**Safe with You**

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# Safe with You

by its_me_biz

Summary

Irina Rozanova and her 12 year old son Ilya have to get out of Moscow. Though it pains her to leave her other son behind, he is already beyond hope. Irina and Ilya are going to start a new life in Ottawa, where Ilya meets his best friend forever, Shane Hollander.

# Chapter 1: Escape to Ottawa

Just after Ilya's twelfth birthday, his mother tells him they are going to take a trip.

This is strange for a few reasons. First, they have never taken a trip just the two of them. In fact, unless Ilya is misremembering, the family has never taken a trip at all. His father is always working. His mother mostly tries to stay out of her husband's way. They do not do things together as a family.

Even stranger, she tells Ilya that he mustn't tell anyone about the trip. "Not even Alexei?" he asks warily. He trusts his mother but he does not trust Alexei, who at sixteen has become a frightening, often drunk, carbon copy of their father. Ilya is big enough to defend himself now, from his brother at least, but Alexei finds other ways to torture him whenever they're home at the same time. Ilya tries to always be somewhere else: at school, which he does not really care about, or at hockey practice or with Svetlana and her mother, making cookies or something. He avoids his father and brother like the plague. His mother does as well, since Ilya's father is constantly yelling at her about something: accusing her of cheating on him or spending too much money. Lately Ilya has noticed fingerprint-shaped bruises on her arms and once even near her neck. He tries not to think about that too much.

"Not even Alexei," she whispers, her eyes filling with tears. Ilya stops asking questions after that. He has seen his mother cry plenty at the sharp, nasty words from both her husband and her older son. Ilya does his best to never add to her distress.

Irina won't tell him when they are leaving, where they are going, or how long they will be gone. She only tells him to pack a bag and to hide it in the back of his closet. He must bring only what he really cannot live without. No, he cannot bring his skates or his hockey equipment. He wants to argue that those things are the most important to him but her expression stops him. He is old enough to know something is wrong but not old enough to understand what is happening. He trusts his mother so he does what she says.

Early one morning, after his father has gone from work and Alexei has gone to school (or wherever he goes), Irina stops Ilya from walking out the door to start his own school day. "We're leaving now, Ilyusha," she tells him. "Quickly, my love."

They each carry a large duffel bag. He does not know what is in his mother's. In his there are some clothes, a cassette player and headphones, a couple of treasured notes from a girl in his class that he first kissed just two weeks ago. He looks around his room, wondering if he should take anything else. He throws a couple of paperbacks in at the last second. And, despite his embarrassment about it, even alone in his own room, he throws in the small stuffed dog he has slept with since he was a baby.

Later, when he realizes that they won't ever return to Moscow, he remembers the things he left behind: hockey posters, his favorite markers, small trophies from peewee hockey tournaments. But on that morning, walking briskly next to his mother, baseball hats pulled

low to cover both their faces, he does not think of any of that. He feels excited mostly. He does not care about what he's leaving behind. He assumes one day they'll come back.

He is surprised when his mother hails a taxi after ten minutes of walking. They never take cabs, even though Irina doesn't drive. If they need to go somewhere they walk or (worse) they rely on Ilya's father. This is almost a treat. He is further shocked when his mother tells the driver to take them to the airport. Irina says nothing else in the cab so Ilya follows suit, even though his questions are piling up. They are dropped off on the curb but Irina waits until the cab is out of sight before she leads Ilya inside. She reaches into her purse and pulls out a small booklet she hands to Ilya. "Passport," she says.

He flips through the little book in his hand, finding a picture of his face in it from school last year and a number of blank pages. "Where are we going?"

"Canada," she whispers, as if someone could overhear and prevent them from leaving. She starts walking toward a long line of people, looking over her shoulder every so often, as if she's afraid of being followed. They join the line. It takes a while to get to the front of it but once they do, Irina speaks in a low voice to the man at the desk. He takes both their passports and prints two tickets out on his machine. He hands these things back to Irina and smiles at her. "Have a good trip," he says warmly. Irina leads Ilya to another line.

Ilya does not hold his mother's hand anymore, deciding he was too old for such things when he turned ten. His father and brother had started teasing him for being a baby, so he stopped, sometimes even pulling his hand away from hers when she tried to take it on the walk to school or church. But now, in the airport, surrounded by things he's not seen before, confused and a little afraid, he finds himself reaching for his mother's hand again. She smiles at him for the first time that day (possibly for the first time since she told him they were taking a trip) and squeezes his hand in hers.

"Ilyusha," she says and then pauses. "I want to tell you but I can't yet. Do you understand? We have to wait until we get where we're going."

Ilya nods. She buys him chocolate milk and snacks from a little store, raising her eyebrows at the price before carefully counting out her money to pay. She continues looking around from time to time, which makes Ilya nervous. What is she afraid of? Even as the question pops into his mind, he realizes: the answer is, always, his father. Maybe also the influential friends he claims to have. Ilya also looks around, wondering if he should be helping in some way, until finally they stop near a row of chairs.

