, pretending not to feel, pretending everything slid off him without leaving a mark.

He could lie with a straight face, could bury affection under sarcasm and sharp smiles so well that people believed him every time.

Except when it came to Shane.

Pike had told him that once, late enough at night that honesty came easier, lying on the couch while Jackie and Shane tried to convince Arthur to go back to bed.

"I don't understand how people didn't figure you two out sooner," he'd said, leaning back on the armrest with an almost amused shake of his head, nursing the second beer Ilya was sure would give him a headache the morning after.

Ilya remembered scoffing at him. "Figure what out?"

"You and Shane." Pike had looked at him then, like the answer was obvious. "Shit, man—you look at him like he's the whole world."

And he was. He really was. Ilya's whole world.

Turned out it was a lot harder to hide someone when your heart beats their name like a second pulse beneath your skin.

So Ilya distanced himself.

He rarely spoke to Svetlana now. Even through a screen, he was certain she would notice the difference in him immediately.

Svetlana had always looked at him too closely, had always known things he never said aloud.

If he saw her in person, he was almost sure the truth would spill out of him like overturned ink, messy and impossible to gather back up again.

And Shane wasn't ready.

Ilya wasn't ready either, he told himself. Repeated it enough times that maybe one day it would feel true.

Avoiding the Centaurs was easier.
He did his job, sat through practice, media, meetings, and then disappeared before anyone could ask him to stay.
He never showed up to Bood's barbecues, stopped letting Hayes drag him into movie nights with the team.

Most nights, he was driving down the 417 toward Montreal, toward the only person who made the noise in his head quiet down.

The other nights, when Shane was far away and already asleep by ten, he stayed home.

Curled beneath heavy blankets in the dark, phone face-down on the nightstand so he would not notice the lack of messages coming through, pretending he preferred solitude over the sharp ache of wanting something he did not know how to ask for.

Wanting to shout from every rooftops the overwhelming love he had for Shane.

Wanting to intercept every conversation with a single 'Shane does that, too' or 'Shane would hate that'.

Sometimes during those nights, he felt a little like he was already dead and nobody had noticed yet.

He couldn't *stand* them. The team meetings.

They had been his favorites in Boston, teasing his teammates and laughing with their wives, playing with their kids.

Now, it was a nightmare.

The casual touches between the couples. The wedding bands that glinted under kitchen lights instead of being hidden under layers and layers of clothes.
Someone calling 'honey' from another room like it was the easiest thing in the world to belong to somebody openly, unashamedly.
It made jealousy curdle hot and ugly beneath his ribs until he barely recognised himself in it.

So he stayed away before it could poison him completely. Before it turned him cruel. Before wanting Shane too much became something sharp enough to hurt both of them.

The point was- he thought he was doing a good job of hiding it all. And it didn't even hurt as much now that he had Galina to talk to.

He expected his teammates to be wary of him, maybe even hate him for not being part of *the boys*.

What he didn't except was *this*, though.

Wyatt

When he was younger, Wyatt's family used to have a joke about him: that nothing could change in the house or in people's appearances without him noticing.

It was true, really. He would notice if a vase was pushed a bit to the left or if his mother decided to try to go one shade lighter at the hair salon.

Wyatt noticed. It was one of the things that made him a great husband, and -hopefully soon- a good father.

It was why he tried out as a goaltender. Even at seven he could memorise the patterns in movements of every player in his team and follow the puck even at its increasing speed.

It was also how he noticed the ring hanging from Rozanov's neck the first day they played together.

Rozanov- Ilya or Rozy as he'd asked them to call him, was different from what they had all expected. There was no trace of the party animal Wyatt had heard so much about.

Sure, the guy was funny and witty, his chirps were lethal and Wyatt was pretty sure he laid his accent really thick when he wanted to avoid answering a question.

But- that was mostly it. He didn't go out with them often, didn't drink much when he did.

Certainly didn't snort cocaine from a girls's breasts like he'd seen him do in too many shaky videos.

He was - mellow.

Most of the time Wyatt thought he looked sad. Sad in the way that didn't come with tears but with silent stares at nothingness that could last minutes uninterrupted. Sad like Wyatt remembered his sister had been, before getting help.

Wyatt worried for him a lot. It was second nature to him, older brother and all, but he wanted to hug that man like he was his nephew and not a 6'3 Russian super athlete.

And then there was the matter of the ring.

Unquestionably a wedding band, Wyatt was sure. It was mostly hidden under the orthodox cross he always wore, but it would often catch light in the shitty arena bathroom.

Wyatt was pretty certain that that was the reason Rozanov- Ilya always showered last, when everyone was already dressing up. He was sure he wasn't meant to see it either, it had been an accident that Wyatt had forgot his own wedding band on the shower and had to go retrieve it just as Ilya was turning around.

At first it made sense, really. Wyatt remembered once a player that had been traded from Toronto to Vegas, who had to hire security personnel for his family. And Boston fans were even more brutal than Toronto's.

So- made sense. Keep the wife a secret, keep the family safe.

Hell- Wyatt had thought about it himself before Lisa told him that the only thing that would need protection were his balls if he didn't stop leaving socks in the entryway.

Except, things didn't really add up.

The first time Wyatt noticed something was up was in September, right at the beginning of Ilya's first year.

Wyatt only remembered because the weather had turned vicious overnight, like it often does in Canada, leaving the summer behind cruelly and everyone else stomping through the arena half-frozen and irritable while management argued about delayed flights.

He walked into the players' lounge expecting there to be no one yet, given how early it was. Instead, he found Ilya standing in front of the coffee machine staring at two cups.

For a long moment, Wyatt thought maybe the machine was broken, or maybe the new guy needed help with the settings. But the cups were already full to the brim.

Ilya seemed to notice him and blinked, putting on a plastic smile, "Good morning, Hazy"

"Morning," Wyatt said cautiously.

Ilya looked down at the cups like he'd forgotten they existed.

One tea and one coffee overloaded with cream and what looked to be enough sugar to concern several medical professionals.

"Right," he murmured softly. Then, almost embarrassed, he pushed the second cup away. "I am a bit stupid this time in the morning."

Wyatt frowned.

"You made the wrong order?"

A strange look crossed Ilya's face and he only shrugged one shoulder.

"My- my partner only drank tea," he said after a second. "Said my coffee tasted like diabetes in a cup."

The words came with a tiny smile.

Wyatt smiled a little despite himself. "Yeah, man. Lisa is always bugging me about sugar, too. Doctor and everything. So you started drinking tea for her?"

"No," Ilya said simply. "Still hate tea. It tastes like dirty water, no?" He picked up the untouched second cup and stared at it for a beat and added quietly, "I just forget sometimes."

Something about the way he said it lodged unpleasantly beneath Wyatt's ribs. It wasn't dramatic, or even particularly sad, just really tired. Before Wyatt could think of something to say, Ilya dumped the untouched tea into the sink.

"Anyway," he said briskly, accent suddenly thicker again, "if Bood misses another empty-netter today I will kill him with own hands."

Wyatt let himself laugh and forgot about it and filed it away with the thousand little strange habits of his fellow teammates.

Sure- he didn't understand how you could forget you're not at home with your wife but at work.
But hey- maybe it was a Russian thing.

Life continued on and Wyatt's affection towards Ilya grew stronger.

The man was incredible on the ice, which made his job exponentially easier as a goalie.

Sure- they weren't really winning a lot, but they weren't losing so pathetically like the Centaurs had been used to.

Plus, though Ilya almost never hung out with them when in Ottawa, he was actually fun when they had away games. Well except when playing Boston. And Montreal for some reason. He was rather sulky then or conspicuously absent.

One trip, after an away game against Hunter's Admirals they *almost* didn't lose, Wyatt found himself commiserating over how much he missed Lisa in the hotel outside bar.

It was, really, a nice thing — being on a team where people still loved their wives out loud, where nobody sneered about the *old ball and chain* like it was a badge of honor.

Even Bood joined in, and Dykistra, and a few of the younger guys who were still too young to be cynical about marriage.

He did not expect Ilya to chime in.

“Is hard,” Ilya said after a few vodka shots, the words slurred around the edges. He tipped his head back against the chair and stared at the ceiling like it had personally wronged him. “Not seeing them for so long. So- so long”

Wyatt blinked, now was the moment to ask the question he’d been wondering about since September. “Roz— you have a wife?”

For a second, Ilya’s face shifted. Something soft and sad moved through it, so quick Wyatt might have imagined it.

“Is not your business,” Ilya said, almost carefully.

Wyatt frowned. “How do you deal with it? Not seeing her that much?”

Ilya looked down at his drink, thumb worrying the rim of the glass. “I don’t sleep very good anymore,” he admitted. “I got too used to sleeping next to someone.” His thumb traced absently around the rim of the glass. “Hard to adapt. I just miss ‘em, s’all..”

Something in Wyatt’s chest twisted painfully, he was really the only one listening to him, the others too occupied arguing to each other about nothings.

“And I miss hearing noises in the kitchen,” Ilya continued softly, words looser now with alcohol. “In mornings, you know? Always made too much noise. Singing badly, dropping things.” A tiny smile flickered across his face before disappearing again. “Now is just… quiet.”

A long pause.

Then Ilya smiled faintly into his vodka, eyes distant and unbearably fond. “I still talk to them before bed every night.”

Wyatt went very still. “Before bed,” he repeated weakly.

Ilya nodded, entirely sincere. “Helps”, he hiccuped a bit, straightening himself up, “Sometimes I reach for h- them in my sleep still. I forget, you know?”.

Wyatt frowned. “Forget what?”

Ilya stared down into his glass for a long beat before getting up and dropping it on the table.

“That h-she’s not here anymore,” he said simply.

Wyatt felt something cold settle in his chest. Ilya had not said away, or busy, or far.

He’s said- not *here*.

Dykistra, from somewhere behind them, laughed at something completely unrelated, and the sound felt obscene against the stillness.

Wyatt swallowed. “You mean… she’s waiting at home? You’re away too much?”

Ilya blinked slowly, like the question didn't quite make sense, pursuing his lips and nodding mechanically. He didn't reply for a long time. He gave a small, crooked shrug. "It's strange. The bed is always empty now."

Wyatt stopped breathing properly.

"I go to bed now. You should all follow if you do not want to be zombie tomorrow", the captain told the team, who murmured their agreements, starting to clean up the table.

Wyatt stayed seated, hearing Ilya's voice in his head, his words and the tone he'd said them with.

Shit.

Rozanov had not spoken about his wife like Wyatt did, or even Bood. Not like a loving husband or a divorcée. He spoke of her like she was gone.

It couldn't be, right?

Wyatt had to be wrong. He hoped he was.

But every single sign was pointing in one direction. The habits that were hard to shake off. The ring wore on a necklace and not on his finger. The fact that he always distanced himself from girls that tried to flirt with him.

Everything clicked into place like pieces of an horrific puzzle.
Ilya's wife was *dead.*

Meanwhile, in room 1221

"You need to sleep, mon soleil—"

"No, no, Shanya, you don't understand," Ilya mumbled, face dangerously close to the screen. "Put phone closer now. I need to count freckles again. It is— imperative. Very important scientific research."

A laugh crackled softly through the speaker.

"Wow," Shane said impressed. "*Imperative*."

"Yes."

"You counted them yesterday."

"I did not finish."

"Because you fell asleep at thirty-two."

"Yeah well- you distract me."

Shane snorted. The camera shifted as he adjusted against his pillows, warm lamplight washing gold across his face. “Tragic.”

“Mm.”

Ilya squinted at the screen with drunken concentration.

“There is one here,” he announced seriously, pointing at Shane’s cheek through the phone like Shane could see where it was. “Tiny one. Did not remember it. Suspicious.”

“Suspicious?”

“I think- You are hiding freckles from me”, Ilya replied solemnly.

“Yeah, baby. That’s exactly what I’m doing. You uncovered my masterplan”, Shane laughed softly.

Ilya hummed, unconvinced. On the other side of the call, Shane smiled in that soft, helpless way he only ever smiled at Ilya.

“You’re drunk.”

“Drunk in love,” Ilya corrected immediately, scandalized.

Shane laughed again, quieter this time.

It hit Ilya in the chest with enough force to ache.

God.

He *missed* him.

Missed him in the unbearable, stupid ways. Missed the weight of him in bed, the sound of him stomping around kitchens at five in the morning, the way he always stole Ilya’s hoodies and then acted affronted when accused of theft.

Missed him enough that his bones felt hollow with it some nights.

“Come to Ottawa,” he said suddenly.

Shane’s expression softened immediately. “Baby—”

“I know,” Ilya sighed dramatically, letting his forehead thunk against the mattress. “You have practice. And media tomorrow. And responsible adult obligations.”
Ilya didn’t specify that what he actually meant was transfer here, choose Ottawa, choose *me.*

“Mmhm.”

“You are very boring.”

“You have told me that a lot.”

“Well, you are.”

Shane smiled so fondly it nearly killed Ilya on impact.

“Get some sleep, Rozanov.”

Ilya blinked slowly at the screen. Then, very quietly: “Miss you.”

The words slipped out softer than intended. Honest in that dangerous way exhaustion and alcohol always made him.

His face felt wet but he was sure it hadn’t been raining so he wasn’t certain why. Maybe he had splashed some vodka, Shane would hate that.

Shane’s face changed instantly. “Oh, baby.”

Ilya hated the distance suddenly. Hated Montreal. Hated Ottawa. Hated hockey a little, maybe, though he’d *never* tell Shane. Hated every highway between them.

“Bed is too empty without you,” he mumbled and let his eyes slip close, dreaming of a world where his arms were less empty and his heart was fuller.

Somewhere else in the hotel, Wyatt Hayes rolled over in his sleep with the terrible certainty that his teammate was grieving the love of his life.

And maybe, in a way, Ilya truly was.

Chapter End Notes

i was giggling my ass off writing this and it’s not even that funny
i don't know if this has been done before but i’m just obsessed with this idea

have an extraordinary day xxx

Chapter 2: The banana yogurt

Chapter Notes

> okay so i did sleep 3 hours to write this but it's okay because I've never gotten so many comments before!
> guys Luca's experience might be unrealistic, just roll with it! it's inspired by my country and I found that it's not accurate!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luca

Luca was pretty sure Wyatt had lost his mind.

Not that he would ever say so out loud, of course. He was a rookie. Bottom of the barrel. Socially and professionally insignificant.

And honestly he already had it pretty good.

The Centaurs treated their younger players like actual human beings, which apparently made them statistical anomalies in the NHL. Luca had heard the horror stories traded between rookies in hotel hallways and airport terminals, stories about bag skates, disgusting dares and mental warfare disguised as hazing.

There were entire legends surrounding what Shane Hollander had endured during his rookie year under the old Metros captain.

Compared to that, Ottawa felt like daycare.

So Luca kept his mouth shut, nodded respectfully, and quietly searched Wyatt for signs of an undiagnosed concussion as the goalie continued talking in a deeply serious tone.

"And I didn't even want to tell anybody," Wyatt was saying, leaning against Luca's stall like this was a state secret. "But I can't keep all this in by myself, right? We need to support him. The loss must've been hard."

Luca blinked at him.

"Right… the loss."

Wyatt's expression somehow became even more solemn.

"His wife."

Luca nearly inhaled his own tongue.

He coughed violently into his Gatorade bottle while Wyatt patted his back with the grave compassion of a man comforting someone through shared grief.

Now, Luca was no seasoned veteran.

But he had been a fourteen-year-old with unrestricted internet access and a deeply concerning fixation on Ilya Rozanov.

Which meant he knew things.

Not in a creepy way. Mostly.

Okay, maybe a little in a creepy way.

The point was: there was absolutely no universe in which Ilya Rozanov had secretly had a wife.

Impossible.

The man had spent the better part of a decade being professionally hot in public.

People tracked his haircuts more then the weather. There were entire compilations online of "every time Rozanov winked during interviews." (Luca himself — tragically — could still remember most of them.)

There had once been a Twitter account dedicated solely to cataloguing Ilya's hookups based on paparazzi photos, nightclub appearances, and suspicious Instagram stories. Luca had followed it in high school, religiously.

There was no possible way a marriage could have slipped under the radar. Let alone a whole dead wife.

But Hazy looked solemn, and Luca was still half sure that this must be some kind of prank. So he just patted his shoulder roughly and tried to sound less amused than he actually was.

"Yes, of course. Anything he needs."

Which was technically true. Because Luca was not going to admit out loud that he would probably let Ilya Rozanov use him as a decorative footstool if asked.
But he also was not going to deny it.

"Um- are you going to tell anyone else?", Luca asked after a second.

"No way dude, you're the only one I know he won't notice if you start acting weird", Hazy grabbed his goalie mask and started to head where the rest of the team was preparing to go to practice.

"Wait why?"

“Oh nothing, kid. It’s just- he already knows about your little hockey crush so he knows you’re weird around him.”

“He- what? My h- Wait. Wait, Wyatt. What do you mean?!”, by the time he was done speaking his own words echoed in the empty room.

Shit. He was sure he had been acting cool, *damnit*.

Luca only wanted to get back to his warm apartment and bury himself under three blankets away from everyone.
Unfortunately, the universe had other plans.

In Switzerland, Luca was used to treating heating like a luxury. His mother had raised him with the kind of caution that was usually reserved to cooler countries.

“Put on socks and another hoodie before even touching the thermostat, Schatzi,” she used to yell from somewhere in the apartment whenever he even looked too cold. “Money does not grow on trees.”

So he had grown up layering sweaters over sweaters, surviving winters beneath blankets and stubbornness, learning very young that there were few things more offensive to a strict household than unnecessary electricity usage.
Which was why, when he got home that night and discovered his heater had stopped working entirely, he mostly just sighed, wrapped himself in two hoodies, and assumed he could survive until morning.

Turns out, Swiss winters were significantly more forgiving than Ottawa’s.

By three a.m., Luca could see his own breath.

By four, he was considering setting himself on fire for warmth.

And by five-thirty, he was lying awake under every blanket he owned wondering how Canada somehow continued functioning as a real country despite clearly being uninhabitable.

He arrived at practice one hour earlier, looking probably like a wet kitten.
His curls were damp with melted snow, his nose pink from cold, and his entire body had developed an unusual rigid posture.
Nobody was there when he entered the locker room.
Luca shuffled silently toward the showers and let the hot water hit him like a religious experience.

He stood under it for what felt like thirty minutes, letting feeling slowly return to his limbs while steam curled thick around him.

Honestly, if someone had asked him to sign legally binding documents in that moment, he probably would have. To hell with his first born son.

“Kid,” Bood’s voice echoed eventually from somewhere outside the showers. “You alive in there?”

“Um- yep. Sorry.”

“Jesus you’ve been in there for twenty minutes.”

Luca tilted his head back against the tiles with a groan as the heat soaked into his bones. He was considering simply living here now. Surely the team would understand.

“Haas”, a voice suddenly said too close to him. Luca nearly screamed.

Ilya Rozanov stood there holding out a towel with the exhausted patience of a kindergarten teacher.

“You have been in here long enough to evolve into sea creature,” he informed him.

Luca stared at him through the steam. It was honestly unfair how good-looking the man was before eight in the morning.

“Oh,” Luca said intelligently.

Ilya raised an eyebrow. “Yes, ‘oh’.”

“Sorry, Cap. I thought I had more time before the team got here.” Luca despite himself took the towel and quickly pulled it around his waist. Their fingers brushed briefly.

Unfortunately, Luca’s brain interpreted this as a life-changing event.

Ilya leaned one shoulder against the doorway, looking him over more carefully now, gear already halfway on. “Why do you look like abandoned Victorian child?”

“The heater in my apartment broke.”

A pause and then: “You slept there anyway?”

Luca shrugged weakly. “I’m Swiss.” And I can’t really afford anything else. He wanted to add. He was still on a rookie’s contract and most of his salary was sent back to Switzerland.

“I am Russian and *I* don’t even sleep without heater.”