They huddle together on the floor near the window, their bags between them. Ilya watches the planes take off. He has never been on a plane. He has never seen North America, except in pictures in school. He wonders what Canada is like. He tells himself that this is an adventure. He tries not to think about what he will miss from home. He banishes those traitorous thoughts deep down into himself and vows not to look at them for now.

His mother visibly relaxes once the plane takes off into the air. She has given Ilya the seat next to the window so he can watch them ascend into the sky. He looks out of it for a long time, until all he can see are clouds. His mother says nothing so he says nothing. They are, shockingly to Ilya, fed some kind of meal (where did they make the food? Where was it

stored? The whole trip seems to consist of bizarre moments like this). Then his mother gives him a pill to swallow. Shortly thereafter, he falls into a dreamless sleep.

When he wakes up, people are murmuring. Light is streaming in through the plane's window. Something has changed; he can feel the plane moving differently. He must look scared because his mother takes his hand again, smiling. "We will land soon," she tells him.

There are more lines to wait in now, Ilya finds. He looks at the signs, trying to practice his English, which he has been learning in school. When they get to the front of one line or another (Ilya has not been paying attention; there is too much to look at around him), his mother asks, in English, to speak to someone in Russian, please. They are ferried to a small room and asked to wait. Irina's leg bounces, her fingers tap the table in front of them. Ilya waits and watches.

A man comes in first and introduces himself. He looks between Irina and Ilya and smiles. "*Can I help you?*" he asks, in Russian but with what Ilya assumes must be a Canadian accent.

Irina glances at her son before pulling some papers out of the bag. "*We are seeking asylum,"* she says. Ilya does not know this word but no one stops to explain it to him and he doesn't ask. "*I have all the papers and we have a sponsor. She is meeting us here."*

The man nods, taking the papers from her hand and reviewing them quickly. He asks them to wait and excuses himself. When he is gone, Ilya turns to his mother. "*Now can you tell me*?" he pleads.

She takes a deep breath. *"Your father is not a safe person,*" she begins. Her eyes blink back tears. "*There was no help for us in Moscow. He is too powerful. And Alexei*…" Here she starts crying in earnest for a moment before taking a deep breath and trying again. "*Alexei is too much like him. I was too afraid to–*" Ilya fills in the gap himself: she was too afraid to tell him. He is already lost to them. She pauses again. "*Someone I met told me we could come to another place and start over. It had to be far away from Moscow, your father has too many friends. But I think here we can be safe."*

Ilya stares at her. He knows his father is not safe; he's not going to argue about that. He knows that he has controlled Irina for years, accused her constantly of cheating, monitored her activities, restricted her money. He only let Ilya play hockey because he was good at it and that reflected well on his father. In all honesty, hockey is Ilya's biggest concern at the moment. He had been entertaining a loose plan this past year, when some casual scouting started at his games, to play professionally one day. He thought the path would be fairly straightforward when they were in Moscow: get noticed, get on the best team for juniors, get drafted by a professional league, in Russia or somewhere else. But now he doesn't know if he will ever play hockey again. He is finally, truly afraid.

Apparently sensing the change in her son, Irina leans down to him and kisses the top of his head. She undoes the necklace around her neck, the thin gold chain with a crucifix on it that he has never seen her take off before. Without speaking, she puts it around his neck and tucks it under the collar of his shirt. "*We are safe now, my love,*" she promises him. *"Nothing more to worry about."* He tries to believe her.

It hasn't occurred to him to ask what city they have landed in but it's written in huge letters on the walls of the airport: Ottawa. He's exhausted and overwhelmed. He isn't sure what day it is anymore. English is more confusing in practice than it was in his classroom. His mother has been weeping off and on every time she has to talk to someone new. They have spent most of the day waiting and talking to people who are looking at forms and stacks of photos that his mother won't let him see. He wonders if they really are safe, like she insists. He rubs the crucifix between his thumb and forefinger until he feels calm again.

Finally, they are let out of the door and met by a woman with blond hair who calls his mother by her first name. Ilya watches as his mother throws herself into the woman's arms. They hold each other for a long time, Ilya looking around, embarrassed at the display. No one else seems to notice them. When they separate, the woman introduces herself to Ilya in Russian: "*Ilya. I haven't seen you since you were a little boy! I'm your mother's friend Marlena*." He accepts a kiss on each cheek. She leads them to a waiting car, chattering away to Irina, asking about the flight and customs and all of it. Ilya, in the back with the bags, stares out the window at highway and trees and tries to decide how he feels about this. He looks at his mother, who is smiling at last, holding Marlena's free hand in her own. He decides to be cautiously optimistic. Maybe Ottawa will be okay.

# Chapter 2: I Almost Do

Chapter Summary

> English is hard and Ilya is homesick for his old life. Luckily, Irina knows her son. She gives him hockey, even though she's scared.

That first summer stretches out before Ilya like a strange dream.