“We don’t use heating much in my family so I’m used to it.”

Ilya stared at him for a long moment like he had just admitted to eating drywall recreationally.

“You do know,” he said slowly, “that Ottowa is one of most cold city in the world, right? Not sure German winter can compare.”

“It’s Swiss- Whatever. I just- I couldn’t find anything on such a short notice.

Ilya looked at him for a second too long. “Do you have someone fixing it?”

“Yes. Landlord said maybe tonight he’ll look at it.”

“Maybe,” Ilya repeated flatly, pushing his hair back absentmindedly. “Excellent. Very reassuring word.”

Luca smiled a little despite himself. “He’s busy, I’m sure.”

“Yes and we will never win Cup if star Rookie loses his finger because of hypothermia, yes?” Something softened briefly in Ilya’s expression then, gone almost before Luca could properly register it. “You are shivering.”

“I’m fine.”

“You are not.”

Luca looked down.

Okay, maybe his hands were shaking slightly.

The shower had helped, but now that he’d stepped away from the water, cold was creeping back beneath his skin again in miserable little waves.

Ilya clicked his tongue once under his breath. “Pack a bag after practice.”

Luca blinked. “What?”

“You stay at my place tonight.”

For a full second, Luca genuinely thought hypothermia had finally taken him out. “…Sorry?”

“My guest room is not haunted currently,” Ilya said. “You can use it.”

Luca stared. Somewhere behind them, Bood walked past carrying gear and nearly collided with the wall upon hearing this conversation.

“Oh come on, man. How come the kid is invited before me?” he asked.

“Because he is not as annoying, obviously.”, Ilya smirked.

“C’mon. I’m your alternate captain. Can I come too?”

“No.”

“That’s work place discrimination.”

“Yes. You should tell Harris.”

Bood cackled and disappeared down the hallway.

Luca, meanwhile, was still stuck on the fact that Ilya Rozanov had just invited him into his house.

His actual house. With walls. And furniture. Probably heaters.

“Ehm,” Luca said again, because apparently his vocabulary had abandoned him entirely this morning.

Ilya looked deeply unimpressed. “You only know five words today or what?”

“I just—”

“You can say no.”

“No!” Luca said immediately, horrified by the possibility. Then, attempting dignity: “I mean. No, thank you. I mean yes. To staying. Not no to staying.”

Ilya stared at him for a long beat. Then his mouth twitched and he murmured something in Russian absently, like the word had slipped out before he could stop it.

“Bring warm clothes,” he said, already turning away. “If you die in my guest room Sh- I will be very annoyed.”

Practice didn’t feel real after that.

Luca got through it on autopilot, skating drills blurring into each other.

“Focus, Haas,” Coach called, and Luca snapped back just in time to keep the puck in play.

By the end of practice he was sweaty, tired, and still somehow cold. He changed slowly, like if he moved too quickly he might startle Ilya into realising he actually didn’t want a rookie bothering him.

After his shower, he went home first.

The apartment was still freezing, the air biting at his skin the moment he stepped inside. He moved quickly, throwing clothes into a duffle bag with stiff, numb fingers.
Warm hoodie. Extra socks. Chargers. Toothbrush. He was almost temped to bring the cross his mother had given him to kiss before big games. He was ridiculous.

It was no big deal. He was a grown adult, not the little child with the Rozanov poster on his bed. Certainly not the teen typing ‘clips of 81 looking hot’ into a private browser.
He was in the MHL, now. Damn good, too.
He was cool. Everything was *cool*.
He hesitated at the doorway for a second, staring at the empty, cold space before he left.

When he arrived at Ilya Rozanov’s place, it took him a moment to even process it, to remind himself that he was cool. Yep, totally entirely cool.

The house wasn't flashy in the way Luca had expected, less- Slavic too. No marble columns or dramatic glass walls. Just soft lighting, lived-in furniture, a faint smell of something clean and expensive and vaguely woodsy.

Ilya didn't say much when he opened the door, just stepped aside and nodded once like this was completely normal.

"Shoes there", he pointed to a small shoe rack that was almost empty except for a few pair of sneakers he'd never seen Ilya wear.

Luca obeyed immediately.

"Hungry? I am making something to eat"

"Um- yes, thank you. If it's no bother."

Ilya looked especially unimpressed at that but led him to the kitchen anyway where pasta was cooking and salad was served.

They ate at the kitchen island and for a while, it was just the sound of forks and the soft hum of the fridge that should definitely be looked at.

Then Ilya spoke quietly, "You had money for hotel yesterday, why not go?"

Luca paused mid-bite. "I- Sure yes. It's just, it was only a few nights, you know. Plus I don't want to spend my whole salary yet." He tried to chuckle

"How would you spend it all? Is a lot of money, I didn't know you gambled."

"No- no. It's not that! I just send some money to my family in Switzerland too, you know?"

Ilya looked at him over his glass of water, his brows furrowing gravely. "You send money home."

Luca sighed a little. "Yes. Of course"

"You are rookie."

"I know."

"You don't need to support family like you are pension fund."

Luca tried not to feel too offended, focusing on his plate. "It's not like anyone is asking me to. I just— want to. You know they made a lot of sacrifices for me to come here."

A beat.

Ilya's expression shifted slightly. "Do they ask you for money?"

Luca blinked. "What? No. No, of course not! I just send it. It helps, and I don't really need that much here."

Ilya didn't respond right away, but his gaze dropped briefly to his food, then back up.

"You need heating," he said finally.

Luca huffed a laugh. "Yeah. I know that now."

Ilya got up, taking his and Luca's plate and putting it into the dishwasher.

"Come", he said, "I will show you your room"

The room was just up the stairs to the right. It was plain, white walls and grey bed. But it was big. And warm.

"Thank you", Luca said, dropping his bag on the floor near the bed.

"Is no problem", Ilya walked to the door. "See you tomorrow, don't snore too loud."

"I don't snore!"

"You do in buses", Ilya snorted. "Hey. You can talk to me if you need anything. Family can be tough."

"Um- thanks?" Luca murmured once Ilya had already slipped out. He wasn't sure what the captain was referring to, honestly. But as his back hit the warm bed, he found that he didn't really care.

He slept better than he expected.

Warmth did that, apparently.

In the morning, Luca woke up before the rest of the house. He laid there for a moment, staring at the ceiling, listening to the quiet before he got up.

It felt wrong, somehow, to just wait around so he went to the kitchen.

He found coffee easily enough, and bread, and started assembling breakfast to show his gratitude to Ilya.

Ilya came downstairs just as Luca was putting the last toast on a plate. He looked soft, sweatpants hanging low on his hips, slippers slapping against the floor.

He looked startled to see Luca there, and he shuffled into a white shirt on quickly.

Before he could, Luca caught sight of his gold necklace- often hidden under his shirt- and for a second he swore he had seen the ring Wyatt had told him about.

No, impossible. Must have been just a trick of the light.

"You are awake early," Ilya said, plopping down on the kitchen island chair.

Luca blushed, slightly guilty. “Sorry. My mom always said if someone invites you to stay, you should offer breakfast.”

“I think I like your mom,” Ilya muttered.

Luca nodded. “Yes, I like her too.”

Ilya yawned, jaw cracking in a way that made I’m wince. “Can you pass me some yogurt? Is in the fridge.”

“Yes, of course. Um-”, he opened the fridge and looked quickly at the white and black containers, “What kind.”

Ilya didn’t even hesitate. “Vanilla. Banana is awful. Bleh.”

Luca grabbed a vanilla one and handed it to him, then paused. “Why do you have like- ten banana ones if you hate them?”

Ilya tore the plastic off and took a few spoonfuls of yogurt before speaking. “They’re my partner’s favourite”, he murmured softly, “I still have some of them left. From when they were still here.”

Luca closed the fridge silently, like anything louder might break the moment.

When she was still here.
Was.

“Oh, I’m sorry” he said.

Wyatt had been right.
What- How was it even possible.
The shoes, the ring, the empty frames in the hall.

When she was still here.

“Is okay”, Ilya was looking at him strangely and Luca resisted the urge to hug him. “It has been a long time.”

Fuck.
Wyatt Hayes had been right.
Ilya freaking Rozanov had somehow managed to hide an entire marriage.

God.
Ilya freaking Rozanov had lost his *wife*.

Montreal, the next night

“Haas is looking better lately”, Shane murmured, running his fingers through Ilya’s hair.

“Yes. He is getting good. He is really weird, though.”

“He probably has a crush on you.”

“Yes, yes, of course. Still weird”, Ilya murmured from the safe crook of Shane’s neck, where his head was buried. “Do you know you taste like banana in the mornings?”

“Huh?”, Shane stopped petting his hair for a second, sounding a bit offended.

“When I kiss you in the morning you always taste like terrible yogurt you eat before I wake up”, Ilya clarified, pulling his head back a bit to look at Shane in the eyes. “I don’t know how you can eat those.”

“They’re a good source of vitamins, Ilya”, Shane rolled his eyes, “But I’ll stop eating them if they’re so disgusting.”

That got Ilya’s attention immediately. His hand slid up, catching both of Shane’s wrists with effortless ease and pinning them above his head.

“No,” Ilya said, completely serious. “Never.”

Shane stared up at him. “I thought they were disgusting?!”

“Never,” Ilya repeated, softer now, leaning down to press a kiss to his forehead. Then his cheek. Then the corner of his mouth like he was incapable of choosing just one place to stop. “Never stop.”

“Okay—okay, I won’t,” Shane laughed, squirming under him. “Jesus, Ilya, I’m going to—stop, I swear I’m going to pee myself.”

Ilya finally relented, though he didn’t look particularly convinced about letting go of anything, and sealed it with a slower kiss that lingered far longer than necessary.

“You know”, Ilya broke the silence after a bit, “Sometimes I miss you so much. So much that I buy your stupid banana yogurt and eat it.”

He brought a hand to Shane’s hair, tucking back a few strands that had fallen while they were play fighting.

“It tastes like kissing you in the morning.”

Chapter End Notes

Ilya is like 95% sure Luca is being blackmailed into sending money home, like he was.
Meanwhile Luca is like ‘um, okay dude, sure, family can be tough?”
also Ilya is totally thinking, ‘yeah i should probably throw those yogurts away, Shane

won’t come here for a long time and he hates old food’, and Luca hears ‘I can’t bring myself to throw away my dead wife’s old food’

anyway. i should study, I have an exam in 3 days. wish me luck, next chapter will be probably after that.

EDIT: guyssss i saw too many of you say im American! I’m not… I’m European, just from a country where you have to pay for public uni and a low income family who couldn’t afford to use heating whenever lmao

have an extraordinary day xx

Chapter 3: The baby

Chapter Notes

jeez this is a long one, sorry! I should have probably killed my darlings and all that but I fell in love with Bood while writing this so that was a bit hard…
thank you for all the comments, you don't know how much they mean to me! And thanks to everyone who asked me about my exam, I got a 28/30, not bad!

warnings: this chapter deals with matters of racism

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Zane Boodram

When he was a child, Bood wasn't very good at making friends. He had two younger brothers and one older sister, though. So- it wasn't like he was *alone*.

Mostly, he just struggled with other kids.

Not because he disliked them. Quite the opposite, honestly. Bood had always liked people a little too much, with the overwhelming sincerity of a golden retriever who hadn't yet learned that barreling full-speed into strangers was frowned upon.

Unfortunately, eight-year-olds tended to find that kind of enthusiasm suspicious.

He talked too loud. Laughed too hard. Asked too many questions. Got excited too quickly. And when he got nervous, he talked even more.

His mother used to joke that silence physically pained him. His father used to mutter that if talking were an Olympic sport, Zane would already have three gold medals and a sponsorship deal.

Neither statement was *inaccurate*.

Maybe it would have been fine if he looked and sounded like the other kids.

Maybe they wouldn't have laughed with as much mockery if his tongue didn't roll his 'r's as hard, or if his skin didn't stick out in his neighbourhood like a sore thumb.

But, when he moved from Trinidad to a small town in Minnesota, he knew that he stood out before he even opened his mouth.

His skin was darker than most of the other kids around him, his hair never did what it was supposed to, and the second he got excited his Trini accent came slipping through, thickening

around certain words no matter how hard he tried to flatten it.

And in a sport where almost everyone looked and sounded the same, being different in even the smallest way made him feel visible in all the wrong places.

It was not that the other boys were cruel, really.

Sometimes they were just curious in the way children can be before they learn better. Sometimes they asked where he was “really” from. Sometimes they laughed when he said certain words. Sometimes they copied the way he spoke, badly, like it was a joke everyone was supposed to understand.

Bood never knew what to do with that except laugh along too loudly and hope they would move on.

When he made it into the MHL, everyone reminded him how special it was. Especially for a boy like him.

People said it like they were being kind.

They said it in interviews and profile pieces and sport voiceovers, as though his existence had become inspirational the moment he did the thing so many of them had once quietly assumed he could not do. Bood smiled through most of it.

He was supposed to be grateful, and he was. But it was difficult. Difficult to swallow every slur and accept it as a chirp.

So he was angry. He was so angry.
He was eighteen, fresh into the MHL, drafted into one of the worst teams. So far from his family that he started leaving the television on at night just to hear voices in the apartment. And angry. God, he was angry.

Angry at the way people said his name like a story worth writing, not because he got to wear the C on his jersey in record time, but because he did it with his accent and skin colour. Angry at how quickly he had learned to swallow it anyway, because correcting people took energy he did not always have.

Some nights he laid awake staring at the ceiling of whatever cheap apartment he could afford on a rookie contract and wondered if this was just what it meant to make it. If this was the trade.

Then, he met Cassie.
It wasn’t like she fixed anything, really. She just gave him something to return home to, after all the bullshit he had to endure during games.

He was nineteen, and too rough around the edges, carrying a rage inside him that was becoming poisonous.
She was- well, everything.

From the moment Bood had spilled his Gatorade on her on a run and she'd shrieked about having to do an interview in those clothes, 'you peanut-sided brain asshole'. To the twenty days it took to convince her to let him make it up to her.

To- four years later- their marriage.

And now, almost eight years from that day she'd change his entire life, he was going to become a dad.

The day his daughter was born was a story Cassie would never let him forget.

The night before, their home game ended in overtime. The Centaurs were getting good now, actually good in the way that made the stadium start to fill up more than he's ever seen. Ilya fucking Rozanov made sure of that. He made each one of them better, too, simply because they wanted to impress the hockey legend.

Which was why that night his teammates slammed into him as he scored the winning goal, the third of the night.

A fucking *hat trick*, he couldn't believe it. Couldn't remember when he'd last scored one.

He grabbed his phone in his hand the second he got off the ice, desperate to hear the praise he knew his wife had left in his messages.

Four missed calls from Cassie.

Three from her mother.

Two texts

GREAT HAT TRICK BABY, YOU'RE AMAZING

btw my water broke :)

He stared at it for exactly two seconds before bolting.

Someone behind him yelled his name while he was halfway through tearing his gear off. Another voice — probably Coach — shouted something about a press conference. Bood ignored all of it.

"Bood, where the hell are you going so quickly? We have to celebrate!"

"My wife is having the baby!"

That shut everyone up. Then the entire locker room erupted at once.

"Oh, shit—"

"GO!"

"Holy fuck, he looks like he's gonna throw up—"

“Drive safe!”

One of the guys shoved his sneakers into his hands because he was seconds away from trying to leave the arena barefoot with compression socks.
Bood almost threw up, hands shaking so badly he nearly dropped his phone trying to call Cassie back. She answered on the third ring.

“Hi, baby. You were so fucking good tonight.”

“Why do you sound calm?” he demanded immediately, breathless. “Cassie, why are you calm?”

She laughed — actually laughed — and he could hear hospital noise behind her. “One of us has to be.”

“Are you okay? Is the baby okay? Did somebody drive you? Why didn’t you tell me sooner? I should’ve left the game—”

“Zane.”

That tone. The one that always managed to catch him mid-spiral.

“I’m okay,” she said softly. “Baby’s okay. My mom drove me. And if you’d abandoned an overtime game before knowing whether I was actually in labour, I would’ve killed you myself.”

Fair.

By the time he made it to the hospital, his entire body felt electric.
Fear. Excitement. Adrenaline. Love so enormous it was beginning to feel indistinguishable from terror.

Cassie looked exhausted already, curled into the hospital bed with her hair sticking to her forehead, but when she saw him stumble into the room looking half-feral, undershirt tucked absentmindedly into the waistband of his sweats, she smiled so brightly it nearly knocked the air out of him.

“Oh good,” she murmured. “You didn’t forget to put on real shoes.”

He started crying almost immediately.

“Baby—”

“I can’t believe you’re having contractions and still making fun of me.”

The baby came twelve hours later. A daughter. Tiny. Furious. Kicking enough that one nurse laughed and said, “Yeah, that’s a daughter of a hockey player, alright.”

Bood held her for the first time against his bare child and he swore that the whole world held its breath as she drooled on his tattoos.

She was so *small.*

Her fingers curled instinctively around his thumb almost immediately, and something inside him cracked open so fast and so completely he thought, briefly, that it might actually kill him.

“Oh,” he whispered. “Hi, popo, I’m your daddy.”

As Cassie smiled at him from the hospital bed — exhausted, sweaty, eyes bloodshot, and still the most beautiful woman Bood had ever seen — and their daughter wrapped impossibly tiny fingers around one of his, he felt something inside him loosen for the first time in years.

For so long, anger had lived in him, sharp and immediate and familiar enough that he had stopped noticing the weight of it.
But standing there between the two of them, listening to the soft little noises their daughter made against his chest, Bood could not imagine hating a world capable of giving him this.

The team met her three days later.
Which, in hindsight, was a terrible idea because hockey players are somehow incapable of being chill about *anything*.

The second Bood walked into the practice facility carrying the baby carrier, the entire room lost its collective mind.

“Oh my God—”

“She’s so tiny—”

“Holy shit, Bood made a whole person.”

“Does she know her father is hockey superstar now?”

His daughter slept through most of the chaos, bundled up against his chest while enormous professional athletes hovered around her like enchanted idiots.
After half an hour of cooing and awing, Bood remembered he had actually came to the rink to discuss possible time off. Rozanov must have seen something in his face because he stopped sticking his tongue out at his daughter and looked at him.

“Give”, he said, “You have to talk to coach, no? I will hold her.”

“Um- are you-”

“Bood, I have nieces, I know how to hold babies, relax”, Rozanov deadpanned, taking the baby with surprising confidence, one massive hand supporting her head automatically while she blinked up at him sleepily. “Go.”

Bood had intended to ask about missing the next games only if absolutely necessary. Just until Cassie’s mother could stay a little longer. Just until they figured out some kind of rhythm between feedings and sleep deprivation and the terrifying responsibility of suddenly keeping a whole *human being* alive.
Coach looked at him like he had lost his mind.

The conversation lasted less than two minutes before he was essentially ordered to take the time off. Apparently, in Coach's opinion, any man whose wife had "pushed an entire human being out of her body" had no business worrying about line combinations and road games for at least a few days.
When he got back to the rink floor, practice had already resumed in earnest and the whole place smelled like cold metal and sweat.

Most of the guys had gone back to drills, but Rozanov had not.

He was sitting on the stands, far away from the pucks. Bood's daughter was tucked into the crook of one arm, her tiny face hidden by Roz's muscles.

As Bood climbed the bleachers and got closer to them, he realised that Rozanov was talking to her in what sounded to be Russian.

Rozanov caught him staring after a second.

"Bood," he said, deadpan, "I am being promoted to favourite uncle now."

Bood let out a breath that was almost a laugh and slid down onto the bench beside him.

"You should probably get back to practice," Bood said automatically, already reaching for her. "I can take her."

Rozanov glanced toward the ice, where one of the defensemen nearly ate the boards in pursuit of a drill. "No, is okay. I am not losing anything good," he said, nodding. "I much prefer this small human."

Bood leaned back and looked at his daughter for a second, at the tiny rise and fall of her chest, at the helpless little shape of her hand curled near her face. Then he exhaled. "You really are good with her."

Rozanov made a face like he had been accused of something embarrassing. "I am good at everything."

He shifted the baby slightly more securely against his shoulder and kept one hand spread carefully over her back, enormous fingers spread with alarming gentleness.

After a moment, he added, "How does it feel?"

Bood looked down at his hands, knowing immediately what he meant. "It doesn't feel real, truthfully."

Rozanov hummed once. "That is normal, I think."

Bood's mouth twitched, hands twitching with the need to take his daughter in his hands to prove to himself she was real. "Yes, I guess it is."

The two of them sat there while the ice hummed under the lights and the drills kept moving around them.

Eventually, Rozanov looked down at the baby again and said, in that same even voice, “I always thought I’d have one by now.”

Bood turned his head but Roz kept his eyes on the child. “I mean- we used to talk about it. Me and my partner,” he said. “We even picked out names.”

Something tight pulled across Bood’s chest.

“Would’ve been nice, I think.” Roz traced one finger carefully over the baby’s cheek, something unreadable flickering briefly across his face.

Then he stood. “I should go.”

Bood startled out of the trance he was in and took her in his arms as Rozanov passed her.

“Tell Cassie she should be expecting mail soon”, Roz winked at him before shuffling down the steps and into the locker rooms.

Damn it. The fucker had brought their entire registry, hadn’t he?

Long after Rozanov disappeared down the steps toward the locker room, Bood stayed where he was.

His daughter slept against his chest, warm and impossibly small beneath the weight of his hoodie, completely unaware that her mere existence had cracked something open inside two grown men in entirely different ways.

The rink carried on around him, pucks ricocheting against the boards hard enough to echo through the arena.

Still, Bood could not stop thinking about what Rozanov had said.

We even picked out names.

It sat strangely heavy in his chest. He knew that it could mean anything, really. Maybe he’d broken up with his girlfriend, or they couldn’t have children.

Except-well Bood knew things about Ilya Rozanov.

Not because Rozanov told people anything willingly but because hockey players gossiped like old women from a small village especially during the offseason.

Last summer, before Rozanov transferred to the Centaurs, Bood had run into some of the guys from the Bears at some charity golf event. They’d been half-drunk, sunburnt, and deeply committed to talking shit about the captain that had left them.

According to them, Rozanov used to text somebody constantly. A girl named Jane.

Apparently it had been ridiculous: between drills, between meetings, before practice, after practice, on the bus, at dinner. Everywhere.

One of the older guys had joked that Rozanov smiled at his phone more than he smiled at actual people, which had apparently been true enough to become locker-room canon.

And then one day he just… stopped.

No more texts. No more smiling at his screen. Nothing.

According to the teammate, something about Rozanov changed after that. He got meaner, sharper around the edges.

Practices turned brutal, they'd been forced to do bag skates until people thought they were going to vomit more than they'd like to remember.

Then, less than a year later, he transferred teams.

At the time, Bood had not thought much of it beyond *damn, poor Bears, I hope he's not like this to us, too.*

Now, though—

Now he sat there with his daughter asleep against his heartbeat and thought about the look on Rozanov's face when he had said we picked out names.
Thought about how grief had moved across his features so quickly it almost seemed accidental.

And suddenly the rumours rearranged themselves into something difficult to swallow.

Bood was not stupid.
He was not stupid and he was pretty sure Jane- or whatever her name was- was dead.

Because hockey players disappeared from relationships all the time. They cheated, they broke up, they got divorced before twenty-eight and they did it all very publicly.
What they did not do was abandon entire cities- hell, states- over heartbreak.
Not unless every street started feeling haunted.

Bood looked down at his daughter.

At her tiny hand curled against his chest.

He thought about what he would do if something happened to Cassie—
The thought stopped so violently in his chest he physically recoiled from it.

"Nope," he muttered immediately to himself, tightening his hold on the baby like he could shield both of them from the universe through sheer refusal. "Absolutely not."

His daughter stirred sleepily at the sound of his voice and Bood pressed a kiss against the top of her tiny hat and forced himself to breathe.

He stayed there until practice finished.
When he was sure that Roz was nowhere to be found, he found Hazy in the locked room and threw one last look behind his shoulder before whispering in his ear, “We need to talk”.

The Cottage, the summer before

“Do you think”, Shane started muttering, legs around Ilya’s waist, surrounded by shoulder-high water, “We’d make good parents?”

“Mh- Hollander you know I was joking about knocking you up, right? It is not possible”, Ilya responded and laughed when Shane drew back enough to splash him with water.

“You know what I mean, asshole,” Shane said, pushing wet hair out of his eyes. “We could, like— adopt.”

The cottage lake stretched quietly around them, dark blue under the fading gold of the sunset. Water lapped softly against the dock somewhere behind them, the air warm with late summer and pine trees and the faint smell of sunscreen neither of them had reapplied properly.

Ilya still had one arm looped around Shane’s waist beneath the water.

It had become instinctive over the years, touching him whenever he could. Like some part of him was always checking to make sure Shane was still there when he could be afforded the privilege.

Ilya snorted softly, his hands stayed planted on Shane’s hips beneath the water, warm despite the cold creeping into his shoulders.

“You’d be a good dad,” he said after a moment. “A great dad.”

Shane responded, almost shyly, “Yeah. I think I’d be good at the boring stuff.”

Ilya arched a brow. “The boring stuff?”

“Breakfasts. Packing lunches. Remembering school forms. Making sure they have clean socks. That sort of thing.”

His voice had gone gentle by then, the kind of gentle that made it clear he was imagining it as he spoke. Ilya’s throat tightened unexpectedly.

“Yes, you would be annoying. Make sure that their rooms are always clean and the clothes have no wrinkles”

Shane rolled his eyes, but he was smiling fondly, forehead damp where wet hair clung to his skin.

“Okay, I’d do the practical stuff. But I also wouldn’t care about grades or any of that bullshit.”

Ilya lifted a brow. “No?”

“No.” Shane shrugged. “I’d want them to try, obviously, but if they came home with bad grades? Whatever. If they sucked at sports? Fine. If they were weird little freaks?” He grinned. “Even better.”

“You say that now.”

“I mean it.” Shane’s expression softened, voice quieter under the low hum of the waves. “I’d just want them to know somebody’s proud of them no matter what. That’s all. I don’t want them to feel like they disappoint us if they’re not perfect. It’s hard to be always perfect.”

Something in Ilya’s chest tightened painfully at how casually Shane said it.

“Of course, Malysh. And they would get your brain, so we would not have to worry.”

Shane looked at him for a second too long before speaking again. “You’d be a good father too.”

Ilya laughed immediately, sharp and humorless. “Absolutely not.”

“You would.”

“I know what people become,” Ilya continued quietly. “You spend your whole life thinking you are different then your parents and then one day you open your mouth and hear them talking. I don’t want to be like my father, but he’s in my blood.” His jaw tightened. “And my mother…” He exhaled through his nose. “Some days she could barely get out of bed. She’d just disappear into herself for weeks.”

The water shifted softly around them as Shane moved even closer.

“What if I’m like that?” Ilya asked, voice lower now. “What if I hurt them without meaning to? Or what if I just…” He searched for the word and looked away. “Stop being able to function. One time I was six and Alyosha had to cook for us because Mama couldn’t get out of bed. We ate toast for one week. I can’t do that to them.”

Shane reached up and pushed damp hair back from Ilya’s forehead carefully, thumb brushing his temple.

“You’re nothing like your father, you hear me? Nothing. And your mother, baby- she had no one to help her. You have me. You always have me.”

He leaned in until their foreheads touched, water lapping quietly around them.

“If you ever feel like you cannot get out of bed, I will bring everything to you.”

Ilya could feel the tears forming in his eyes.

“You would be good at it,” Shane reassured again.

Ilya looked at him for a long moment after that, then, eventually he broke the silence.

“Okay”, he pressed a quick kiss to Shane’s shoulder, “But we would need dog first.”

Shane blinked. “A dog?”

“Yes. Trial run.”

“Trial r- Ilya, do you think children and dogs are the same thing?”

“No,” Ilya replied calmly. “Dogs are harder. Children eventually learn to speak.”

Shane laughed so hard he nearly slipped under the water entirely while Ilya caught him automatically, already smiling again.

When their hands were starting to prune and the sun was setting, they got out the water, drying themselves quickly.

“You know, I’ve always liked Nikolai for a boy”, Ilya muttered as he threw the towel in the washer, “It means victory. We have always been victors, no?”

Shane laughed quietly, closing and clicking the right settings on the screen before turning around. “I’ve always been a winner, I don’t know about you.”

“Oh? Tell that to my draft pick-”

“You can’t always bring that up, asshole.”

“Mh- I think I can.”

A second of silence.

“What about- What about Irina? If we had a daughter?”, Shane said, busying his hands folding and re-folding a blanket.

“Irina”, Ilya’s heard stopped beating for a second.

“Yeah, I mean, only if you want of course. Maybe as a second name? Or first, whatever-”

“Shane”, Ilya stopped his ramblings, “It is perfect.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“Alright, than Irina it is if we- when we have a daughter”, Shane looked so shy and Ilya- not for the first time- wanted to find a way to tuck him somewhere behind his ribcage, next to his heart. “After we retire, we could get a big house, with a big porch for the dog to run around and for the kids to play.”

After we retire.
Right.

Sometimes Ilya hated how much Shane made him hate hockey.
He hated how much he was willing to sacrifice if it meant he could hold hands with him publicly.
He hated how weak he was and how Shane didn't seem bothered by saying 'after we retire'.
Hated how much it broke him instead.

"Oh so you agree with the dog?"

"We both know you'll get one if you want to. I can't convince you not to."

Ilya wanted to tell him that he would do anything Shane told him to.
That he would walk the whole road from Ottowa to Montreal on his knees.
That he would say goodbye to his first home, to his mama's grave, if it meant being able to love him openly.

Instead, he said: "Of course. I am very stubborn." And prayed the bitterness wasn't showing on his face.

Chapter End Notes

I encourage everyone to read Akim Aliu's letter for the player's tribune to understand the problem the league has and how recent certain attacks have been. Hockey should be for everyone. In his words: "Hockey is not unique. It has the same problems that plague our whole world. There's not much we can do about that right now. What we CAN do is be honest. What we CAN do is be courageous. What we CAN do is stand up for one another. That's what hockey is supposed to be all about, right?
Hockey is not for everyone. Not yet. But it damn sure should be."

Have an extraordinary day xx

edit: next chapter is Troy's pov and I just realized I don't remember a lot from Role Model so I'm going to have to skim through it because I am incapable of being chill about anything. If it takes a bit more for me to update that's the reason!!!

Chapter 4: The hit

Chapter Notes

> Is this shite? Probably, but if I didn't post it I'd have stared at it for three more hours and I need to sleep.
> The last scene in this chapter is inspired by my all time favourite fic! I had to take inspiration cause that's such a ilya thing to do so credit goes to crimson rivers for the inspiration!
> This is set a year later the last episode, when Troy joins the centaurs of course.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Troy

Troy Barrett had never been traded before. He'd never really worried about it either.

He had been drafted by Toronto at eighteen. He'd built his whole life there.

He used to joke that one day his number would hang from the rafters at the Gardens beside the franchise legends, and nobody ever laughed at him for it because, for a while, it had actually seemed possible.

Then everything with Dallas happened.

And suddenly Troy was in an Ottawa Centaurs jersey that looked ugly even under professional lighting, trying not to think about the fact that Toronto had gotten rid of him in less than forty-eight hours.

It felt stupid to be this devastated over hockey. Embarrassing, honestly.

There were women Dallas had hurt. Women whose lives had actually been destroyed.

And Troy was sitting in a hotel room spiralling because he got traded to Ottawa.

Perspective-wise, it was bleak.

But guilt didn't stop grief from happening. *Apparently* they could coexist perfectly fine, which sucked.

He deserved it anyway, that was the worst part about this shit show.

Troy stared out the hotel window at the enormous Costco parking lot below, gray slush piled at the edges of the sidewalks, neon Tim Hortons sign flickering faintly through the snow.

This was his life now. A sad hotel off the highway and a team at the bottom of the standings.

And he deserved every second of it.

For years, he'd laughed along and joined in the locker room jokes, the slurs tossed around casually like punctuation. Calling people cocksuckers after a bad shift while going home and checking his phone every ten minutes waiting for his boyfriend to text him back.

Like that wasn't the most hypocritical thing in the world.
Like he hadn't spent half his life terrified somebody would look at him too closely and figure him out.

He should have paid more attention. He should have known what Dallas was doing. He should have stopped him.
The shame of it sat in his stomach like something rotten.

So yes.

He deserved the trade.

He deserved the death threats flooding his Instagram mentions and the reporters dissecting his statement like it was English class.

Maybe he even deserved the warning meeting with the Commissioner, where he'd been told very carefully and very professionally to avoid "further public controversy."

He rubbed both hands over his face and exhaled shakily.

The room smelled faintly like stale coffee and industrial laundry detergent and one lamp flickered occasionally in the corner.

His phone buzzed beside him, a reminder of the practice tomorrow.

Outside, snow drifted slowly through the parking lot lights.

Tomorrow he would meet the Centaurs's players.
Tomorrow he would have to look at them in the eye like he hadn't spent the last seven years making them hate him.
Tomorrow, he would take whatever they threw at him and be grateful for it, because he deserved it.

Tonight, though, he took the ugly sweater off, let himself sit alone in the ugly hotel room and felt every miserable inch of what he'd lost- and what maybe he never really had in the first place.

The first month with the Centaurs was terrible enough it had to qualify as psychological warfare. Not because of his teammates, of course. They were perfect.

Most of them were great men. Wyatt acted like every slur Troy had thrown and laughed at was forgiven, and Rozanov was- strangely understanding, beyond the starting cold shoulder.

Troy was the problem, as always.

He was playing like shit. In a way he had never done, before. Troy was good at one thing in his life, hockey. The humiliation that came with a pointless season so far was only worsened by the way his teammates looked at him when he missed a shot. Pity. Troy hated it.
Everything felt too loud, too harsh, and Troy wasn't sure how to keep doing this.

Except there was Harris, who took him on rides in his stupid truck and sang stupid Christmas songs.
Except there was Ilya, who saw something in his eyes in Vancouver and put an arm on his shoulder- like a lifeline- and just said *Fathers are hard*.

(When Ilya closed the door behind him with a last look over his shoulder that spoke of understanding, Troy almost laughed.
There was his cruel homophobe father condensed into one word. He was the anvil over Troy's head, dangling at every misstep. He was the hugs after the draft and the *I'm proud of you, son*s. He was the man who ruined his mother's life and the one who insisted to hold Troy's trophies in celebratory photos. He was the officer and the jail cell and the bail and the motive.
He was *hard*.
And somehow- Ilya understood that.)

So it wasn't that bad, in the end. Not really.

Bad, yes, in the way new things were always bad when they had to be first survived and then enjoyed. Bad in the way Troy still flinched when people were too kind, still was an asshole even to the best people, still sometimes woke up with the old dread sitting on his chest like a weight he could not explain away.

But it was not the punishment it had meant to be. The Centaurs kept showing up around him, one by one, until the shape of the season stopped feeling like exile and started feeling like something closer to a life. A strange one, probably an ugly one. But his.

Eventually the ice stopped feeling like a place where he was being judged and started feeling like the one place in his life where things still made sense.

So no, it wasn't perfect. It wasn't clean, or easy, or fair.
But it wasn't the end of him, either.
He started buying furniture for his place, too. Nothing dramatic, it wasn't like a new couch that didn't smell of old leather signalled that he was going to settle down in Ottowa.

But- he stopped thinking about leaving, too. And that was enough.

By the time the team played against Toronto, the Centaurs were starting to click. A mutual trust was beginning to form, and yet Troy was terrified. He knew he could count on them, he

knew they'd have his back. But Toronto was different, some jagged fragment of him would always belong there, and it terrified him.
To play against the same people he'd called brothers for seven years.

The same monster who'd used to be his family.

The fans were even worse. The crowd booed every time Troy touched the puck.
They fucking booed him. And they cheered on a sexual predator.

What the fuck was wrong with the world?

His former teammates were awful, snarling insults at him every chance they got. Dallas seemed to be on a mission to spend as much of this game as possible attacking Troy.

By the middle of the first period, Troy was channeling all of his rage into his game. He played fast, aggressive hockey, the kind he was known for. He went hard to the net, took bodies in the corners, and never stopped battling.

And the team had his back. They played just as hard, chirped just as loud and- when Troy finally scored in the third period- celebrated even louder.

The crowd booed stronger than ever, but Troy didn't care. He was too busy hugging his friends.

By the end of the game, they were all exhausted. There were two minutes left on the clock and Toronto was down by one.

They weren't even playing to catch up anymore.
They were playing to punish.

Troy could feel it in the way the shifts came harder, meaner. In the way Toronto kept trying to drag the game into the mud and make everybody in the building choke on it.

Dallas was out there for too long, of course he was, as if waiting for someone to raise at his bait.

He was still skating like he owned the ice, still smiling that ugly, satisfied little smile whenever he got into somebody's head.

He had spent the whole game hunting Troy with his stick and his elbows and his voice, as if Troy personally owed him the satisfaction of being broken in front of a home crowd.

Troy wanted to kill him, maybe. To take him by the shoulders and shake and cry and yell '*Were you always like this? Were you always a monster?'*

Which was, perhaps, not the ideal emotional state to be in with ninety seconds left and the puck buzzing around in the offensive zone.

When he saw the opening, his feet moved faster than his head.
Ilya was moving too, always reading it faster than everybody else on the ice, and Troy knew

the second he saw the play in his head that Ilya was going to go for it himself.

Ilya caught the puck with the blade of his skate and passed it to his own stick, a move so ridiculously difficult that was made to look extremely easy.

He could have scored.

Toronto had pulled their goaltender so the net was empty and the only defender standing in front of him was a rookie that looked equal parts amazed and terrified to be in front of the Ilya Rozanov.

He could have shot the puck towards the net. But he didn't.

Instead, he shot it sideways, ending at Troy's feet.
Troy was off before he knew it.

He felt his thighs burn as he pushed and pushed and finally shot as the clock was ticking the final seconds.

He heard the sound of the puck hitting the goal post, of it sliding in.
He heard the ugly sound of the goal horn.
And then he heard the sound of a body collapsing.

His stomach dropped.

The whistle blew somewhere behind him, distant and stupid- too late.

Troy was already turning around and skating before his brain had finished understanding what had happened.

Dallas was standing over a body that was too still. Troy hit him so hard the whole world seemed to lurch.

It was *Ilya*.

The puck was nowhere near him and still- Dallas had pushed him in the boards.

His body was crumbled unnaturally, his legs bent and head limp.

"Get the fuck away from him," Troy snarled, though he was pretty sure it came out mangled by the violence of it, and threw his glove down, grabbing Dallas's jersey.

Dallas tried to twist out, tried to laugh, tried to say something Troy did not care enough to hear.

Troy hit him again. And again. And again.

When the linesmen arrived, prying them apart, Troy almost fought them too, but one of them got a hand on his chest and shoved him back hard enough to make his skates scrape wildly across the ice.

Troy could barely breathe. His whole body was lit up with one thought and one thought only.

Ilya.

He tore his eyes away from Dallas just long enough to look at him properly.

He was still unconscious, but a medic had rolled him on his back. The sight of his too-still body laying on the unforgiving ice almost made Troy choke up.

“Is he okay? Fucking tell me!” he yelled.

A linesman blocked him from skating next to him, “You can’t go closer, Barrett. The medic needs space.”

Toronto’s bench looked like they had all been hit with the same sudden, appalled realization that the game had become something much uglier than a late-period scrum.

Troy could not stop looking at Ilya.

He stood back a little, and kneeled on the ice next to the other centaurs. A sign of respect for the captain they all loved.