It turns out that his English, which he had been learning in school in Moscow, is not very good in practice. He discovers this whenever he tries to speak to anyone outside of Marlena's house. He quickly stops trying, although Irina encourages him to keep at it. Hers is not much better but she tells him she plans on taking some classes once they get settled. She tells him that he will have special classes in school in the fall until his language is better. She seems pleased about this but Ilya is only irritated. Maybe a little nervous but he won't admit that out loud.

At least when school starts there will be more people for him to talk to. At the moment, his only company is his mother and Marlena's family. Her two small daughters are sweet; they act as Ilya’s little pets. Though they are younger than him, their English is better. He practices with them and is a good sport when they laughingly correct his pronounication.

In a few weeks, Irina appears more settled. Marlena starts showing Irina around town. They attend mysterious (to Ilya) meetings that his mother dresses up for, wearing one of two dresses she brought with her.

Mostly, despite the company of the little girls, he is bored. The novelty of being in a new place wears off quickly. He misses his friends at home. He misses hockey. He could practice skating if he had his skates and could find a rink. He could be kissing Katya again. He could be having a normal summer lying around with Sveta while she gets a tan but instead he is in this strange small city in a new country where only a few people speak his language and he is expected to learn theirs.

Some time in mid-July his mother tells him she has found a job. She has never had a job before, Ilya knows. His father was the one who worked and kept the money and would only give her so much for groceries and other necessities. His father was the one who complained about the cost of hockey equipment, even as his fancy friends told him that Ilya had a real shot at playing professionally. Ilya does not miss his father, exactly, but he misses his normal life. He especially misses skating.

He tries not to complain, mostly because he does not want to worry his mother, who seems finally at peace. He is rewarded for his good son act when Irina tells him she has found a hockey program for him. Try-outs are in two weeks. She presents him with a pair of used

skates and says he will have to borrow the other equipment; they can't afford to buy new things. She's already talked to the mother of another player his age, who offered some hand-me-downs. Ilya thinks he should maybe feel ashamed of having to take other people's handouts but instead he is grateful. Hockey will help him. Hockey makes sense.

The first day of try-outs reminds him of how much he loves skating and how good he is at the sport. Even in used skates and borrowed gear, he is heads and tails above the other boys he's playing with. On the second day of the camp, a coach takes his mother aside and tells her, slowly so she can follow, that Ilya has enough talent to join a real team. She tries to explain, in her own broken English, that they can't afford whatever it is he's suggesting. Ilya feels anger rush through him. This is the first good thing to happen to him since she made him flee their country and move in with strangers. He almost doesn't hear what the coach is trying to explain, something about a scholarship? He doesn't know this word, which means his mother certainly doesn't know this word, so he interrupts the man to ask him what it means.

The coach smiles at him. "It means, someone else will pay. You are very talented, Ilya."

Ilya nods. "Yes."

The coach laughs, though Ilya doesn't understand why; he *is* talented. "I have some contacts at one of the programs that participates in Juniors competitions. Some of those guys end up going pro. That's where you belong, Ilya."

He turns to translate as much as he understands to his mother. "*He says someone else can pay. That I can go to Juniors, compete at a higher level. This is what I want, Mama."*

She nods at him and then (embarrassingly) embraces the coach. "Thank you," she whispers. It's one of the phrases she can say confidently in this awful language; she says it often. Ilya echoes her now, full of gratitude for this mysterious Canadian man who is offering him something better than what he dared to imagine for himself.

This is how he meets Shane Hollander.

At first, in the locker room, Ilya barely takes notice of Hollander. He tries instead to focus on picking out familiar English words while he changes, listening to the other boys' voices rise and fall around him. Their age group is twelve to fourteen, meaning some of them still look like babies while others already sport the beginnings of facial hair. Ilya thinks of them all as his competition at first before remembering they will be his teammates. He will make some friends finally.

He will wait though, until tryouts are over and he knows who is worth getting to know.

It's when they are on the ice that he notices Hollander for the first time. Ilya has been on skates since he could walk, practically. He was faster than all his friends at home, the undefeated champion racer amongst them. Shane is the first person who can match his speed, which is so surprising to Ilya, he finds himself staring at the other boy quite a bit. Shane stares back, offering a very tentative, shy smile. Ilya grins at him like a wolf.

There are other good skaters there, boys who even Ilya can see will become competent players and go far. But he also knows, even at twelve, that he and Hollander are going to go all the way.

By the time they are both fourteen, they are nearly inseparable. They go to different schools, of course, Ilya and his mother living in a notably worse neighborhood than the Hollanders. But they play together in the Junior league and both manage to make an impression in every game they play. Scouts talk to them and their parents constantly, some of them even with a few Russian words for Irina. She is skeptical, still afraid of the far-reaching tentacles of her father, but as far as Ilya knows, he has not found them, if he's even bothered to look.

Anyway, it doesn't matter. Ilya knows they have a special visa that puts them on some kind of list to become permanent residents of the country. His father won't be able to force them to come home if he ever does mysteriously appear. Dimly, in the back of his mind, Ilya worries that when he becomes famous (because he already knows he will be drafted by the MLH when he is old enough), he will be easier to find. He fears that his father will demand things from him then, money or answers or even access to Irina. He keeps these fears to himself. His mother has enough to worry about; he will not add to it.