Haas was on the ice as well, and he looked exactly as Troy felt. Wyatt looked ridiculously small even in his goalie pads, holding Bood back from attacking a Toronto forward.

At the other end of the ice, the medics were putting a neck brace on Ilya, which was fucking scary- and Troy hoped unnecessary.

When they put him on the gurney and started sliding him to the exit, the whole stadium erupted into cheers, even the Toronto players clapped their sticks.

Like the crowd hadn’t bood every time they got the puck and cheered at every brutal check. Like the players hadn’t been out for blood five minutes before.

Sometimes- Troy hated hockey.

He stood up and skated near the gurney before he knew what he was doing. Ilya had his eyes open but they were hazy and he was murmuring something in Russian. “I’m coming with.”

“B-“

“I'm out for the game either way.” There were less than 20 seconds left on the clock and Troy was also pretty sure he was going to be given a game misconduct.

For a second, nobody seemed to know what to do with that.

The medic gave Troy a look that suggested he was not in the mood to negotiate with a man who had just tried to rip another player’s head off, and then nodded once, brisk and distracted.

“Fine. Stay close but stay out of the way.”

Troy had never been good at staying out of the way in his life, but he managed to do it now because Ilya was awake enough to be helped onto the gurney and still not awake enough to look properly at Troy, which was somehow worse.

His eyelids fluttered. His mouth moved around another string of Russian that meant nothing to Troy and still sounded wrong in a way that made his stomach twist.

“Hey,” Troy said, too rough, too loud. “Hey, stay with me.”

Ilya’s eyes found his for one unsteady second.

Then his expression shifted, tiny and blurred with pain, into something like recognition.

“Jane,” he said, except it came out broken on the edges. “-Need J-Jane”

“Um- alright, buddy”, Troy wrecked his brain trying to remember if he knew someone named Jane, “I’ll call her, alright? Just stay calm, she’ll be here soon.”

“No. No. Won’t come”, Ilya slurred, wailed, “Can’t come.”

“What do you m-”, Troy noticed they had almost reached the ambulance, “Hey Roz- just keep your eyes open, okay? Don’t be stubborn, man”

The ambulance doors opened with a heavy metallic clang that echoed straight through Troy’s ribs, and the medics rushed to roll Ilya in.
He could see Ilya strapped to the stretcher, neck brace stark against flushed skin.
One of the paramedics was talking to him firmly in slow English.

“Mr. Rozanov? Stay awake for me.”

Ilya’s eyes were fluttering.

“Can you tell me where you are?”

No answer.

Another medic adjusted something beside him and suddenly everybody moved faster.

“Sir? Sir, I need you to stay awake.”

Troy took a step forward automatically.

A hand caught him hard by the elbow before he could climb into the ambulance after him.

“You can’t come, sir” the medic snapped, already turning away.

The doors slammed shut and then they were gone.

The red lights disappeared into the snowy Toronto traffic while Troy stood there behind the arena like a complete fucking idiot in full hockey gear and skates, breathing steam into the cold air.

For a second he genuinely considered following the ambulance on foot.

Which was insane.
Obviously insane.

Except- the hospital wasn't that far, really. And he knew the Toronto streets. Maybe he could-

He looked down at himself.

His helmet was gone, thrown during the collision. His gloves were gone too, knuckles split open and swelling from punching Dallas's face in.

He still had his skates on, and they scraped awkwardly against the pavement as reality finally caught up to him.

Right.
He should probably change. In the locker room.

The walk back through the service corridors felt endless and by the time he reached the visitors' dressing room, the adrenaline had started draining out of him in ugly waves, leaving behind nausea and shaking exhaustion.

Toronto's facilities were fucking terrible for away teams, so he discovered. Not even because of lack of funding, just- petty terrible. Too cramped. Too dark. Cheap gray carpet that still smelled damp somehow. Lockers packed too close.

Troy shoved the door open hard enough it bounced against the stopper and the conversation died instantly.

Wyatt looked up first from where he was halfway out of his pads. Haas was sitting beside him with an ice pack against his wrist, staring at the wall. Dykistra had a towel around his shoulders, curls damp from the shower.

Everybody looked wrecked.

"Troy," Wyatt said carefully. "How is he?"

Troy ignored him.

"Where's his stuff?"

Bood blinked at him. "What?"

"His phone," Troy said, too fast. "He asked for someone. Jane. I need his phone. I need- I need to do something. I need to call her."

“Wait— what did you say?”, Wyatt asked, looking alarmed.

“Jane,” Troy repeated impatiently. “In the ambulance. He kept asking for Jane.”

“Oh my God,” Bood breathed. “I’m going to be sick.”

A horrible feeling started curling low in Troy’s stomach. “What?”

Luca looked slowly between them. “Wait,” he said carefully. “Is she like- his Jane?”

Nobody answered quickly enough. Troy’s pulse started climbing again for an entirely different reason. “The fuck does that mean?”

Bood rubbed both hands over his face.
“Me and Wyatt talked about it before,” he muttered. “He keeps saying this kind of shit that just makes you think. It’s been like this since he joined last year—”

“Bood,” Wyatt warned quietly.

But Bood was already looking at Troy with shiny eyes now.

“We think,” Bood said slowly, “Jane was his wife.”

The room went dead silent and Troy stared at them.

Maybe they got a concussion when Troy wasn’t looking or something, because they were acting crazy. He didn’t have time for this bullshit, he was getting aggravated. Ilya was going to wake up and he was going to be pissed if he didn’t get him Jane.

“What the fuck are you talking about. Ilya’s not married”

“You don’t understand-”

“Look, if you’re trying to play some sick joke on me, it’s not going to end well. He’s alone in the fucking hospital, help me find his phone, jerks.”

“It’s not a fucking joke!”, Bood yelled back at him, “It’s not! Just- calm down one second.”

“Troy, man. We wouldn’t joke on this kind of stuff”, Wyatt continued, “it’s something we’ve suspected for a long time. Haven’t you noticed it too?”

Troy stopped dead in his tracks, back to the team from where he was frantically looking for the phone.

There was no way. Troy would have known, right? Ilya was not a private guy. He posted at least two times a day on any social you could think about. There were pictures of him in various states of undressed and with women of all different kinds.

No way he could hide a wife.

Right?

“No.” Troy laughed once, sharp and humorless. “No, because I would know.”

Wyatt and Luca exchanged a look that made something uncomfortable twist in Troy’s chest.

“You sure about that?” Wyatt asked carefully.

“Yes,” Troy snapped immediately.

Because this was Ilya fucking Rozanov.

Ilya, who posted constantly. Ilya, whose face was everywhere. Ilya, who somehow managed to end up shirtless in half his Instagram stories.
There were paparazzi shots of him leaving clubs, interviews in two languages, clips of him dancing terribly at teammates’ birthdays.
Women hung off him constantly online. There was no way a hidden wife fit in that life.

Right?

But even as the thought crossed his mind, cracks started opening underneath it. The last time he’d been papped with a woman had to be years ago. 2016? Maybe?

His stomach dipped.

“No,” Troy said faintly.

Wyatt watched realization hit him in real time and looked almost sympathetic about it.

“Yeah,” he said quietly.

Troy stared at the floor.

And then another memory surfaced hard enough to make him physically sick. Dykistra’s wedding invite had come after a team practice, while half of the team was still in the showers.

“It should be in June, just after the playoffs”, he’d said while shrugging on a shirt.

“Which we are making this year”, Ilya had popped his head out of the shower to point out, receiving cheers from everyone.

“That’s right, cap! And your beautiful families are invited too, of course. I like your wives more than you”

“Your fiancée likes us more than she likes you, too!”, Holmberg chirped from where he was putting sweats on.

“Shush, child. Ilya tell the children to stay silent, the adult is talking!”

“You are not adult”, Ilya had replied, “they are more mature than you.”

“Shut up, dude! Hey- you’re bringing a date, right? Please tell me we finally get to meet your mysterious soulmate.”

Everybody had stopped laughing, for some reason Troy did not understand yet.

Ilya had turned the water off, but he hadn’t gotten out of the shower. “Would have been nice. But, no,” he’d said after a second. “I do not think that is possible.”

At the time Troy had assumed it was just Ilya being dramatic in that bizarre melancholic way Europeans sometimes were.

But now—

“Oh, fuck,” Troy whispered.

Nobody spoke.

Because suddenly it was all there if you looked at it sideways.

The way Ilya disappeared on certain dates every year.
The way he never hooked up with anyone despite the entire league assuming he did.
The apartment that somehow always felt too large for one person.
The turned-down picture frames in the halls.

Troy thought about the ambulance again.

I need Jane.

It broke Troy a little, that somewhere deep in the wreckage of his brain after pain and fear and hurt had stripped everything else away, the first thing Ilya had wanted was still her.

Jesus Christ.

Troy scrubbed both hands over his face hard enough to hurt.

As the guys around him recounted every time where Ilya had made it clear he had lost his wife, shame curdled inside Troy.

“I told him I’d call her,” he said hoarsely. “Fuck. I told him she was going to come.”

The cottage, a week later

Ilya perched on a cloud—a very fluffy cloud—and there were people all around him.
The mother. The father. And an angel.

A pretty, pretty angel.

“Ilya?” the angel murmured, voice thick and unsteady, like he had been crying. Ilya disliked that immediately. He reached toward him without thinking, needing to fix it somehow,

because beautiful things were not supposed to look sad.

“So beautiful,” Ilya told him softly.

“That’ll be the meds,” someone else said—the mother, he thought. “Ilya, honey, how are you feeling?” she asked gently.

“Look at him,” the father announced with a laugh. “Those painkillers they gave him were strong.”

Ilya gasped in delight when he discovered he actually could touch the angel.

He stared in wonder as his fingers drifted carefully along the angel’s jaw. Beneath his fingertips, it felt like sparks fizzing through the air. Like the first goal he’d ever scored and the first time he held the cup up. Somewhere deep in his stomach, ripples spread like stones skipping across water.

It was, quite possibly, the best day of his life.

“Am I dead?” Ilya asked, awed.

Because surely that was the only explanation. Why else would an angel visit him on earth? For one brief moment, he thought of his mama. Maybe he would get to see her again if he was dead.

The question made the angel frown.

“No, you’re not dead. Jesus. You just made me think you were- thanks for that by the way.”

“Oh,” Ilya replied after a beat. “So you’re visiting, then?”

“We’re at the cottage, baby,” the angel said carefully. “I took the day off so I could stay with you. The doctors said you could travel and you wanted to be home, so-”

Ilya blinked at him, confused. “No, I mean… Are you visiting earth?”

The angel stared.

“I don’t know what that means,” he muttered. Then, quieter, “I’m not visiting earth, Ilya. We live here.” He glanced toward the others. “Mom, is he okay? Should we call the doctor?”

“Oh, that’s good,” Ilya sighed happily. “That’s really good. You should stay here forever, then.”

“He’s fine, sweetheart,” the mother assured him fondly. “He’s high. He wanted to come home, and that meant a lot of pain medication. He’ll be normal again in a couple hours.”

“I would like to do blasphemy,” Ilya announced seriously, because he didn’t particularly care where the conversation was going and all he wanted was to kiss the angel’s red lips. Pretty. Pretty, pretty lips.

The room burst into laughter. Ilya liked the sound of it.

But the angel didn't laugh. He only looked at Ilya with helpless fondness, soft-eyed and warm.

Ilya needed him to laugh. Immediately.

"I will tell you joke," Ilya declared.

One of the angel's eyebrows lifted. "Oh?"

"Yes. And then you will laugh."

"Ilyusha—"

"Why is a hockey rink always so cold?"

The angel humored him. "I don't know. Why?"

"Because there are too many fans."

The mother laughed. The father laughed. The angel didn't.

Instead, he reached up and took Ilya's hand carefully between both of his, pressing a small smile against his knuckles.

"You were supposed to laugh," Ilya complained. "It was funny. And you like hockey."

"Mm," the angel murmured, eyes drifting shut briefly. "Better luck next time."

"I will keep trying."

"I know you will."

Ilya sighed wistfully and let his head sink deeper into the pillow. He kept staring at the angel because the angel was beautiful, and looking away felt impossible.
But his eyelids were growing heavier with every blink.

He frowned faintly. He didn't want to leave. He wanted to stay here with the angel.

Maybe the angel would still be there when he woke up again.

Maybe this time, he would stay. He would choose *him*. Wouldn't *that* be nice.

"You will stay, right?" Ilya mumbled sleepily.

"I'll stay," the angel promised.

"Good, that's good." Ilya smiled, pleased and dreamy. "I think- I think I am going to keep you."

And finally—finally—the angel laughed.
The sound warmed Ilya's chest instantly, like magic.

It was the last thing Ilya heard before sleep carried him off into dreams of a little house, a dog asleep in the yard, and two daughters with the angel's smile and eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for the wonderful comments xxx
I reread Troy's book these days and I remembered why it's one of my favs, Harris my beloved!
Who would you like to see as the last chapter before the reveal?
Have an extraordinary day!

Chapter 5: The plane

Chapter Notes

Okay so I might have gotten too into Coach Wiebe's backstory…
I'm sorry if this is too long, I couldn't find anything to cut that didn't feel important

a lot of the descriptions of the plane scene were taken by tlg so credit goes to Rachel as always <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Coach Wiebe

The first time it happened, Brandon thought it was too good to be true.
He should have trusted his instincts. But he was young and in love, a combination often lethal and unforgiving.

It started in Winnipeg, during his second season playing for Detroit, three games into a brutal road trip that had everyone half-dead on their feet. The hotel bar had technically closed an hour earlier, but one of the assistant coaches knew the bartender, and suddenly half the team was lingering around nursing expensive whiskey and bad decisions.

Brandon was not known for his alcohol tolerance. In fact, he was known for the opposite of it.

It took barely three beers for him to start thinking thoughts he would *never* be able to say out loud—about Patrick's hair and his neck and the way his bicep moved as he played pool with the others.

Brandon was fucked.

He was fucked and pathetic and *maybe* a little bit in love.

When Patrick squeezed his thigh under the table that same night, Brandon thought he was imagining things.

When Patrick looked him directly in the eyes and said, "I'm going to bed, I think," Brandon could barely breathe around the implication.

And when the hotel room door opened and Patrick grabbed him by the neck of his shirt and kissed him in a way that felt far too dangerous, Brandon decided that even if it was a dream, he would rather die than wake up from it.

For a while it was good. God- it was *so* good.

They became experts at pretending. *Nice game, bro*s. A shove to the shoulder in the locker room. Patrick stealing fries off Brandon's plate at team dinners while Brandon rolled his eyes like he wasn't secretly thrilled by the familiarity of it.

Nobody noticed anything because hockey players touched each other constantly. Arms slung around shoulders, wrestling in hallways, roughhousing during practice. It gave them camouflage. It let Brandon stand two inches from Patrick without anyone looking twice.

In Dallas, Brandon became just another teammate again. Patrick would grin at him across the locker room, toss him tape during practice, chirp him during drills, but there was always distance carefully threaded through every interaction. An invisible line neither of them acknowledged.
Brandon was too afraid to cross it first.

But on the road-
On the road, Patrick would knock softly on Brandon's hotel door sometime after midnight, baseball cap low over his eyes like that disguise would save either of them if someone saw.

Or Brandon would get a text.

U up?

As if there had ever been a chance he was sleeping.

Then suddenly they would be tangled up in unfamiliar sheets in unfamiliar cities, kissing with the desperation of people borrowing time they knew did not belong to them.

It lasted four months. Four months of getting to know each other's bodies but never anything else.

When the summer approached, Brandon - for the first time in his rather short career- was not bummed Dallas didn't make it to the playoffs. He was fucking devastated.
Here was his chance to have one more month with Patrick, gone.

The thing was that Brandon wasn't really good at letting things go.
His family used to tell him when he was a kid that if the MHL thing didn't work out, he could be a lawyer. Which Brandon often thought was the only socially acceptable way to call a child an asshole.
He had always needed answers. Needed clarity. Needed to pick at problems until they either bled or healed.

So he decided, rather quickly, that he would ask Patrick where they stood, that he would confess his feelings and hope they were reciprocated.
In retrospect he knew he had been too naive, too in love to see the doubt and fear that crossed Patrick's eyes when he would kiss him.

At the time- he hadn't seen it.

Because every message, every call, every laugh in the dark became its own kind of promise.

Brandon started believing things he had no business believing.

That Patrick would touch him in public someday, once they were older, once the league was different, once neither of them had to be quite so afraid.

That Patrick was only waiting because Brandon was waiting. That one day, in some future he could almost see if he squinted hard enough, he would be introduced not as a secret but as something chosen.

The day Brandon finally gathered enough courage to tell Patrick he was in love with him became one of those memories that refused to fade properly.

It stayed preserved in awful detail, sharp around the edges no matter how much time passed. The kind of memory that surfaced at three in the morning years later, uninvited and painfully intact, even when he was healed, even when he slept next to a body that didn't recoil when it was touched in public.

For months, Brandon had convinced himself that patience was the same thing as understanding.

He told himself Patrick was scared, and maybe he had every right to be. Hockey was not forgiving. Locker rooms were not forgiving. Men like them learned early how quickly affection could become ammunition in the wrong hands.

So Brandon accepted things he normally never would have.

He accepted being wanted only behind locked doors.

He accepted the careful distance in Dallas, the way Patrick's body language could transform instantly the second another teammate entered the room. He accepted being treated like something precious in private and something ordinary in public.

Because every time Brandon started feeling the ache of it too sharply, Patrick would look at him softly, or laugh into his shoulder, or reach for him in the middle of the night like the separation hurt him too.

And Brandon loved him enough to survive on fragments.

It would've been enough- he thought, then- if Brandon knew that Patrick loved him. It would justify the ache of secrecy.
If, even in private, he could get to call Patrick his own- that would have been enough.

As the words left Brandon's mouth (a barely whispered, *I'm in love with you* in a shitty hotel room somewhere in Saskatchewan, after their last game), he saw the shift in Patrick's eyes as if it was something physical.

Patrick laughed. He laughed and laughed and laughed. The kind of laughter usually reserved for petty chirps or hockey competitors. The kind of laugh he'd never directed towards Brandon. Cruel, mocking, belittling.

And then, humiliatingly, Patrick continued.

He told Brandon he was straight.
Told him it had been nothing more than something to pass the time, something easy to reach for when the road was long and the nights were empty and the consequences still felt far away.
Told him that Brandon had mistaken convenience for feeling and loneliness for love.

Brandon could have survived the first part. Maybe even the second.
He might have been able to arrange all of it into some brutal shape he could live with, some story that made him foolish instead of shattered.

But Patrick did not stop there.
He made sure the final pieces landed where they would do the most damage. He made it plain that this had been a mistake, and worse than that, a joke that had gone on too long.

He made it plain that if Brandon ever touched him again, he would make sure Brandon could not touch anything anymore.
Like Brandon was some kind of *sick man*, perverted and disgusting. Like Brandon was not the same man he'd touched for months, amorously.

After that, there was nothing left to misunderstand.
Only the sick, stinging knowledge that Brandon had loved someone who - in the end- was nothing like he thought.

The year later, he was traded to the AHL, and that somehow felt like mercy. Not having to face his number on the ice for another year, at least.
He stayed there for three years, playing at lower rates with better teammates.
It did him good.

He spent those years living as a queer man. He didn't broadcast his personal life- of course. But he didn't hide it, either.
His teammates suspected, probably. But they were a tight bunch, so Brandon was safe.

When he was called back into the MHL, he was a different man from what he'd been in Dallas. Sharper around the edges, less scared.

He stopped letting comments slide, too.

He complained when he needed to, about the slurs thrown too casually and the rookies being bullied until they looked hollow-eyed and sick, and the coach who treated humiliation like a discipline method and called it toughness.

And the league heard him and did what it always did best.

Nothing.

After that, the word difficult began to follow him around like a second shadow. Somehow, standing up for those who couldn't or were to afraid to made him difficult to work with.

But Brandon had always been too righteous for his own good, so he refused to be quiet.

To the league- it did not matter that the things he said were true. It did not matter that the room was better for rookies when he spoke up, or that the air in the locker room changed by a fraction when someone realized he would not laugh along with what had been done to them.

It did not matter to the coaches or the managers or the team sponsors.
Just like their opinion of him didn't matter to Brandon.

If his speaking out would save even only a player from embarrassment or harm- that was be enough for him.

His career went on, long enough to become its own kind of achievement, even if no one ever called it distinguished. Eleven seasons had a way of sounding small to people who never had to earn each one, but to Brandon, they were not small at all.

They were bruises and road trips and bad hotel coffee and mornings when his body hurt in places he could not explain to anyone who had not lived inside the same grind. They were proof that he had outlasted the men who tried to make him smaller. They were proof that being difficult had kept him decent.

He met his wife, Linda, during that time, around 2006, and she changed his whole life.
She mended his heart from damage that was not hers to cure. She made him feel priced and loved and wanted.

She'd cried when he'd first told her about Patrick, held him closer and tighter, and that night he was sure he was going to marry her.

The MHL hurt him. For years, he suffered under incompetent managers and bigot coaches.

When he retired, he could've stepped away, and he did for some years.

But it was always clear to him that no matter how much it had hurt him, hockey was his place. He belonged on the ice, he belonged near the players.

He needed to be the change he so desperately sought out when he himself was a player.

The decision to start coaching wasn't an easy one. He was a dad, and his wife had a brilliant career. He knew it would be hard, he knew a lot of people wouldn't like him, or want him to succeed.

He knew there were lots of people who would think he was never going to make it.
That's who he thought about as he got his coaching certification. As he coached the local rink. And when he was called up as assistant coach for younger prospects. Even as he coached under experienced AHL head coach and then became one himself.
And especially when he was hired as an MHL coach.

The centaurs were not a great team. A lot of the times they were not even a good one.
But they were a family. Made of decent people.
He'd told a player one time, *there's no assholes in Ottowa*. And he was sure of that.

Sure, the league was still flawed.
God, it was flawed in ways Brandon suspected would outlive him entirely.
But it was better.

On his kinder days, Brandon allowed himself to believe he had helped make it that way.
Not alone, of course.

But he had been loud when the league preferred silence. He had filed complaints that disappeared into office drawers. He had argued with management until his reputation curdled around him. He had stood beside rookies after practice while they stared at the floor trying not to look humiliated. He had taken the hits that came with refusing to laugh along.

Maybe none of it had changed things all at once. Maybe change in hockey happened the same way glaciers moved, slow enough to look motionless unless you survived long enough to notice the distance.

Still. It had moved. *He* knew it moved.

When Admirals captain Scott Hunter kissed his boyfriend on the ice after winning the Stanley Cup in 2016, Brandon cried so hard he genuinely frightened his daughters.

Linda found him folded in half on the living room couch, hands pressed over his face like he was trying to physically contain whatever had cracked open inside him.

The television commentators were still talking in the background, voices bright and stunned and delighted as replay after replay showed Scott pulling his boyfriend in by the front of his jacket without hesitation, without fear, under the full glare of cameras and arena lights and millions of watching eyes.

Like holding him was even more precious than holding the cup.

Linda held him through the worst of it while their girls hovered nearby looking confused and worried, too young to understand why their father looked heartbroken over something so beautiful.

Brandon knew, rationally, that he had never been the only queer player in the league.
Statistics alone made that impossible.

But rationality had very little power over loneliness. And hockey had a way of making isolation feel holy, inevitable, deserved.

For years, Brandon had carried his queerness like something heavy and solitary.

Even after he built a life that made him happy, even after he found people who loved him openly, some part of him still carried the phantom memory of the fear of being caught.

But as he watched Scott Hunter beam at another man, Brandon felt something inside himself loosen for the first time in years.

Because suddenly there was proof.

Proof that a queer player could exist publicly and still be loved. Proof that some terrified seventeen-year-old prospect somewhere might see that broadcast and realize he was not alone before the loneliness had the chance to hollow him out completely.

Proof that some unknown player who had been hiding all his career could take a breath, could be free.

Proof that all the complaints Brandon filed, all the reprimands, all the years of being labeled difficult and bitter and impossible to manage, had not vanished into nothing.

He had wanted, once, for someone to choose him publicly.
Instead, he had helped build a world where somebody else finally could be.

When Brandon got the news that Ilya Rozanov had requested a trade to Ottawa, he'd laughed so hard in the face of the poor intern that he probably looked stupid.

When it turned out it wasn't a joke, he'd almost fainted.

Brandon remembered playing against the guy once, in his last year as a player and Rozanov's first. Remembered- very distantly being called a dinosaur which didn't make sense given he was only thirty, but it was quite funny.

From what Brandon could tell, Rozanov was not a bad guy, at least not publicly. But he was a loud one, the kind of player that would birth a new scandal every month.

He was excited for Ottowa to have a star player, of course. But he was afraid that the drama that oftentimes came with it would be too much for the still very young team.

But Ilya- as he'd told Brandon to call him the first time they'd met- had a way of surprising everyone.

In just a few months he established himself as a leader. On the ice, he was everything they were missing, he was speed and aggression and endurance. In practices, he made sure that everyone around him got a little bit better, even if he wasn't the coach, he always made sure to tell each player something he'd noticed about their skating.

The only problem was- well, Ilya was never there.

He was always on time at practice, had missed most of the optional ones, and he was almost always absent on team hangouts from what they told him.
When they were on road trips, he was adamant of getting back to his room before ten, they didn't know why or which carriage would turn into a pumpkin otherwise.

The thing was, Ilya was not like any of them expected.
The thing was, Brandon saw something inside of Ilya that resembled him too much. And that worried him.

He knew what the team said, of course. Those guys were as subtle as a brick through a window.

They had- somehow- convinced themselves that Ilya was a widower. The first time they'd told him, he had almost laughed.

They told him he never hooked up with anyone on roadies, that he disappeared immediately after games. That he had 'sad eyes', which Brandon wanted to argue were more likely due to the fact that he was playing for Ottowa.

They told him that apparently Ilya wore a ring around his necklace, that Brandon had never seen and was pretty sure was a hallucination. Apparently he never talked about exes. Apparently he got weird whenever people invited him out late, that he talked about a partner with a sadness in his eyes too much like grief.

To Brandon, though, none of that screamed widower. It screamed something else entirely.

Now- Brandon was under no illusion that just because there had been a few players that had come out, that the league had gotten more queer. But- he recognized something in the things tehy'd described. The careful distance. The way Ilya seemed relaxed right until conversations drifted toward personal territory, and then suddenly he'd remember somewhere else he had to be.

The hyperawareness. The control. Brandon had spent most of his own career like that.

And Ilya—

Ilya flinched every time reporters asked about his personal life. Ilya never drank enough to lose control like the whole league thought he did. Ilya vanished before nights could get messy. Ilya's shoulders had dropped when he had first seen that Ottowa's locker room was a no tolerance zone for bigots.
Brandon noticed because he knew where to look.

He didn't say anything though. He told the team he was glad that Ilya had them. He was proud of his team, even when they were being silly they were always heartbreakingly good.

It wasn't until later that he began questioning everything.

They were going to Tampa for yet another game. Brandon was brainstorming ways to make their penalty kill less shit, when the plane started shaking.
He thought nothing of it, after a lifetime of flights.
Maybe he needed to try another strategy, more offensive, not let the opposing team get into their house, Wyatt had to-

When the plane dipped, Brandon's first thought is that this was not normal turbulence.
His second thought came just as the plane lurched up again, he thought of is his daughters, always his daughters. The second thought was let me see them again, let me hug them again.

"Jesus! What the fuck?" David, the equipment manager sat next to him yelled at the same time everyone else on the plane yelled a variation of the same thing.

And then the plane dropped again.
It was an awful, sickening sensation, made worse by the screams that filled the cabin.
Brandon didn't scream because he couldn't find the breath to do it.

They were going to die. They were all going to die, tumbling through the dark somewhere over Florida.
Brandon closed his eyes and hoped they crashed far away from any other people. That they would not take any more lives with them.

The plane shuddered and leveled out, with another stomach-lurching swoop. There was total silence on the plane as everyone waited for whatever was about to happen.

A voice came over the speakers. "We've lost an engine. We have been cleared for an emergency landing in Tampa, but expect it to be a rough descent. Please stand by for further instructions from your flight attendant."

Across the aisle, one of the rookies looked seconds from vomiting.

Brandon gripped the armrest hard enough his knuckles hurt.

“Tabernak! There’s a fire!” Someone yelled. It was Nick Chouinard. "The plane is on fire!"

"Fuck," Brandon muttered. "Fuck."

There were panicked cries all around them, and Brandon hated that he knew who was making each one. He knew these guys so well and loved them like family, and he didn't want them to be scared.

He could hear Bood somewhere probably recording a voice message to his wife. He was saying something about their child that he tried to block out.
Dykistra was praying quietly, a repetitive chant with cracked voice.
He was pretty sure he could hear Wyatt crying, but he couldn’t make himself look.

Across the aisle, Ilya was frantically typing something on his phone, tears streaming down his face silently.

Brandon should probably try to message Linda, but what would he even say?

God, his daughter. They'll be devastated.

The flight attendant- a young woman who had a brave face on but Brandon could tell was barely holding it together- was coming down the aisle with instruction. "Tables up. Remove your ties, glasses, chains. Anything like that. Get into a position to brace for impact. Duck your heads and rest them against the seatback in front of you. Feet firmly on the floor."

He thought about everyone else on board.
About Bood, who was about to become a father to his second child.

About Wyatt's wife, Lisa.
About Harris, and all the surgeries he'd survived just to end in a fucked up plane.
About Luca Haas, who had just turned twenty.
About David, the equipment manager, who had just celebrated being eight years cancer-free.

About Ilya, and the solemn way he looked sometimes, the fact that Brandon had never really got him to open up. Never got to tell him it was okay. As he got into brace position, he risked one glance to him again. His head was bowed low enough that his forehead nearly touched his clasped hands. His lips moved rapidly under his breath.

Ilya was praying. Brandon never really believed in God, but he closed his eyes and sent one thought to whoever was there, please, please let us survive this.

Everything seemed to still for a few seconds. The plane was so quiet. Maybe it was because Brandon's heart was pounding in his ears, drowning everything else out, but it seemed like no one was making a sound.

It felt like the plane was descending faster than usual, but Brandon couldn't be sure.

It was shakier, much more turbulent. He tried not to think about the fire, about who was sitting down there- *the rookies, it was probably the kids, they always liked the back row, it made them feel cool*- and if they had been injured.

Maybe the fire was out already. Maybe it had spread to the wing. Maybe the whole plane was about to explode.
Brandon forced himself to breathe through his nose and keep his head down.
The brace position felt ridiculous when your body was already doing its best impression of a panic attack.

He could hear the aircraft crying around them—metal groaning, something rattling loose, the steady brutal roar of an engine that sounded less like an engine and more like a thing dying.

Somewhere behind him, somebody was openly sobbing now.
Brandon didn't know if it was one of the rookies or one of the staff.

It could have been any of them. It could have been all of them.
He kept his eyes shut and counted the names in his head like a prayer of his own.

Linda and her pearly laughter. Emma and her teenage angst. Little Sophie with her missing front teeth. Even their rescue, Lollypop, who would take her shots only from him.

The pilot's voice came back over the speakers, shaky but clear enough to be understood. "Ladies and gentlemen, we are beginning our descent. Please remain in your brace positions until advised otherwise."

Brandon kept his head down and listened to the sounds around him as the plane tilted forward. The wet, uneven breathing of six foot man scared out of their mind. Someone whispering a prayer in French. The tiny, helpless sniffle of one of the rookies behind him.

The rustle of fabric as people shifted in their seats without daring to sit up straight.
And under it all, one thin, continuous thread of Russian.

The plane sank lower.

The wheels hit the runway with a brutal jolt that made everyone gasp at once.

Brandon's teeth clicked together so hard he saw sparks. The whole aircraft bounced, then slammed down again, tires shrieking against wet pavement.

And then, at last, it stopped.

For several seconds nobody moved.

Then the cabin erupted into sobbing and shouting and laughter so hysterical it barely counted as human. Someone yelled, "We're alive!" as if they needed to say it out loud to make it true. Someone else answered with a string of curses, Brandon finally lifted his head.

Through the window he could see emergency vehicles swarming the runway, red lights flashing across the rain-slick surface. A line of fire trucks.
He pressed a hand over his face and closed his eyes.

"Fuck," he whispered, though this time the word did not carry the same terror. "Fuck."

Across the aisle, one of the only people who had not cheered was Ilya. He had dropped his phone into his lap and was bent forward with both hands over his mouth.

Brandon looked at him properly then. Ilya's face was soaked. His eyes were bloodshot. There was no attempt to hide any of it anymore. He looked wrecked in a way Brandon had never seen on him before, stripped of every polished edge, every guarded expression. But he was alive. They all were.

A flight attendant came through the aisle again, voice steadier now though her hands were shaking. "Remain seated until instructed. Emergency services are outside and we are being evacuated in an orderly manner. Please stay calm."

One of the veterans near the back let out a choked laugh.

"Calm," he repeated, and that set off another wave of exhausted, disbelieving laughter around the cabin. It took a few minutes before the doors opened. The line to deplane moved slowly, and when Brandon stepped down onto the tarmac, the humid Florida air hit him like a slap.

He inhaled and nearly laughed from sheer, dazed disbelief that he was breathing anything at all.

Around him, the team moved in a disorganized cluster toward the buses waiting by the terminal. A few people were already on their phones, calling family, texting wives, mothers, girlfriends, children.

One of the rookies had both hands over his face and was openly crying now that the danger had passed and his body had decided it was allowed.

Brandon found his own phone with stiff fingers.

There were already messages from Linda.

Brandon, is it true?
Baby?
Are you okay?
Call me.
The kids are scared.
Brandon, answer me.

I love you

He swallowed hard and typed back with one thumb that he was alive, there had been an engine problem, everything was okay now. Then he sent it, then immediately added a second message because alive did not feel like enough.

He pocketed his phone and looked at where his players were waiting like little ducklings, counting again and again to make sure that they were all there, like a tired schoolteacher.

They were all here.
They were all *alive*.

By the time they reached Tampa, the mood had transformed from near-death terror into aggressive celebration of survival. Which meant the younger guys insisted on going out. Brandon didn't need to be convinced, he was already planning on getting drunk out of his mind and then calling his beautiful wife just to look at her face.

The rest of the team was immediately convinced too, Ilya as usual refused initially.

Then three different people accused him of being eighty years old, ('*a dinosaur like Hunter*' specifically, which Brandon shouldn't have found as funny as he did) and apparently that was enough to wear him down.

Brandon regretted agreeing to come almost immediately. The bar was loud, humid, overcrowded, and full of terrible music. Half the team was already drunk within an hour.

Ilya, unexpectedly, was among them, nursing his third glass of vodka. Brandon decided he was going to take a crack at trying to get him to open up, before going to bed.

"You alive?" He asked as he slid into the bench next to him.

Ilya looked over slowly, then snorted. "That is not funny to ask after today."

"Yeah, well. Near-death experiences are not good for my sense of humor."

“They are clearly not good for your face too.” Ilya squinted at him critically. “You look terrible.”

“Kind as always.”

“You are welcome.”

Brandon huffed out a laugh despite himself. Around them the bar pulsed with noise—music too loud, glasses clinking, Wyatt trying and failing to arm wrestle someone twice his size while the rookies screamed encouragement. The whole team had the frantic energy of men who’d looked death in the face and decided to spit vodka at it in retaliation.

Ilya seemed disconnected from all of it.

Brandon signaled the bartender for another cocktail. “You’re drinking vodka in Florida. That’s such a waste.”

“I do not trust tropical cocktails.”

“Coward.”, Brandon’s cocktail had a little pink umbrella in it and he loved it.

“They glow blue, Coach.”

“That’s how you know they’re good, Rozanov.”

Ilya rolled his eyes faintly and took another sip of vodka. Even drunk, he sat carefully composed, shoulders loose but spine straight, like years of discipline had rooted too deep to fully disappear.

Brandon studied him for a second.

“You know,” he said slowly, tongue too loose from the alcohol to know better, “I was kind of afraid when you transferred here, I thought you were going to bring trouble. But you’re actually kinda boring.”

Ilya looked genuinely offended. “Boring?”

“You have to admit it, Rozanov, you’re past your wild days.”

Ilya looked genuinely offended, “Is lie. I am a party animal.”

“Mm.” Brandon swirled the cocktail in his glass thoughtfully. “That’s why you’re ignoring the team’s shenanigans?”

“Yes, well, I think maybe surviving a plane crash gives me right to become boring for a bit”, Ilya replied.

“Fair enough.”

For a moment they sat in companionable silence, watching the disaster unfolding around the rest of the team.

Luca Haas was trying to climb onto a pool table while David the equipment manager shouted at him to get down before he broke his neck after surviving a plane crash just to die in a Tampa dive bar.

Brandon shook his head. “Idiots.”

“You love us.”

“Unfortunately.”

Ilya’s expression softened at that. Barely visible, but there.

Brandon wondered if there was a story there, he knew a lot of the coaches for the other teams were assholes, he didn’t know enough about Le Claire to know if he had been too.

Brandon prided himself on not being one.

“Didn’t know you believed,” Brandon said after the silence had stretched long enough to turn thoughtful.

“Believed?”

“Yes. I saw you were praying pretty hard on that plane.” The words slipped out before Brandon could reconsider them and for a second, Ilya went very still, then he laughed quietly into his glass.

“You heard that?”

“Yes, you were right in front of me.”

“Mm.”

Brandon expected him to shut down after that, like he’d done before.

Instead, Ilya stared down at the amber liquid for a long moment and said, very softly, “I do not believe, I think. It’s complicated.”

Brandon blinked. “Oh?”

Ilya nodded once. “I was not praying. I was talking to my— I was speaking to someone.”

Brandon’s heart fell to his ass. It couldn’t be, right?

“She used to hate the thought of flying.” A tiny smile flickered across his face. “Always thought planes were arrogant. Humans pretending they belong in sky. She’d tell me, ‘*Ilyusha, your feet belong on this earth, not a thousand miles in the air.*”

The accent thickened when he drank. Softer consonants. Rounder vowels.

Brandon leaned against the bar carefully. “I guess she was right after today, huh? She’s going to be insufferable about this.”

Ilya looked at him strangely, before dropping his gaze. “She would’ve been”, he was slurring a bit, and Brandon had the sudden realisation that he should maybe stop this conversation if he wanted to continue to keep the non-asshole title, “She’s dead.”

Ilya pressed his palm to his chest and Brandon was- he was speechless.

“Is silly. I asked her to not let the plane crash. I know- I know it was not her, but maybe she helped? I don’t know”, Ilya had his eyes closed now, “Is stupid to think, maybe.”

“It’s not, Ilya. It’s not, okay?”, Brandon was- he was going to cry, maybe, “I think it’s time to go to bed, buddy. It’s getting late.”

That sobered Ilya up. “Yes, you’re right. I have to call- I will go now.”

“Goodnight, Ilya”

“Yes, goodnight”, Ilya stumbled a bit before righting himself and entering the elevator.

The noise of the bar came rushing back all at once—music, shouting, glass breaking somewhere to his left followed immediately by Wyatt yelling “WORTH IT”—but Brandon felt oddly detached from all of it.

His drink had gone warm in his hand.

Oh my God.

Fuck.

Fuck.

They had been right, hadn’t they?

Brandon felt briefly humiliated about his own stupid assumption.

Jesus Christ.

Ilya pressing his palm against the chain beneath his shirt like it physically hurt him. The sadness that lived permanently at the edges of him. The way he vanished from parties. The way he’d looked when speaking of her.