Despite their closeness, Ilya does not tell Shane about his fears either. Shane learns quickly not to ask Ilya questions about anything besides school, hockey, and girls. Anything else, questions about Moscow or his family or how he and his mother came to be here cause Ilya to shut down immediately. He knows Shane wants to know more about him but he hates to talk about his life before Ottawa. He wants to put it all behind him, never admit that he has a father and a brother he will never see again. He wants to be a part of Hollander's perfect family, get rid of his Russian accent, and become a normal Canadian teenager.

By fifteen, Ilya has a rotating cast of girlfriends. They come to the rink to watch him practice, in little groups of giggling girls. Shane finds it embarrassing mostly. Ilya offers to find him a date so they can go out together but Shane always has an excuse: he has too much homework or he's focusing on practicing his backhand (which, admittedly, needs work). Sometimes he spends the night at Shane's, to get away from the tiny one room apartment his mother managed to find for them after almost a year spent living with Marlena. They still visit Marlena and her family on Sundays for a big Russian meal. This is one of the few facts of his life he shares with Shane. Sometimes Shane even comes with them, trying to pick up enough Russian words to tease Ilya.

Their Juniors team is unstoppable with both Shane and Ilya on it. The MLH draft gets closer every year. The scouts get more intense, writing things down on their reports and presumably sending them along to the MLH. Together, they win every tournament their team enters until they are invited to travel to Saskatchewan to play in the World Juniors championship final. There, they will face the Russian team for the title.

Irina is firmly set against Ilya going anywhere that other Russians will be present. "*It's too dangerous, my love,"* she pleads with him. "*What if someone on the team sees your name? What if he finds out where we are? He'll find us, Ilyusha, he'll make us go back–"*

Ilya tries to stay calm but his rage boils over. He raises his voice to her, for the first time since they escaped from Moscow. *"I have to go, Mama! I have to play with my team! You're being*

*paranoid, it's been long enough. You can't take this from me, you've taken everything else, you cannot take this!"* He regrets the words the moment they come tumbling out of his mouth. They stare at each other for a moment before his mother turns and walks into her bedroom, shutting the door quietly behind her. He stalks out the door, slamming it on his way out, and takes two buses across town to the Hollander's house. He is frozen through by the time he gets there.

Yuna answers the door, pulling him inside quickly. "Ilya, what on earth–" She unwraps him from his scarf and coat, pulling off his gloves and hat, talking all the while, "is everything alright, honey? Where is your mother? Did something happen?"

Ilya shakes his head at first. He didn't really have a plan when he stalked out of the house in a fury. He only knew that he wanted to talk to Shane. "She's fine," he mutters. "We had a fight."

Yuna sighs. "Does she know you're here?" He shakes his head, unable to look Mrs. Hollander in the eye. Now that his anger has dimmed, he feels a little ashamed. After a moment, she tells him to take off his shoes. "I'm going to call her and tell her where you are. You can stay for dinner, Shane can drive you home later." She leaves Ilya standing in the hall, unlacing his boots. He hears her muffled voice on the phone and tiptoes to Shane's room. Shane is not home yet; Ilya collapses on the bed and waits.

He hears Shane come in, his mother greeting him at the door, presumably to tell him what's happened. Ilya's embarrassment has almost fully eclipsed his anger now. The sight of his best friend takes the edge off at least. Shane stands in the doorway of his own room, waiting for Ilya to acknowledge him. Ilya does not sit up. "Hollander," he says.

Shane sits next to him on the bed. "Rozanov." He lies down next to Ilya, the way they've done plenty of times in the past five years. "Your mom's freaking out?"

"Yes." He sighs. "I was mean to her." Shane says nothing. He has probably never been angry at his mother and if he has, he's probably promptly apologized for being disrespectful. The Hollanders are a perfect family. Ilya has only his mother now and he has hurt her. "I forgot my cigarettes."

"You shouldn't be smoking." Ilya smacks him with a pillow and Shane laughs. "Sorry." Shane throws the pillow on the ground and turns to face Ilya. "Want to talk about it?"

"No. Talk to me about something else."

Shane hums. "I talked to Jessica again today."

"Ah, Jeeeeessicaaaaa."

"Fuck off," Shane laughs. "What's the name of your flavor of the week?"

"I do not know this expression, Hollander. My English, you know."

"Your English is only bad when you don't want to talk about something!"

Ilya ignores this. “Tell me about Jessica.”

Shane hardly ever talks to him about girls. Ilya loves girls and they love him back. His mother works late some nights and Ilya is never without company. None of them stick around for very long; it turns out while he’s generous and kind and loves to make girls come (a skill he has developed quite well, if he does say so himself), he does not make a great boyfriend. He ignores the rumors about himself that swirl around school. So far they haven’t deterred any girls from dating him. He also ignores the growing feeling that his interests in sex and dating may extend to boys as well. He does not need to make his life more complicated. Also he hasn’t found a willing candidate to test this theory just yet.

“She’s hot. And nice.” Shane shrugs. “I don’t know, I’m busy all the time with hockey and school.”

Ilya snorts. “You say that a lot.”

“Well, it’s true! I don’t have time for a girlfriend. Probably.”

Ilya looks at him in an appraising way that makes Shane nervous. “You have kissed a girl before?”

Shane blushes. “Fuck off, of course I have.”

“With tongue?”

“Oh my God, Ilya.”

Ilya laughs. He rolls on his side to face Shane, who is (predictably) blushing. He would be lying if he claimed he hasn't noticed how pretty Shane is. If he’s being totally honest, part of his wondering about his sexuality started with wondering about Shane Hollander in particular. “We could practice,” he says, quickly before he chickens out. If Shane says no, they can act like it’s a joke and Ilya won’t bring it up again. But he’s feeling restless after fighting with his mother and the long bus ride; he needs somewhere to put this energy. Plus Shane is his best friend. That makes him the perfect person to test his theory on.

Shane laughs at first. “Yeah okay,” he says, shaking his head. Then he looks at Ilya, propped up on one elbow so he can look down at Shane, and hesitates. It’s only a second but Ilya clocks it. They’ve been friends a long time. Ilya knows all of Shane’s microexpressions, could catalog them each from memory. He’s actually thinking about it, Ilya can tell. He leans an inch closer to Shane’s face, both their smiles fading into something more serious.

“Want to?” he whispers, staring at Shane’s mouth instead of looking him in the eye, afraid of what’s about to happen and also unable to stop himself.

Shane takes a ragged breath. “Um.” He licks his lips. “I don’t–it’s probably a bad idea. Right?” He doesn’t move though, doesn’t try to get away from Ilya, who takes a chance and moves another inch closer. Their noses are almost touching now.

“Maybe,” Ilya whispers. He waits another few seconds, counting to five in his head, reasoning that that’s enough time for Shane to pull away if he doesn’t want to be kissed. He’s right, it is a bad idea, but Ilya knows it's going to happen anyway, the momentum can’t be stopped now. Then, suddenly, Yuna’s voice breaks the spell: “Boys! Dinner!”

Shane jumps out of bed like he’s been electrocuted. Ilya waits a second before he follows, fixing his face so that he looks bored. He is good at pretending everything is fine. He so often pretended in Moscow: pretended that they had a normal family; that his brother didn’t hate him; that his mother didn’t sometimes take to her bed for days at a time; that his father didn’t rule over them all with an iron fist. He acts normal during dinner so Shane does too. Until it’s time for Ilya to go home.

“Shane, why don’t you run Ilya home, honey. It’s a school night,” his mother adds. He wordlessly picks up the keys and gets in the car, Ilya close behind him, thanking the Hollanders for dinner over his shoulder.

Neither of them speaks for a few minutes after they get in the car. Ilya breaks the silence. “Sorry about… earlier.”

Shane’s hands briefly tighten on the wheel. “It’s fine,” he says quickly. He glances at Ilya. “I know you were just fucking around.”

Ilya nods. “Of course,” he says easily. He ignores the little ache in his chest when he says it, pushing it down the way he has learned to push down all difficult feelings. “See you at practice,” he says when they arrive in front of the apartment building.

Shane smiles at him, almost normally. “I’ll pick you up. If you want.”

Ilya nods again and jogs up the steps. *I don’t want anything from you, Hollander,* he tries to think. *Just to be friends.* He almost believes it.

# Chapter 3: Highest highs and lowest lows

Chapter Summary

Ilya and Shane compete at the Junior World Championship in Regina. Ilya sees an old friend. Things are going well until Irina suffers a mental health episode. Ilya doesn't know what to do except call on the Hollanders to help.

It's a combination of Yuna and their Juniors coach who convince Irina that it will be okay for Ilya to go to Regina. Yuna even offers to act as Ilya's guardian for the weekend to save Irina from traveling outside their province. This, Ilya thinks, is what tips the scales for his mother. Irina claims it's because she doesn't want to miss any work but he suspects that in reality she is too afraid to go somewhere that his father or one of his so-called friends might be. Ilya thinks he should be angry that her fear of her husband outweighs her pride in her son but he ignores that feeling. Anyway, there's nothing his father can do to them. It's been five years since they left. They are officially permanent residents of Canada. Even his father could not force them to come home. Ilya is sure the man won't be in Regina anyway; it would be too much of a hassle to travel so far just to antagonize his son. He does not let himself feel badly that neither of his parents will watch him play in this game. He tells himself Yuna being there is enough.

He manages not to think about either of his parents during the final game. He thinks only about winning. He and Shane are an unstoppable force together. He can tell after the first period that the Russian team will be defeated. Ilya is called any number of names by people who would have been his teammates had he stayed in Moscow: traitor, defector, cocksucker (this one especially makes him laugh, which mostly confuses the other team). When the Canadian team wins gold, he and Shane jump on each other, laughing and hugging. Ilya is relieved that Shane hugs him without hesitating. Everything between them is fine after their almost kiss. Nothing has been ruined.