Brandon exhaled slowly and leaned back against the booth cushions, staring up at the ugly neon beer signs overhead.

“She’s dead,” he murmured quietly to himself, still trying to fit the words properly into place.

It explained too much.

God.

How old had he been?

How long ago had it happened?

Ilya had been carrying that around alone this whole time.

Brandon rubbed both hands over his face hard enough to make his eyes ache.

He'd been foolish, not believing the team.

He had to do something. He decided he would have to speak to the team, see what he could do to help Ilya.

He gave one last look at the guys that were still at the bar as he walked back to his room.

All he could think about for the rest of the night was that, somewhere upstairs in their Tampa hotel room, Ilya Rozanov was probably sitting on the edge of a bed clutching a wedding ring and talking to someone he wished he could have had more days with.

Brandon's chest hurt just *thinking* about it.

Room 1919, Tampa Hotel

Ilya had just opened his hotel room when his phone ringed.

My Jane

Baby

Please call me again

I can't sleep

Sorry

Ilya called him immediately.

"Malysh?", he whispered, and wondered if Shane could smell the alcohol in his breath and the cigarette he'd smoked through the phone. Probably not.

"I'm sorry. Sorry", Shane's breath hiccuped. "Just a nightmare."

"I'm okay, moy pomidor"

"Can I see you?" Shane asked. "Can we FaceTime?"

"Yes. Of course. One second." he sent Shane a FaceTime request. He could tell right away that Shane had been crying.

"Oh," Ilya said softly. "Sweetheart. I am so sorry."

Shane gave a fragile, trembling smile. "You should be." Then he covered his mouth with his hand as his eyes filled with tears.

"I am okay," Ilya assured him. "Still here. I should not have scared you with those texts."

Shane only shook his head in response, mouth still hidden by his hand. Ilya hated seeing him so upset, but he loved seeing him. Loved his freckles and his little nose.

Earlier, Coah Wiebe had asked him if he believed. Right now, Ilya thought that if there was a God, it had to be in between Shane's freckles or sat right in the gap of Shane's teeth.

"I did mean what I wrote," Ilya said. "All of it."

Shane lowered his hand, cleared his throat, and said, "So a little brush with death and you turn into Mr. Poetry?"

Ilya laughed softly and took off his shoes, putting them neatly near the door, a habit difficult to shrug off even away from Shane. "Was it too much?"

"No. Fuck you, it was beautiful. And I'm glad it wasn't..." Shane stopped talking. Then he took a steadying breath and said, "I'm glad it wasn't...necessary."

Ilya's eyes started to burn. "Yes. Me too."

"You're not allowed to die, Ilya. Not before I do."

"Do you have to win everything?"

"I have to. I can't lose you." His voice cracked on the last word. It was a bit selfish, maybe. But Ilya thought he should be allowed to be a little selfish sometimes.

"Shane," Ilya said soothingly, "it is okay. I am okay. Is over."

"You're so far away," Shane said, sniffing hard. "I want to rent a car and drive there."

Ilya's heart soared,

Yes, yes, come here, please hold me. Hold me tight because I think I'm starting to unravel

"We will see each other soon, Malysh."

"Not soon enough."

"It is never soon enough."

"Never," Shane agreed and just stared at him for a while, as if to prove to himself that Ilya was really there.

He was lying in bed, the screen the only light in the room except for the little night light Ilya had gotten him a few Christmases ago. Shane had frowned when he'd opened it, insisting he was not afraid of the dark, Ilya, but he had never turned it off since.

Ilya quickly undressed and slid into the bedsheets himself.

Shane looked lovely. Ilya was really tired, but he didn't want to stop looking at him.

"Y'know," he said, already half gone, "I talked to my mama on the plane."

"You did?" Shane sounded soft. Ilya thought he sounded lovely too.

"Mhm." Ilya yawned, jaw cracking. "I asked her if she could save us. I told her I was not done loving you, that I needed more time."

His eyes were closing now, heavy and slow.

"I think she heard," he murmured. "Do you think she heard?"

"Yes, baby," Shane said, voice breaking slightly. "Yes. She definitely heard."

"Mm. Good." A pause. "I am… drunk, I think."

"I think so too."

"I will fall asleep, probably."

"That's okay, Ilyusha. Sweet dreams."

Shane's voice was already far away now, as if it had started coming from another room entirely.

Ilya wanted to tell him that his sweeter dreams were of Shane, but the thought never made it out properly.

Before sleep took him completely, Ilya wondered, briefly and without order, if Shane would hate him if he knew that for a second on that plane he had been grateful that he was going to see his mama again.

He didn't know what it meant about him that it had felt like relief for half a second.
He wondered if that made him a terrible person.
He wondered if he was ever going to stop wishing for impossible things.

The answer never came fast enough.

Chapter End Notes

This took a lot because I started both this and Harris's chapter together so I choose which one I liked more and then decided this one was definitely better! Let me know if you want the Harris one, though!

Oh, Brandon you were so close to the truth…
I honestly think that coach wiebe's gaydar and experience meant that he would not be fooled like the other character. Ilya had to genuinely use the (misunderstood) dead mom card for him to be like 'oh shit the little fuckers were right!'
By the way, it was important to me that Brandon's love story ended in Saskatchewan, where Hollanov's one started, dont know if any of you caught that!

I'm curious to hear your thoughts. And I want to hear what you think will cause the team to realize they were SO far off the mark, will it be the fan mail or something elseee…

the whole patrick/ brandon thing is so dear to me- because it could have easily been hollanov. patrick is not ultimately evil, hes not… he is scared, and when things get too real, when people get too scared, there's a chance theyll turn mean. in the end i think brandon has forgiven patrick. i think sometimes brandon still thinks about him- he still hopes he found his own sunshine

Have an extraordinary day xxx

Chapter 6: The one where everybody is confused (and a bit emotional)

Chapter Summary

basically I had a tough week and I'm making y'all suffer with me

Chapter Notes

ok so you remember the unraveling that Ilya mentioned last chapter? Yeah well it has happened, so maybe prepare some tissues!

the first part of the chapter is essentially a depressive episode. I could have skipped it and went right to the reveal but it didn't seem right. We saw so many snapshots of Ilya and Shane's relationship in the last 5 chapters that felt like a climax of feelings from Ilya's part, and this feels like a right place to have a breakthrough. Shane is not perfect, but he's always there for Ilya when he needs it, they just needed to communicate better!

The conversation with Wiebe is taken from the book, credit to Rachel Reid!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ilya's biggest fear when he was little was becoming like his father. He was already accustomed to his sharp words and harsh silences, he knew that he wanted to be nothing like him.

Quietly, ashamedly, sometimes he would fear becoming like his mother too.

He loved his mother in a way that felt too large for his body, like something he didn't have the language for yet.

She had been softness in a house that didn't know what to do with it — gentle hands, careful voice, the kind of kindness that never asked for anything back.

Even when she was tired, even when the world seemed to press too hard against her shoulders, she still made space for him and Alexei. Even with all her pain and all her hurt, the only thing that had touched him through her hands was love.

Her sadness had never been loud.

It hadn't broken things or thrown itself against walls the way his father's did. It had been quieter than that- slower, heavier, like sinking rather than falling.

He was afraid that one day he would carry the same silence in his bones. He hoped he would love gently the way she did. He feared he'd disappear gently too, the way she had.

He didn't really understand them at the time. His Mama's quiet days.

Ilya was loud. He was louder when he got mad, and even louder when he was sad. On most days, his head was full of words — frantic and screaming and mean. He was used to that.

Galina had told him once that he had a harder time forgiving his mother for taking her own life because she'd done it silently. She hadn't screamed or raged in the days before, like his father did when he was sad or angry or anything in between. She never had.

She had just gone—quiet.

He *hated* the quiet.

Ilya woke up on Boxing Day and he instantly knew that something was wrong.

He didn't know what time it was, only that it was still dark outside, only that he wasn't home. He was far from home. Maybe there was no home anymore. Not for him, anyway.

He didn't remember getting into bed.

He could barely piece together the night before—only fragments of the fight, blurred voices, crying, shouting, nothing in order, nothing that made sense.

He didn't know how he'd ended up here, but he was here anyway.

Ilya knew he was having a *scary bad day,* like his Mama used to call them. He'd known it since last night, really, but knowing and living it were different things entirely.

On bad days, Ilya could still go through his day. He still go to the rink, still eat. He hated himself more. He hated everything else more. Everything hurt, in a way that was always just slightly too much to endure. But he always managed to endure anyway.

This kind of bad days were worse. So much worse.

He couldn't even get out of bed at all. His mind went eerily quiet. He wasn't angry, or sad, or anything he could properly name. He had no energy to move. No energy to exist. Even crying felt like effort. Moving felt impossible. His bladder ached sharply but he couldn't *move*.

Hours passed—he was sure of it because he watched the night thin into morning, eyes fixed on the window as pale light slowly crept in. Birds began to call as dawn melted into day. He tracked the sun as it moved across the Ottowa sky, inch by inch.

It had to be close to midday by now. And still, he hadn't moved. Not even slightly.

His body hurt. His neck and shoulder were stiff and burning. He could feel the bed beneath him growing damp, but he couldn't cry, couldn't react, couldn't even feel properly anymore.

He just stayed there, completely still, hating himself for it.

He was pathetic.

He needed to *move*.

But his muscles barely responded.

Then came a knock. A voice, muffled through the door. Ah- maybe he was not dead then.

"Ilya?" Shane called. "It's me. Listen, I'm sorry about yesterday, okay? I was being a dick. Let's talk."

Shane.

Shane. Shane. *Shane*.

They had fought the night before, over Bood's barbecue. Shane hadn't wanted to go. Ilya hadn't wanted to—*exist*, really. Not like this.

But Shane didn't deserve to see him like this. He didn't deserve to love someone like Ilya. He remembered what it was like to bring a wet cloth to his Mama's room to wipe her down when she couldn't even talk. He didn't want to do that to Shane.

He didn't want to do anything anymore.

Ilya had so little left. Everything had shifted so quickly, so violently. His friends lived too far away, divided by state lines and secrets. Every familiar place in Boston was gone. Most of his relationships were cut loose and drifting. And it was all his fault.

But Shane was still here. Shane's love was still here. Ilya wondered for how long that would last, if he saw him like this.

It wasn't fair.

It wasn't fucking fair.

It wasn't fair that Shane was about to see him like this. But even that wasn't enough to make him get up.

Tears slid down his face as he tried anyway. Tried so hard to force his body into motion. He suppressed the panic, the shame, and pushed. He felt like muscles atrophied, all he could do was put his hands over his face, sob into his palms.

Fucking humiliating.

The knock came again.

“Ilya?”, Shane sounded a bit frantic now, “Ilya? I’m coming in… okay, baby? I’m just— I’m worried. Okay? Yeah. I’m coming in, I’m- I’m gonna-”

Shane sounded like he was trying to convince himself more than anything. Ilya wondered if he had sounded like that too when he was twelve and knocking on his childhood’s house bathroom’s door.

Ilya prayed Shane would give up, the door opened anyway. *His beautiful, stubborn Shane.*

He could hear Shane’s breath catch the moment he stepped inside.

“Oh,” Shane whispered, crossing the room quickly and sitting beside him on the bed, reaching towards him until they were face to face. “I’m here. It’s okay. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Shane’s hand came to his face, always gentle, and the other slid into his hair.

Ilya wanted to scream that it wasn’t okay. That it would never be okay. That nothing ever stayed okay. Because Shane didn’t want this. Not really. Not like this.

Why would he? Why would anyone want him like this?

“Let’s sit, okay? We can manage that,” Shane said softly, eyes glossy as he searched his face.

He was crying. Shane was crying, too. It made something inside Ilya twist painfully.

“Please,” Ilya whispered, voice broken.

“Ilya…”

Shane looked away for a second, jaw tight, as if he was trying to hold himself together. But it wasn’t working. Ilya always loved being able to read everything in Shane’s expression like it was his first language. Now he wished he didn’t have to see the sorrow written there.

“I can’t,” Ilya tried again.

Maybe Shane would stop. Maybe he would leave him there

“You can, Ilya. You can do this. We’re getting you up. You’ll drink some water. I got you a smoothie—your favorite. Sweet. I’ll order some McDonald’s, how’s that? Please, Ilya.”

Please, Ilya.

Please, Ilya.

Please, Mama.

Ilya nodded faintly and Shane exhaled like he’d been holding his breath for hours. Ilya hoped Shane knew that he would do anything that he asked.

Shane slid an arm around him, trying to help him up, and Ilya broke completely then, collapsing into him, sobs shaking through his chest as he buried his face against Shane's shirt.

"Oh," Shane said softly against his hair. "It's okay, baby. It's okay. We'll take a bath. I'll fix this. It'll be okay. It will. It will be okay."

His voice trembled, breaking around the edges, like he was trying to convince both of them at once.

Carefully, Shane shifted him until he was sitting upright against the wall.

Ilya felt wrecked. Completely *wrecked*.

"Okay, stay here," Shane said quickly. "I'll prepare you a bath. I'll be right back. I—just a minute."

He left before Ilya could answer.

For a second, Ilya thought he might leave. He wouldn't have blamed him if he didn't come back. Wouldn't have blamed him at all.

"I put a bath bomb in it. Those russian market ones you like," Shane said, returning quickly, trying for something like a smile.

"Thank you, solynshko," Ilya managed. His voice scraped his throat on the way out.

"Okay. It's okay," Shane said quickly.

And Ilya just sat there, wishing he had enough strength left to feel anything other than exhaustion.

When Shane had washed every sud out of Ilya's skin and mind and washed his hair tenderly, he helped Ilya stand up.

They stood there for a bit, just clinging to each other under the hot spray of the shower head.

After they had dried out, they put on comfy clothes and sat on the couch. Ilya munched on the McGriddle that Shane had somehow ordered when Ilya wasn't looking.

He felt better. Much better. Not fixed, just less far gone. Like Shane had breathed some life back into his lungs.

For a second he wondered why he'd never been able to do that for his mother.

"I need you to know-", Shane started speaking. It was five in the afternoon, probably, and words had started reappearing in Ilya's mouth.

“Malysh-”

“No, Rozanov. This is important”, Shane put one of his hands on Ilya’s thigh, and Ilya knew he was being serious because Shane didn’t even bitch about the oily McDonald’s smell. He liked when Shane called him Rozanov, it reminded him of the times when they didn’t allow themselves to cross that line. It reminded him that now they could be more. “I need you to know that I would choose you. In a heartbeat. I would leave hockey today. And I need you to believe me.”

“I do. I don’t want you to. Of course I know that, I am sorry-”

“No, you don’t apologise. You’ve given up so much and I don’t appreciate it enough. I get that”, Shane continued, his eyes were still a bit shiny.

“I would give up more,” Ilya said simply. “Anything for you.”

“I don’t want you to. God- I think… I think we believe our love must mean sacrifice. I don’t want that, Ilya”, Shane was looking at Ilya now, not at some point behind him like he did with everyone else, right at him, “It’s not fair. We deserve for our love to be simple.”

Ilya looked down at his hands.

The sandwich sat forgotten in his lap now, growing cold between the wrapper. Shane’s hand was still warm against his thigh, thumb brushing absentmindedly back and forth like he was trying to soothe something deep beneath the skin.

“I don’t know what that means yet. And I’m still so fucking scared- all the time, Ilya. That someone will find out, that they’ll hate us, that you’ll hate me”, Shane continued, “But I know I want you more than anything. And for that I- I need you to be okay. I- I was so scared when you weren’t answering, I thought-”

Shane’s voice cracked.

Ilya shook his head once, almost imperceptibly. He would never do that to Shane.

Never.

Well- Unless he *really* couldn’t help it.

He stared at the spot just over Shane’s shoulder because looking at him directly felt like too much. Because if he looked at Shane, he would see the worry there again. He would see the way Shane was trying so hard not to flinch, and that would make everything even worse.

“I don’t…” Ilya began, then stopped. His fingers twisted in the hem of his shirt. His stomach felt raw. His skin still felt too tight, too thin. Every part of him was still humming with embarrassment, with the awful fact of being seen. “I don’t want you to see me like this,” he said at last, the words small and wrecked.

Shane blinked at him. Then his expression changed, all at once turning from concern into something fiercer, something steadier. His hand slid from his thigh to his knee, holding him

there like an anchor. “I’m supposed to be the one seeing you,” he said, voice trembling with feeling. “Because I want to help you. That is the whole point. Ilya, I am not going anywhere because things are hard. In sickness and in health, right?”

Ilya looked down.

“I know this is hard,” Shane said. “I know it is. But you’re brave. And you’re *strong*. You just need a little help.”

Ilya laughed once, brokenly, without humor. “I know.”

“Real help” Shane said. “Not just me, not just one decent day and a bath and McDonald’s. More than that.”

Ilya’s shoulders sagged a fraction. “I am getting help. I have a therapist.”

Shane went still. “You do?”

“Yes. Galina.”

“Oh”, he was quiet for a moment, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Ilya let out a shaky breath. “I didn’t know how.”

Shane searched his face, then reached up and tucked a damp curl behind his ear. “How long have you been seeing her?”

“It’s been a while- probably six months?”

Shane looked genuinely stunned for a second, then let out a small, unsteady breath. “Okay. Okay, that’s—good. That’s good, baby.”

Ilya’s mouth pulled tight. He hated how badly he needed to hear that.

Shane rubbed his thumb over his knee. “And this,” he said, gesturing vaguely, trying not to make it frightening, “this is something she knows about?”

“She thinks maybe I am depressed.”

Shane’s face changed at once, worry sharpening into something more focused. “Depressed?”

Ilya nodded once. Then he forced out the rest. “Maybe like my mama. She thinks… these are depressive episodes.”

The words sounded foreign even now, ugly and clinical and too close to the bone.

Shane’s face shifted again. “Depressive episodes,” he repeated softly, like he was trying the phrase on and hating how it fit. “This- this is- okay, I will… Um- I will do some research, okay? Did she- did she tell you how we can make it better?”

We

The word hit Ilya somewhere deep in his chest.

Ilya looked at him then, really looked at him, at the panic Shane was trying to contain beneath practical questions and determination. He looked terrified, but he was still here. Still reaching.

“She told me routines help,” Ilya said quietly. “Eating. Sleeping properly. Not isolating myself.” His mouth twisted faintly. “Which I am apparently very bad at.”

Shane gave a weak huff of laughter. “Okay. We can do routines.” He nodded like he was already building plans in his head. “I’m great at routines. I’m the *king* of routines.”

Despite himself, Ilya’s shoulders loosened a fraction. “Oh- I know, Shanya.”

“And medication?” Shane asked carefully. “Did she mention medication?”

“She wanted me to see a psychiatrist first before deciding anything.” Ilya hesitated. “I keep putting it off.”

“Because you are scared?”

“Yes.”

Shane was quiet for a moment. Then, softly: “Because of your mom?”

Ilya stared down at his hands. “Yes.”

The answer sat heavily between them.

Ilya didn’t want to tell him that sometimes he thought that if he did have pills in his house, he might do something stupid, something he would never be able to take back. For some reason, Shane looked like he knew anyway.

Shane shifted closer on the couch until their knees pressed together. “Hey,” he said gently, waiting until Ilya finally looked up again. “That was different.”

Ilya’s expression tightened immediately, unconvinced. “You don’t know that.”

“It was,” Shane said honestly.

“How?”

“Because she was alone.” Shane swallowed hard afterward, emotion flashing openly across his face. “And you are not alone,” he continued, quieter now. “You have me. You have Mom and Dad. You have Galina. You have people now.” His eyes glistened again.

“Sometimes I still feel alone,” Ilya admitted in a whisper. “Even with everyone.”

“I know.” Shane’s voice cracked softly. “I think that’s what depression does.”

Ilya’s chest tightened painfully.

“It scares me,” he confessed. “Because my mama had people too. She had me.”

Shane closed his eyes briefly at that, hurt flickering across his face. “You were a kid,” he said softly.

“I should have—”

“No.” Shane’s voice sharpened instantly. “No. Don’t do that to yourself.”

Ilya flinched. Shane immediately gentled again, reaching for his hand carefully, like approaching a frightened animal.

“You were a child trying to save somebody who was sick,” he said. “That was never supposed to be your job.”

Ilya’s throat burned, Shane squeezed his hand tighter.

Ilya wished it was that simple. He wished blame and guilt could be washed away like that. But he knew that wasn’t how it worked. He knew he would have to carry this his whole life.

“I think- I think you should tell people”, Shane said after a moment.

“Tell people what?”, Ilya’s heart sank. Was Shane suggesting he tell people he’s depressed? Didn’t he see how ashamed Ilya was even to tell *him* about it?

“About us. Your friends on the team at least”, Shane continued, he had his planning face on, and it reminded Ilya of that perfect night at the Cottage years ago, when they’d confessed their love for the first time, “I have Hayden, and Rose knows I’m gay. It helps. I think you deserve to have people too. I know it wouldn’t fix anything but it might help, and-”

“Shane if this is because I was a bit sad this morning-”, he interrupted, snapping out of his stupor.

“Rozanov, you’re not sad. You’re fucking depressed. And you need a support system”, Shane shut him up, “You deserve a support system.”

What was happening? *What was Shane saying?*

“You’re not ready, malysh”

“I will never be ready, Ilya. Not fully- fuck”, Shane closed his eyes for a second, when he opened them up they were damp again, “I don’t think this- this *shame* is ever going away. I just need to fight against it.”

“I don’t want you to hurt because of me.”

Shane’s expression softened so quickly it hurt to look at. “Oh, baby,” he whispered.

Ilya immediately wanted to take the words back. Because they sounded selfish when spoken aloud, manipulative.

Shane turned more fully toward him on the couch, one leg folding underneath himself. “You think you hurt me?”

“Yes,” Ilya admitted quietly.

“Ilya.” Shane shook his head once, slow and disbelieving. “Sometimes I think you really don’t understand what you are to me.”

Ilya looked away.

“No, listen to me.” Shane reached out, gently catching his chin until he looked back again. “You are the best thing that has ever happened to me. You being okay is my first priority, and if that means telling people, that’s what we are going to do.”

“But hockey—”

“I know what hockey is like.” For a moment Shane looked older somehow, worn thin around the edges by years of swallowing himself down small enough to survive locker rooms and interviews and stupid jokes and careful silences. Ilya knew that he would never understand what it was like for Shane in the league, what it had been like to be the best and the Asian one. He wished he could take the weight off of his shoulder and bare himself. “I know exactly what it’s like,” he repeated more quietly. “I know what they say. I know how people look at you. I know what happens to guys who are different.”

His eyes dropped briefly to their joined hands.

“And I’m tired, Ilya. Of being scared all the time.” Shane laughed faintly, bitter around the edges. “Of acting like loving you is something shameful I have to hide.” He swallowed. “I hate what it does to you- to us.”

Ilya’s chest tightened painfully.

Shane rubbed at his own eyes quickly before continuing. “You isolate yourself. You pull away from everyone and then you sit there convinced you’re alone.” His voice wavered. “And I keep thinking maybe if somebody else knew—somebody you trusted—then maybe you’d have more people to catch you before it gets this bad.”

Ilya stared at him silently.

“I’m not saying I’m ready to hold a press conference,” Shane said quickly, trying to lighten the heaviness for a second. “Jesus Christ, I think I’d actually throw up.”

A tiny smile flickered weakly across Ilya’s mouth despite himself.

“But the guys on your team are amazing,” he continued. “And you trust them.” He hesitated. “You should have support that isn’t just me.” Shane looked down for a moment, jaw trembling before he forced himself onward. His eyes were almost liquid, Ilya wanted to drown in them. “This morning- I thought something happened to you. And all I could think was that nobody would even know to come looking except me.”

The shame hit sharp and immediate.

“Shane—”

“I- I think we should go to the barbecue tonight”, Shane burst out, tone decisive.

“What?! But yesterday you said-”, Ilya was too stunned to form a complete sentence.

“I know what I said. I changed my mind. I think we should go, as boyfriends-”

“Fiancés,” Ilya corrected automatically, because apparently his brain had decided that was the important part.

For a second Shane just blinked at him, almost annoyed at the interruption, and then something unbearably soft crossed his face.

“Fiancés,” Shane agreed quietly, clearing his throat, visibly trying to get himself back on track. “Right. Yes. Fiancés.” His mouth twitched faintly. “And I think maybe you tell the guys then.”

Ilya felt genuine panic lance through him.

“Tonight?”

“I’ll wait in the car,” Shane said quickly, like he had already thought this through. “You can talk to them first. Then I’ll come out when you’re ready.”

The room went quiet. Ilya could hear his own heartbeat now, uneven and quick beneath his ribs.

He tried to picture it: the team crowded around Bood’s backyard with beers in their hands and smoke in the air. Someone yelling about the new trades. Someone else stealing chips straight from the bag. And then him walking in with Shane.

His stomach twisted violently.

“I can’t breathe even thinking about this.”

Shane smiled faintly. “Yeah. I know the feeling.”

Ilya looked over at him sharply then.

Shane was trying very hard to look calm, but now that he knew what to look for, Ilya could see all the cracks underneath it: the tension in his shoulders, the way his fingers kept flexing against his knee, the slight too-bright shine in his eyes.

“You are terrified,” Ilya realised softly.

Shane laughed once under his breath. “I’m absolutely fucking terrified.”

“Then why are you pushing?”

“Because I love you more than I’m afraid,” he said simply.

Ilya’s chest ached.

“And because,” Shane continued, quieter now, “I saw what happened this morning. I know it wasn’t the first time it did.” His voice roughened around the edges again. “I saw how alone you felt. And I just…” He swallowed hard. “You deserve community,” Shane said softly. “You deserve people who know you. Fully.” His thumb brushed across Ilya’s knuckles. “I think secrecy is eating us alive.”

Ilya hated how true that felt.

For years now his life had been split carefully— hockey on one side, Shane on the other, each one managed with exhausting precision so they never intertwined.

But lately it felt less like balance and more like being torn apart in the middle.

“I want to do this so much,” Ilya admitted, “but I don’t want you to regret this.”

“I won’t.”

“You can’t promise me that.”

“I can, and I am”, Shane kissed him softly, chuckling softly when Ilya tried to chase after him, “I have never regretted you in my entire life.”

And Ilya-

Ilya *loved him* so much.

God- The word love was starting to become frayed at the edges, overused and too tight to hold the feelings he felt towards Shane. Like the whole world spun around him. Like he was the Moon that Ilya gravitated towards.

Years ago, he remembered him and Svetlana used to spend hours just smoking weed in his Boston apartment, talking about nothing and everything.

Once, out of nowhere, she had explaining the pulsar map that was on the Voyager probe to him- something she’d learned in school before she dropped out- they had been drunk on expensive vodka and wonder, sprawled across the bed while Ilya pretended to understand the science behind it.

What he did understand was that humanity had carved directions into gold and sent them into space that said:

this is where we are.

this is how you find Earth.

At the time, Ilya had thought it was unbearably optimistic. To believe something lost in all that darkness could still find its way home.

Right now, loving Shane felt a little like that.

Like no matter how far Ilya drifted — through grief, through shame, through the terrible quiet inside his own mind — some part of him remained oriented toward Shane with impossible certainty.

Shane was his fixed point. The place every part of Ilya instinctively tried to return to.

“Okay”, he said, in his stupid accent that Shane loved, “We will go then. And I will tell.”

“Alright. We’re doing this”, Shane replied, like bracing himself for battle.

Because Ilya was incapable of being sincere for too long, he grabbed Shane’s pec through his shirt and whispered, “Are you going to wear that slutty shirt that Rose bought you?”

“Get off, asshole”, Shane shoved him away, getting up and walking towards their room, “We’re back in joking mood, I see.”

“I would never joke about your slutty shirt, Shane. Is very serious”, Ilya yelled to Shane’s retrieving figure. When he was gone, Ilya turned his face to the couch pillow to bury his smile in.

He couldn’t believe they were doing this.

Fuck.

They were really doing this.

Bood’s house was beautiful.

He hosted the party in the back deck. An enormous space, with a slatted wood ceiling that was lined with lights. It almost gave the illusion of being indoors, except for the flurries of snow that caught in the light.

Despite the weather, the space was warm with electric heaters, people, and the mouth-watering aroma of grilled meat. People lounged on cushioned furniture, some in a circle around a firepit, some on the built-in benches that lined the perimeter of the deck.

When Ilya arrived, they all made a big fuss. Which, honestly, was exactly what he needed.

“Look who decided to show up,” Bood boomed first, already grinning as he pushed through a cluster of guys to get to the deck steps. “The captain, the myth, the legend.”

“Please,” Ilya said, taking off his gloves with exaggerated suffering. “I am very humble. It is my greatest flaw.”

A couple of guys laughed immediately.

Someone—he thought maybe Luca—snorted into his beer.

Ilya let his face settle into the version of himself that belonged here: easy mouth, sharp eyes, a little smug, a little amused, a little dangerous in the way people found charming when it wasn’t aimed at them.

“I was sure you were not going to come”, Bood admitted, shiny eyed.

“I was not going to”, Ilya replied, just as honest, “But I need to speak to the team. Is easier when you are all drunk off your asses.”

“Ohh”, Wyatt joked, “Are we in trouble, Captain?”

“No. No”, Ilya wanted to get this out of the way, he had told Shane to come in in ten minutes, so he needed to say something now, “Is just- I need to tell you something.”

The laughter around him softened, but didn’t disappear.

Ilya exhaled once through his nose, slow. He glanced over the deck, taking it in properly now: the firepit glowing, the steam rising off half-empty trays of food, the easy chaos of a team pretending—just for a few hours—that nothing outside this house existed.

“Can we go inside, or something?” he said at last.

That got a few confused looks.

“Inside?” Young echoed, lifting his beer. “We just got warm out here.”

“I know,” Ilya said. “That is why I am asking now, before you get more comfortable and start ignoring me.”

A ripple of chuckles moved through the group.

Bood leaned in a little. “Is everything okay, Cap?”

“Yes. Yes-” Ilya paused, corrected himself with a faint tilt of his head, “It is not bad. Just….”

Wyatt pushed himself off the railing. “Nobody got traded, right?”

“What?! Bozhe *moy*. Inside,” Ilya said again, more firmly this time, nodding toward the glass doors. “Please. I need all of you inside.”

That, at least, got movement.

There were a few groans, a couple of dramatic complaints about abandoning the heaters, and one very loud, very theatrical “this had better be important,” but the whole group began

drifting toward the house in a loose herd.

Bood fell into step beside Ilya like he had appointed himself escort, while the rest of the team trailed behind, still talking over one another as they filed in.

The house was just as impressive on the inside—warm wood, clean lines, low golden light, and enough space to hold the entire team without anyone having to stand too close.

Someone had already set out drinks on the kitchen island. Ilya waited until the last of them came in before shutting the door behind them, cutting off the noise of the wind.

That helped. It also made it feel, suddenly, like there was no escaping this. He cleared his throat.

"Okay," he said, and immediately hated how small it sounded in the middle of all that room.

Wyatt folded his arms, frowning. "You're really making this dramatic now."

"I am not," Ilya said. Then, because he could feel the words slipping away from him if he did not force them out quickly, he took a breath and said, "I need to tell you something personal."

The words came out quieter than Ilya intended. The team seemed to hold its breath around him.

Bood, who had been half-leaning on the wall, looked up first. His face softened immediately, like he had decided whatever this was, it was probably going to be serious. "Yeah?" he said gently.

Ilya swallowed.

He had rehearsed this in his head all night. Twice in the shower. Once in the car. Again while telling Shane. None of it had helped. His pulse was thudding hard enough that he could feel it in his throat.

He looked down at the floor for a second, then forced himself to look back up at them.

"You know how I do not really hang out outside the rink," he began, and immediately heard how awkward it sounded. He winced, then kept going before anyone could interrupt. "And how I am never around after games. Or at summer stuff. Or really anywhere that is not practice, travel, or here?"

A few heads nodded.

"Yes," Bood said.

Ilya wet his lips. "And how I do not really date. Not in the way you all think. I do not go out, I do not party, I do not—" He cut himself off, heat rushing to his face. "I mean, I am not out there picking up girls like you thought I was."

Bood blinked. "Yeah, cap."

“And,” Ilya said, his voice getting thinner the more he spoke, “how I am never really available during the summer. I am always... out of reach.”

“Um,” Luca said slowly, his expression turning thoughtful. “Yeah. We know.”

Ilya stared at them, for one wild second, he was sure he had somehow lost his English. “Well,” he said carefully, “that is because it is. It is—” He stopped, took a breath, and made himself continue. “It is because I am— I have-” He tried to force the words out of his mouth.

“It’s okay, cap,” Bood said, raising a hand like he was soothing a nervous horse. “You do not have to say it out loud.”

Ilya froze.

Around the room, the others had started looking at one another with a awful, solemn understanding, nodding.

Ilya’s stomach dropped.

“I do not?” he asked, suddenly suspicious.

“Yeah,” Wyatt said, and there was a strange, almost pitying confidence in his voice. “We figured it out a while ago.”

Ilya blinked. “You did?”

What?

How was that possible?

They had been so so careful. So damn careful.

Had Pike been right? Could they read it in his eyes?

Luca nodded. “Yeah- your first year, probably.”

“You—” Ilya looked from one face to another. “What did you figure out?”

This had to be a mistake.

There was no way. This had to be a misunderstanding. There was no way they had figured it out. *Right?*

Wyatt gestured vaguely, as if the answer was obvious. “Roz, you were not subtle.”

“I was not subtle about what?”, Ilya was probably hyperventilating. Was this a panicked attack? Fuck he shouldn’t have done this today, he knew it was stupid and now here he was trying not to lose his shit in front of a dozen 6’3 hockey players.

Dykistra lifted his chin toward Ilya’s torso. “Well for one- The ring.”

Ilya went still.

Oh my god.

They knew.

They knew.

How the fuck did they know? Ilya had hidden the ring so carefully, he made sure to always put his shirt on before exiting the shower. How?

“The ring,” Bood repeated, like that explained everything. “And the yogurt.”

Ilya turned slowly to stare at him, genuinely confused now. “The yogurt?”

“Yes, I told them about the yogurt at your house. Sorry. Also the empty frames,” Luca added, looking like a kicked puppy.

“Right, I noticed those too”, Young muttered from his right.

“The- what? What is happening right now?”

“They’re right, Ilya”, Coach said, from his place perched on the couch, a small sympathetic frown on his face “I mean- even without all that- you can see it in your eyes.”

Oh Shane was going to murder him, maybe. Probably.

But- They knew, they knew.

And- they did not hate him?

“We love you cap, of course we noticed”, Bood said, probably concerned about Ilya’s silence.

“So- You know?” Ilya asked, voice smaller than he intended.The room answered all at once.

“Yeah, cap.”

“Of course.”

“We figured it out a while ago.”

Something in Ilya’s chest loosened so suddenly it almost hurt.

“You knew,” he repeated slowly, he needed to make sure. “And you do not care.”

Wyatt frowned immediately. “What? No, of course we care.”

The relief stumbled a little.

“No, I mean—” Ilya shook his head once. “You just said you were okay with it.”

“I mean- of course? We are,” Bood said gently. “Nobody here thinks less of you, cap.”

There was something strange about the way he said it, Ilya felt himself straighten instinctively, shoulders pulling tight. It sounded maybe too close to those arguments he’d had with Alexei when he was younger. *I don’t hate them, I just can’t support their lifestyle, Ilya*.

Ilya didn’t have the time to find what to say before Luca, stood stiffly against the kitchen island continued to talk. “Honestly, a lot of things made sense when we figured it out.”

“Like what?” Ilya asked. Maybe he had misunderstood their tone. They were being supportive, and Ilya was just being too harsh.

“The way you are,” Young answered before anyone else could. And- okay. Maybe he didn’t mean it to sound like that. Maybe Ilya was just too sensitive today.

“The way I am,” he repeated, begging for them to say something that would ease the bolder that had been building on his chest.

Young nodded, oblivious. “Yeah. You’re kinda weird sometimes.”

Oh-

“Jesus, rook. You can’t just fucking say that!” Dykistra added. “But yeah, man. You like- never bring anyone around.”

“I’m sorry but you also look miserable half the time,” Wyatt said, then grimaced. “I mean— not because of— you know what I mean.”

No, Ilya did not know what he meant. The relief inside him had started curdling into something else. Something wary.

Bood rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. “Honestly, man… we just figured you were still dealing with it.”

Still dealing with it.

Ilya blinked slowly, a small cold feeling started somewhere near the base of his spine.

“With what?” he asked carefully.

Wyatt answered first, voice quieter now. “I mean… that kind of thing doesn’t really go away, right?”

“You think I want it to go away?”

Bood’s expression softened immediately, which only made Ilya’s stomach twist harder.

“No- no of course. We understand it must be really tough to get over something like that.”

“Yeah,” Wyatt said carefully. “You’re like- so strong. I don’t think I would be able to survive if it had been me.”

The room hummed with quiet agreement.

Something hot flashed through Ilya’s chest.

“You would die more than live like me?”, Ilya asked. And he sounded so stupid, he knew he messed up. That there was a verb he had conjugated wrong or something, and he must sound idiotic.

Ilya was so smart in Russian and here he was, talking like a fucking child because he was so sad he couldn’t think straight.

Suddenly Ilya was fourteen again and translating for his father what his scouts had said. And the scouts always spoke too slow and enunciated so clearly and Ilya wanted to punch their teeth out and scream because they would always treat him like he was stupid.

“Oh,” Wyatt said quickly. “No, I didn’t mean—”

“You clearly meant something.”

“No one’s judging you”, Bood cut in fast, “I mean- everyone deals with it differently. We’re just saying you’re really brave for being able to deal with it like this.”

Brave.

Brave for dealing with it?

No. Fuck them.

Fuck each one of his teammates and fuck his coach for being silent while this was happening and looking at him with his stupid pensive face. Fuck Shane for suggesting this and fuck Ilya for being so naive in thinking he had found brothers in them.

“You know,” Ilya said carefully, trying to turn the sadness that was trying to steal the words from his mouth into something else, “I didn’t expect this. Not from you.”

The room went still. Wyatt blinked. “What?”

“What?”, he mocked, “I played with you for years. Years. I help you rise from bottom of the league. And this is what you think of me?” Ilya snapped quietly.

The guys exchanged confused looks. Bood looked genuinely horrified now. “Cap, what? That’s not—”

Dykistra interjected. “Wait.”

Ilya crossed his arms tightly over his chest.

“No,” he said. “I wait for fucking nothing. I will leave, now. I really thought you’d- I mean, even you, Barret? Never-fucking-mind, you’re all fucking- fucking…”

He couldn’t even finish the thought. He should have said traitors, maybe assholes. For some reason, he just wanted to say *mean*.

“No, seriously,” Dykistra said again slowly. “I think maybe we’re talking about dif-.”

Someone knocked on the window. Ilya felt his shoulder curve a bit. Fuck.

Shane didn’t deserve to hear any of the shit they were saying.

“Ilya? It’s been ten minutes”, Shane said, shyly from the window, and Ilya needed to get them away from this, “Um- hi everyone. I’m Shane- you know that, sorry. I’m Ilya’s b-”

Ilya crossed the room quickly, taking Shane’s hand in his. “No, malysh. We go now. It looks like we are not welcome.”

“What? I thought-”, Shane scrunched his nose, looking like a confused kitten.

Ilya loved him. So much. He wondered if they would still think him disgusting if they knew the amount of love he carried for Shane.