Ilya has taken his skates off and is working on shedding some of his gear when he hears someone in the locker room say, "holy shit, who is that?" He looks up to see a beautiful curly-haired girl standing in the doorway, grinning directly at him. He smiles back automatically before he recognizes her. After all, he hasn't seen her in five years. She looks familiar but could she actually be– "Svetlana?" he says, mostly confused. She runs into his arms and kisses him on both cheeks like any old friend would. His teammates are hooting and hollering around him but he is only looking at her, shocked and thrilled and then a little frightened because if she is here…

"*My father thinks I'm in the washroom,"* she tells him in their native tongue. *"I only have a minute. I'm so proud of you, Ilya. I'm so happy to see you."*

*"Wait, Sveta–"*

*"I can't stay, Ilya, my father, but here,"* she thrusts a piece of paper into his hands with some numbers. *"You need to get* WhatsApp, *put it on your phone or your computer. Then we can talk."* She holds his face in her hands for a minute, grinning at him. She lightly touches her lips to his before turning and bouncing out of the room, the other boys falling all over themselves to say goodbye to her.

"The fuck was that, Roz?" one of their defensemen laughs. "You just casually know the hottest girl we've ever seen in real life?"

Ilya laughs, shaking his head. He doesn't answer, staring down at the number in his hands. When he looks up, Shane abruptly turns away from him, looking down at the floor. Ilya isn't sure what his problem is. They won the game and Ilya got to see someone from home. Shane can talk to him later if he feels so weird about it.

To his surprise, Shane doesn't mention Sveta at all. They talk like usual, at practice mostly, though they share some random texts in between, like about how Shane and Jessica have started going out. Ilya pretends to be happy for him. He *is* happy for him; he's just also a little jealous maybe. He loves hooking up with random girls but there's a lot of drama that follows him about it and it's getting tiresome. To save himself, he spreads a rumor at school that he has a girlfriend back in Russia, which is at least half true. He and Svetlana have been talking over WhatsApp almost every day, filling in the blanks from the last five years. He hasn't told his mother; Sveta won't tell her father, or his for that matter. She promises him that. She kept the fact that she had found Ilya after the game to herself, though her father had remarked about Ilya's presence on the Canadian team. Presumably he passed that information along to Grigori but Svetlana assured Ilya it doesn't matter. His father, it seems, has told everyone that Irina is crazy and he sent her away himself. Svetlana is the only friend Ilya has who knows the real reason they left. She understands why he and Irina won't go back to Russia.

**Svetlana Vetrova:** *so when you get drafted to the NHL, I will go to university in the same city and we will be together.*

**You:** *What if I am drafted to Ottawa? You would not survive here, you would die of boredom.*

**Svetlana Vetrova:** *You won't be. I predict one of the legacy teams for you. Somewhere in New York or Boston. Maybe West Coast even.*

The West would be too far, Ilya thinks privately. He wants to stay near his mother and the Hollanders, namely Shane. He and Shane are both being scouted for the league; they have been for years now. He knows they will both be drafted next summer, it's just a matter of where they'll both end up. The idea that Svetlana, with her dual citizenship from her father's hockey career, would be near him too… it's almost too much to dream for. His life has already been going so much better than he ever thought possible.

He should have known it would come crashing down at some point.

It happens three months after World Juniors. He had assured his mother after they came home from the game that he had not spoken to anyone on the Russian team, that Yuna and his coaches had made sure of it. He left out seeing Svetlana. Irina seemed relieved and for a few months, things were normal. Then, in the beginning of May, Irina began to fade.

At first, Ilya is not surprised. It had happened before, in Moscow as well as once or twice since they've moved. She spends a few days drifting aimlessly, forgetting to eat, crying in bed. Ilya knows how to handle it. He encourages her with soup and water (like a prisoner would get but it's all she'll accept). These strange moods don't last long usually, just a day or two and then she comes back to herself. This time is alarmingly different. It does not pass in a day or even two. By day five, Irina won't get out of bed at all. On day six, she won't speak to him, even if he asks her a direct question. He doesn't know what to do. It's never lasted this long before. She's never stopped eating or talking. He considers calling Marlena but he is afraid his mother will be angry if he tells her. The Russian community here is small. If they find out Irina has these… issues, people might start avoiding her.

Finally, out of ideas and starting to panic, he picks up the phone and calls the only person he can think of who will help and be discreet: Yuna Hollander.

She more or less flies into the apartment not thirty minutes after he scrapes up the courage to call her. He's told her only that his mother is sick and he's worried. When she gets there, she takes one look at Irina and slowly exits the room, holding her cell phone to her ear. She whispers into it for a few minutes and then goes to sit on the side of Irina's bed. Ilya watches from the doorway, still not sure if he's done the right thing.

Fifteen minutes later, David Hollander appears. This is strange because it is a work day. Ilya knows David has a big job, something important he can't just leave at random. Ilya is afraid David will take him to school, which he has been skipping the past two days, too nervous to leave his mother alone and unsure who to ask for help. But David surprises him.

"Come on, son," he says easily, as if he calls Ilya that all the time. "Let's get you some breakfast, huh?" He and Yuna exchange a look that Ilya pretends not to see. He follows David to the car. They drive to a little diner near the apartment. They eat mostly in silence until David clears his throat and asks Ilya if everything has been okay at home.

Ilya shrugs. "Normal. Mostly." David waits. When Ilya meets his eyes, David offers him a tentative smile that crumbles Ilya's resolve. He's called the Hollanders. He supposes he has to tell them the truth. "A couple of days like this," he admits.

David nods. "And before?"

"Never this long." *Never this bad*, he does not have to clarify.

He goes back to the Hollanders' house with David; Yuna and Shane are not at home. David shuts himself into his office to finish his work day, Ilya assumes. Ilya waits in Shane's room for him to come home.

He must fall asleep, the last few sleepless nights finally catching up to him. He spirals a little when he wakes up, wondering again if he made a mistake calling the Hollanders. Or maybe he should have called them sooner. He hears the front door and Shane's voice and hastily sits up, rubbing his eyes awake.

"Hey," Shane says, leaning on the door frame. "My dad said… are you okay?"

“Yes. Of course.”

Shane waits for a second before he walks over slowly and sits down next to Ilya on the bed. Ilya is immediately calmed by the familiar presence and heat of Shane’s body. He’s still a little taller than Shane is, though he knows Shane is convinced he'll have another growth spurt this year. They both want to be as big as they can be on draft day. They have thirteen months left. It’s almost the only thing they talk about.

Shane snakes an arm around Ilya’s shoulders. It’s the most contact they’ve had in months, Ilya thinks, since that time before the championship game where they almost kissed. Or, Ilya almost kissed Shane; he still isn’t sure what Shane would have done if they hadn’t been interrupted. He thinks he may be a bad person for thinking about this when his mother is… where? Still in bed? Taken away somewhere? Still, he doesn’t pull away. Shane is his best friend. He will take the comfort from him, even if he’s selfish for doing it.

Later, Yuna gently and plainly explains to him that his mother is in a mental health treatment facility for now. She’ll have to stay there for a while. He can stay with the Hollanders while she’s there or he can go to Marlena's if he prefers. Ilya protests at first; he’s almost eighteen, he can fend for himself. Yuna lets him argue for approximately one minute before she puts her hand over his and explains that since he’s a minor (just for one more month but still), he needs a guardian. “It can be us,” she says, guessing maybe that he had a good reason for calling her instead of Marlena. “Since you don’t have any other family here.”

Ilya freezes. “They can’t send me back,” he whispers.

Yuna squeezes his hand. “They won’t,” she promises. “Your mom just needs some time. Maybe some medication.” Ilya frowns at this but Yuna continues. “I wasn’t able to answer all the questions from the doctors but… has this happened before?”

Ilya hesitates. He must protect his mother. It isn’t her fault that she’s this way. It’s been better for a long time. Ilya had thought (when he allowed himself to think about it at all) that living in Ottawa had cured her. Her moods made more sense to him when they lived in Moscow, blanketed in the fear and oppression that came with living with his father and brother. He couldn’t understand what there was to be sad about now. He wondered if it was his fault, if it was the hockey game that pushed her over the edge, or if he hadn’t been paying enough attention to her. He’s responsible for her, after all. He has to take care of her.

Ultimately, he doesn’t know how to answer Yuna’s question in a way that is truthful and also protects his mother. He stays silent, hoping he isn’t being disrespectful. Yuna, remarkably, does not ask again.

He thinks he’ll be able to get out of going to school because there’s only a month left anyway. But the Hollanders insist his life should stay as normal as possible. Shane volunteers to wake up early every day to drive Ilya across town before he goes to school himself. It means they have twenty extra minutes together every day. It also puts Ilya in the uncomfortable position of mentally adding to the debt he owes Shane and his parents, that feels too high for him to ever pay back.

Shane insists he likes the extra driving; they don't get to spend a lot of time together when the hockey season ends and school is still going on. Plus Shane has a girlfriend now who takes up most of his weekends. Sometimes Ilya goes out with them, Jessica bringing along a girlfriend to entertain Ilya. He can't help but notice that Shane does not look at Jessica with lust in his eyes. He files that away to investigate another time, when his life is not so complicated.

This morning Shane is gripping the steering wheel like he's afraid it's going to fly off if he doesn't hold it down. Ilya notices this as well (he notices everything about Shane) but doesn't comment. If Shane wants to talk, he'll talk. Sure enough, after ten minutes of near silence, Ilya is rewarded for his patience.

"So I kind of need your advice," Shane starts.

Ilya snorts. "About what, Hollander, what you should wear to prom?"

"Fuck off, I know what I'm wearing, it's in like three days." He turns to look at Ilya, momentarily distracted. "Isn't yours this weekend too?"