“They feel sorry for me, they don’t know how we live like this”, Ilya left out the part where they’d told him they would rather kill themselves than be gay, “Liking cock is a disease now, I think.”

“What?”

“Liking *What*?!”

“What the fuck is happening and why is Shane Hollander in my living room?”

Ilya looked at Bood like he was stupid, “What? You are smart enough to figure out I like men but you didn’t know about him?”

“You like men?”, Troy asked, genuine surprise on his face.

“Yes? Weren’t you all there for the conversation we just had?”

“No- wait. But what about Jane?!”, Wyatt almost shrieked.

“Jane? How do you know about Jane?”, Ilya squeezed Shane’s hand tighter.

“So there is a Jane!”, Bood exclaimed, “We were right.”

“No, you don’t understand. Jane is-”, Ilya tried before Troy interrupted.

“She passed, right?”

Passed? Passed what?

Ilya's head was hurting.

Ilya looked at Shane, knowing that he would help him. Shane's eyes had gone cartoonishly wide. "It means dead. They think I'm dead."

"What?", Ilya demanded, "You think Shane is dead?"

"No, no. Not Shane. Jane. Your late wife, right?", Dykistra added.

"My- what?"

The room had gone so silent that even the heater's low hum seemed too loud. Ilya stared at them one by one, waiting for someone—anyone—to laugh, to grin, to say they were joking.

No one did.

Bood looked like he had been struck physically. Wyatt's mouth was open. Luca had gone white around the nose. Even Shane had frozen beside Ilya, his fingers still hooked loosely around Ilya's.

"What do you mean," Ilya said, very slowly, because his voice was suddenly too thin to trust, "my late wife?"

Dykistra blinked. "You- You were married, right?"

"My late wife," Ilya repeated, each word separate now, sharp with disbelief. "Jane."

There was a beat.

Shane, who had been quiet through the first wave of chaos, turned his head toward him with exquisite care, if only with a bit of humour. "Ilya," he said softly, "did you just tell them I was your wife?"

Ilya stared at him, and his mouth opened, closed and then opened again.

He looked back at the team. "You thought- you thought I was telling you about my late wife?"

"Which you don't have, to be clear.", Shane added, sounding somewhat jealous of the nonexistent Jane.

Bood made a sound like his soul had left his body.

"Oh my God," Luca whispered.

"Isn't that what you were trying to tell us?", Coach Wiebe spoke up.

"No. I was telling you that Shane here, he is my fiancée."

"Oh", Troy murmured, looking at Harris, instead of Ilya.

The entire room collapsed at once.

Wyatt bent over laughing so hard he had to brace himself on the counter. Young actually slid down the side of the kitchen island, one hand over his face. Dykistra turned away and swore into his sleeve, shoulders shaking. Even Coach had to look down at the floor, his mouth twitching badly enough to count as a betrayal.

Bood stood frozen for one full second longer than everyone else, then slapped both hands over his face.

“No,” he groaned. “No, no, no. Oh, fuck. You must have thought we were terrible, dude.”

“You thought I was,” Ilya asked again, needing to clarify, “a widower.”

Wyatt made a helpless little gesture. “In our defense—”

“There is no defense,” Shane said, and now he was laughing too, but he sounded mostly astonished. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I just need everyone to know that I am not dead.”

“No,” Bood said, dropping one hand from his face. His eyes were huge with horror. “Wait— hold on. Then who is Jane?”

“It’s not that hard to understand, really”, Shane started, because Ilya was stuck between a hysterical laugh and a mental breakdown, “Jane- Shane. It’s our code name. He’s Lily in my phone.”

“That explains the ring. And the yogurt, you said you still had it from when sh-he was alive-”, Luca started.

“No. I said *around*. Is for Shane, I buy it for him when he’s in Ottowa.”, Ilya looked at Shane meaningfully. Remembering the conversation they had in Montreal once, breathing in each other’s air.

“You said you speak with her before going to sleep every night. And that the bed’s always empty. We thought-”, Wyatt continued.

Ilya winced, and Shane squeezed his hand tighter, “We always call before sleeping. And we don’t get to sleep in the same bed a lot during the season…”

“And you can’t have children yet because- you’re not… out?”

Ilya just nodded, talking about it felt like squeezing a lemon in a fresh wound.

“Oh”, Bood said.

“Yes. Oh”, Ilya replied with a roll of his eyes.

“You were asking for him, weren’t you.” Troy asked, suddenly, pensive, “When you were hit by Kent. You asked for Jane.”

Shane took a step closer to him, “Yes. I was not- what is word?”

“Lucid. He was not lucid. He was probably saying Shane. It sounds a lot like Jane if you’ve convinced yourself your teammates a widower”, Shane rolled his eyes too.

“Fuck”, Wyatt whined, “We’re idiots, aren’t we.”

“Yep”, Ilya replied. He knew it was sick, but he was so glad that he had misunderstood, that his teammates weren’t sad for him because he met the love of his life and it happened to be a man.

“So- Shane’s your boyfriend?”

“Fiancée”, Shane corrected, shooting Ilya a wink.

“Fiancée. Wow”, Bood murmured, “How’d you manage to bag that, Cap?”

“Right!?”, Dykistra continued, “Good job, Capitaine.”

“Sorry? I am catch of the relationship. You should ask him how he managed to bag me”, Ilya put a hand on his chest, feigning disappointment.

A bunch of the guys snorted, “Yeah dude, you tell yourself that. That is three time Stanley Cup winner, four time voted hottest man in the league Shane Hollander”, Young laughed.

“Ilya has more Hart trophies, though”, Luca murmured, and his eyes widened suddenly, as if he hadn’t meant to say that out loud. “Um- Sorry.”

“That is why you are my favourite son, little onion”, Ilya laughed as Luca’s cheeks grew redder. He didn’t enjoy that his name in Russian was the world for onion, meanwhile Ilya never let him forget it.

“You don’t have to be sorry, Haas”, Shane intercepted before Ilya could say anything else, “He deserved every single one of them. I mean- I will probably beat him soon, of course. But I’ll let him have it for now.”

Ilya wanted to bite him, he wanted to put his in his pocket and carry him around.

The room was still laughing when Coach cleared his throat. Years of conditioning kicked in and conversations stumbled to a stop, guys straightened unconsciously. Even Wyatt managed to drag himself upright from where he'd been folded over the counter.

Coach looked around the room quietly for a second, then at Ilya and then at Shane.

"Okay," he said. "Before somebody says something even dumber than what we've already managed tonight."

"That seems unlikely," Shane muttered, though it was for Ilya only.

"I think there was something important in the middle of all this." The room quieted. "So," Coach continued, looking directly at him. "Let's try this again."

Ilya immediately hated where this was going. "No, I don't think it is necessary."

"It is, you were about to say something important."

"No, is fine, really", Ilya pressed.

"Rozanov."

Bozhe moi. The last name and the full-coach voice. Ilya briefly considered jumping through the window.

Beside him, Shane was openly smiling. *Traitor*.

Coach folded his arms. "You were trying to tell us something."

The room waited patiently, and Ilya looked at the ceiling, at the floor, at literally anything except the twenty people staring at him.

Then Shane bumped their shoulders together once, and it reminded Ilya of all those interviews they did, communicating solely with the touch of their shoes.

It was enough to give him some courage. Ilya exhaled. "I am bisexual."

The words landed in the room, uneventfully. Nothing exploded, nobody looked disgusted or uncomfortable.

Shane's hand found his again.

"I am bisexual," Ilya repeated more firmly. "And Shane is my fiancé."

For a second nobody spoke. Then Bood stepped forward. The A to his C, the first brother he'd found in Ottowa. Always his right wing.

"Congratulations, Cap. On the engagement", Bood hugged him tightly and a knot loosened somewhere behind Ilya's ribs. "Thank you."

Wyatt nodded immediately. "Yeah."

Luca followed. "Congratulations."

Then Troy. Then Dykistra. Then Young. Then everyone else.

Ilya found himself smiling despite everything, beside him, Shane's smile had gone softer too.

Then Wyatt squinted. "Wait."

The room collectively groaned. Ilya almost rolled his eyes again, "What is it, now?"

Wyatt arched a brow. "How long?"

Shane and Ilya exchanged a glance. "How long what?" Shane asked.

"How long have you been together?"

"Oh…", Shane's cheeks were growing redder, in that perfect way that made his freckles stand out even more.

The room perked up instantly.

Ilya felt dread settle over him. "Is complicated..."

"C'mon cap, don't spare us the details!", Young exclaimed and Ilya was going to make them run bag skates, *so* many bag skates.

Shane looked at him one second, inquisitive, *Can I? Should we?*

Ilya shrugged one shoulder, *Why not?*

Shane turned to the team, "We met when we were seventeen, he was smoking in a non-smoking area."

Ilya closed his eyes.

Of course.

Of course that was where Shane started.

That was where it all started, really.

After, when the guys had had too many beers and the crazy day Ilya came crushing on his shoulders, Shane saw the way he was starting squirm and announced that they were going to leave.

"Alright," Bood said, "But from now on, you're only invited if you bring your fiancée, Rozanov."

"Yes- yes", Ilya snorted, "Now, how you say- hop off his dick!"

"Ilya, can we talk for a second?", Coach Wiebe asked, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Um- sure, coach"

After they'd sit down on Bood's couch, away from any of the other players, Coach Wiebe started to talk.

"I am a rookie coach and one that is not particularly popular with Crowell- I don't know how much help I can be if you ever decide to come out. But know that you have my support,

whatever happens."

That was more than Ilya had expected from his coach. "Thank you," he said, sincerely.

Wiebe studied him for a long moment, then seemed to reach a decision. "I'm going to share something with you that I've only ever told my wife."

Oh god.

"Okay," Ilya said.

"When I was playing my second season, in Detroit, I had a thing with one of my teammates. It doesn't matter who, and I'm not going to tell you, but we got drunk and fooled around one night during a road trip and then we...kept doing it a bit. For a few months."

Ilya didn't say a word

Wiebe grimaced. "I'm not telling this right. The truth was, I'd been half in love with him before we first hooked up-before I'd even thought that was a possibility-and after that first night, I fell the rest of the way. I was nuts about him. But he was...he said he didn't feel that way about me."

"He was scared," Ilya said.

"Maybe. Or maybe he truly only wanted a bit of release on the road. We never hooked up at home. But I thought he might have returned the feelings more than he'd let on." Wiebe waved a hand.

"Anyway. It all fell apart when I told him I loved him. He, uh, didn't take it well. I ended up being sent down to the AHL for a while after that, and then he was traded in the summer. Haven't spoken to him since."

Ilya didn't know what to say. He'd been the first one to say "I love you" in his and Shane's relationship. What if Shane hadn't said it back? What if he'd been horrified?

"I am sorry that happened to you," Ilya said.

Wiebe just nodded. "Now I look back and I think, maybe he saved me a whole mountain of trouble. If we'd been a real couple, trying to hide, I can imagine how hard that would have been."

He gave a small smile. "So that's a long-winded way of saying I have your back. That I understand."

Ilya's lips curved up. "This team is very gay."

Wiebe laughed. "Technically, I'm bisexual. To be clear, I love my wife. I'm not hiding anything."

Ilya's smile grew. "Bisexual! Great. Yes, me too."

"I figured, what with your long and impressive history with the ladies."

"That is over. It has been only Shane for a long time."

"I'm glad you have each other. You know I had my suspicions."

“Really?”

“Not about Hollander, no. About you. My gaydar is not broken”

“No, it is not” Ilya stood as Coach did.

Then Wiebe embraced him in a hug, and slapped his back for good measure.

“I just- I don’t understand one thing”, Coach Wiebe said, his eyes particularly shiny, “in Tampa, you said you spoke to your late wife, on that plane.”

Oh.

“I was not-”, Ilya’s voice was suddenly betraying him, “I was talking about my mother. She passed away when I was twelve.”

“Oh”, Coach Wiebe looked at him with understanding in his eyes, “She would be proud of you for today, Ilya.”

Fuck, Ilya was going to cry *again*.

Coach Wiebe patted his shoulder once, before heading toward the door. "Stay strong, Captain. We'll be needing you in the playoffs."

"Keep winning," Ilya instructed, his shoulders to the other man, to hide his teary eyes.

Wiebe chuckled softly. "With you on this team? Easy."

After Coach Wiebe left, Ilya stayed where he was for a moment.

The apartment was loud again beyond the doorway—laughter, someone arguing about hockey, a burst of music from a phone speaker—but it all sounded distant.

She would be proud of you for today.

Ilya let himself believe it, let himself ignore the voice in his head that told him she’d be disgusted by him.

She would be proud. Yes, that sounded more like his Mama.

Eventually he scrubbed a hand across his eyes and blew out a breath.

"Okay," he muttered to himself. "Enough crying."

He opened the door and stepped back into the party.

He made it exactly three steps before someone caught his arm.

"Barret?", Ilya asked, confused when Troy didn't let his arm go.

For a second neither of them said anything, then Troy stepped forward and wrapped both arms around him. Hard.

Ilya's first thought is Ouch.

His second is "Oh".

Troy didn't answer, he just squeezed tighter. Ilya stood frozen for a second before slowly hugging him back. Around them, conversations kept rolling. Nobody paid much attention to the two 6'2 men grasping at each other like they were trying to speak without opening their mouth.

Troy still didn't say anything. But Ilya understood.

He remembered Toronto, the jokes, the comments, the laughs. The things Troy had said back when he was younger and dumber and trying too hard to fit into a locker room that rewarded cruelty.

Mostly, he remembered the awkward apologies that had come later, the effort, the change.

Mostly, he realised how Troy had started to look at Harris.

The hug was an apology, a gesture of love, and of recognition.

After a long moment Troy finally let him go, his eyes were suspiciously shiny. "Okay," Troy muttered. There was another awkward silence before Troy pointed a finger at him. "You make me do emotional stuff again and I'm fighting you."

Ilya barked out a laugh. "Very scary."

Troy nodded once and then he disappeared toward the kitchen.

Ilya shook his head and continued his way to Shane. He found him rather quickly, being cornered by Bood.

"...and I'm serious," Bood was saying. Was Ilya going to commit murder?

"I know", Shane was smiling. Maybe no murder.

"You are smiling, I am serious.", Bood continued, straightening himself as to assert himself, even if he already towered over Shane.

Ilya stopped right behind him and Shane sighed.

"I am smiling because I like that you all care for him. I will never hurt him", Shane looked at Ilya as he said it,"And you do realize he's standing right behind you, don't you?"

Bood turned and Ilya folded his arms. "You are threatening my boyfriend?"

"Fuck", Bood put a hand on his heart, “How long were you standing there, Jesus.”

“Don’t threaten my fiancée”, Ilya continued darkly.

“Ilya”, Shane reprimanded, “he was warning me to never hurt you.”

Ilya’s heart melted a bit. “Oh, okay. Then you can continue threatening my fiancée.”

Ilya loved saying that. My fiancée. My fiancée. *God*, he wanted to giggle, his *fiancée*.

“Come here, you fucker”, Bood snorted, wrapping his gigantic tattooed arms around Ilya. They were good arms. Maybe Ilya could convince Shane to get some tattoos too. Eh, probably not.

“We love you, man”

“I love you fuckers too”, Ilya replied, “Even if you are stupid.”

“Yeah yeah”, Bood punched his arm, “Get your asses off my poarch.”

A chorus of goodbyes echoed as they made their way to the car.

Shane slid into the driver’s seat quietly, and Ilya watched the trees and beautiful roads of Ottawa as they drove home in silence.

Ilya noticed he’d started crying when he licked his lips and tasted something salty.

By the time they made it into their garage, Ilya was sobbing openly.

Shane said nothing at first. He just parked, killed the engine, and sat there with both hands still on the wheel, letting the silence settle around them.

The garage light buzzed overhead.

Ilya pressed the heel of one hand hard against his mouth, but it did nothing to stop the tears. They came hot and humiliating, and once he started he could not seem to make his body remember how to stop.

He hated crying like this. Hated feeling so exposed, so wrecked, like the rest of him had finally caught up to the part he had been holding together all night.

“Hey,” Shane said at last, very softly.

Ilya made a broken noise that might have been a laugh if it had not been so full of grief.

Shane turned in his seat and looked at him properly. “Come here,” he said.

Ilya shook his head once, helplessly, nonsensically, but Shane was already reaching for him. He undid his seatbelt and crossed the narrow space between them, one hand going to the back of Ilya's neck, the other around his ribs, pulling him in until Ilya folded against him with a shuddering breath.

Ilya buried his face in Shane's shoulder and cried harder, his whole body shaking now, the tears soaking straight through Shane's shirt. Shame flashed hot through him even through the sobbing, but Shane only held tighter, one palm rubbing slow circles between his shoulder blades.

"It's okay," Shane murmured into his hair. "I've got you."

"I am sor-" he tried, and failed.

Shane's hand stroked once down the back of his neck.

"Don't."

Ilya squeezed his eyes shut, but it didn't help.

He felt young. He felt twelve years old and standing in a doorway that had changed his life forever. He felt twenty and holding the cup for the first time. He felt twenty eight and holding his father's grave with the same arms he held the love of his life with.

He felt everything, all at once.

Shane kissed the side of his head. Ilya pressed a hand over his mouth, laughing through the tears. "I am sorry," he managed, voice wrecked. "I am just—"

He stopped, because the rest of it came out as another sob. Shane just pushed his hair back, waiting for him to finish his thought. Ilya didn't have to run with him, he didn't have to talk quickly to be sure he would be heard. He could just be.

"I am happy," he said, and the words came out strangled with it. "I am just very happy."

For a second Shane only stared, then his mouth tipped up, slow and tender, and he reached over to cup Ilya's face in both hands. "Yeah?" he asked.

Ilya nodded again, crying harder because Shane looked at him like that, like this was something precious instead of ridiculous. Shane leaned forward and kissed his forehead.

Then his temple. Then just held him there for a moment, thumbs brushing softly beneath his eyes.

"C'mere," he murmured.

Ilya practically melted into him.

The sobs still came, but they were no longer the awful kind. They were the kind that left him trembling and relieved and lightheaded with it, as if his body had finally found a way to let

go of all the love he had been carrying around with nowhere to put it. Shane kissed the top of his head and smiled against his hair.

Sometimes love is terrifying.

Sometimes it is a secret you carry so carefully that it feels like one wrong movement could shatter your entire life.

Sometimes it is waking up in the middle of the night and staring at the empty spot near you.

Sometimes it is fear.

But sometimes love is a tightrope stretched between two people. Endlessly daring you to be brave, to trust that the other person is walking toward you too. You take a step. Then another.

Tonight, Ilya had been brave.

He had stood in front of a room full of people and let them see him. He'd taken another step.

"Want to cuddle and watch a movie?", Shane asked after a while, when the console had already dug a hole into Ilya's- and he was sure also Shane's- side.

"If I ever say no to that, I have joined my dead wife and been replaced with an alien"

"Don't joke about that, asshole!"

As they climbed out of the car and raced each other to the bed with tears still drying on their face and happiness making their chest ache, Ilya thought that maybe bravery wasn't a single moment.

Maybe it was this. Choosing love again and again. Choosing to be known, no matter what. Choosing to take yet another step.

And finding, every time, that Shane was already there.

Waiting for him at the other end of the rope.

Walking towards him, too.

Chapter End Notes

HAPPY PRIDEEE!
this chapter felt particularly poignant to post this month. the core of this story is the grief that comes with having to exist in an environment that does not allow you to live freely. I stand with everyone who is living the same fate, I see you, I love you, you deserve sunshine.

My greatest wish if for every single one of you to be allowed to live your truth fearlessly!

I want to thank every one you for reading and commenting so so much. It may sound silly but you all mean so much to me!

I hope you enjoyed! Have an extraordinary day x

come chat on twitter: lady_st4rdus7

End Notes

This is the first time I get more than 2000 hits on my fic probably, I’m so so so happy. Thank you so much x!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!