Ilya shrugs. "I have no idea. I'm not going." He has pretended to his friends and the girls who have dropped hints about being asked that he's too cool for the prom but the reality is it costs money that Ilya does not have. Any extra money he makes doing odd jobs around the neighborhood goes towards his hockey equipment; even the secondhand stuff is expensive. He doesn't tell the Hollanders this because he knows they would insist on helping in some way. He already owes them too much for their generosity. He doesn't want to keep adding to the mountain of debt he and his mother have accrued.

Shane is frowning. His hands have relaxed a fraction, Ilya notices. "Why not?" he asks.

"Didn't you want advice about something?"

"Oh. Right. The thing is, a bunch of us are going to Mikey's parent's cottage after, for the weekend. And Jessica…" Shane is already blushing just saying her name. Ilya can't decide if that's because Shane really likes her or because talking about girls embarrasses him so much. Both, probably. "Jessica says she's ready. For like. Sex." The last word comes out of Shane's mouth so quietly, Ilya almost misses it.

Ilya examines Shane's profile. He can't blame Jessica for wanting to lose her virginity to Shane. He's beautiful for one thing, not to mention he'll almost certainly be a famous hockey star within the next couple of years. He's also kind and generous (all of the Hollanders are). Ilya has to imagine he's respectful with girls, solely based on the fact that he's never given a single detail about how far he and Jessica have gone. Ilya has to admit he's a little surprised they haven't had sex yet.

"And you want to know what, how it works?"

Shane pushes Ilya's shoulder. "I know how it works, asshole." They both laugh. "I just want… I don't want it to be bad. For her. Ugh, I can't believe I'm talking about this with you."

They are only a few minutes from Ilya's school now, not enough time for Ilya to figure out the best way to answer this question. He guesses he could give Shane the basics: ask what she wants, make sure she looks happy, use a condom. But that's not what Shane is asking. He wants to be prepared.

"We talk about everything," Ilya reminds his friend. "We will talk more after school today. I'll draw you pictures."

"Ha, ha, get out of my car, you dick."

Ilya grins and tousles Shane's hair (a thing Shane hates) before getting out of the car. "Thanks for the ride, Hollander."

Later that day, in Shane's room, Ilya does draw Shane a picture. Shane has his hands covering his eyes, which is truly cracking Ilya up. "Hollander, have you never touched a girl? Why are you being so weird about this?"

Shane groans. "I'm not! I'm just… shy. I guess."

Ilya snorts. "Okay well you can be shy and still learn how to eat pussy."

"Jesus."

"You'll like it." Ilya grins. "You won't be as good at it as I am, of course."

Shane smacks him with a pillow. "Everything's a competition with you." He lies back on the bed, apparently unable to keep looking at Ilya's crude (but informative) pictures. "How many girls have you… done that with?"

"Jealous?"

Shane snorts. "No," he says emphatically.

"A few," Ilya answers, shrugging. Truthfully it is more than a few; his reputation is not undeserved. He just doesn't want to give too many details to Shane for some reason. He is not interested in thinking more about why that could be. "I've been thinking though."

"About?"

Ilya weighs the risk of telling Shane what he suspects about himself. On the one hand, he knows Shane is a safe person to tell. He doesn't use the slurs other hockey players (and sometimes coaches) use in the locker room or on the ice. He doesn't gossip and anyway he barely knows any of Ilya's other friends since they go to different schools. The only worry would be that Shane would put a stop to their occasional sleepovers, afraid that Ilya would grope him in the night. He shakes that off immediately; Shane wouldn't think that. He's not an asshole. It's just that it's been an exhausting, confusing couple of weeks for Ilya. The secret of his mother's issues has weighed on him for a long time and now that that secret is out and she's safe, there's room for him to let go of more. Maybe he'll feel better if he just tells Shane.

“I think I might like both,” he says eventually.

“Both?”

God, Hollander is slow sometimes. High hockey IQ maybe but that seems to be the only thing he’s quick about. “Girls and also guys,” Ilya clarifies.

Shane doesn’t answer at first. Ilya is still sitting up so he can’t see Shane’s face to gauge how stressed out this information has made him. Maybe he should say he’s joking. Maybe–

“Okay,” Shane says (finally). “I mean, that’s cool. That you’re… bi or whatever.” Ilya doesn’t know how to respond to this so he says nothing. “How, um. How do you know?”

Ilya shrugs. “The same way I know I like girls.”

“Have you like, kissed a guy?”

“No.” *Not yet. I’ve gotten close though, remember?*

Shane sits up now, frowning. “So you just… know?”

“Yes, Hollander, that is what I’m saying.” He tilts his head, taking in Shane’s furrowed brow. “Though I think I will try kissing someone to make sure. Do you know anyone?”

Shane laughs before his face settles into something anxious-looking. “No. No, I don’t–” He turns so he is facing Ilya. “Is there someone you–someone you want to kiss?”

“There are lots of people I want to kiss.”

“You should then,” Shane whispers. “Kiss whoever you want, I mean.”

The space between them is electrified. Yuna is not home to interrupt them this time. Ilya is hesitant to move, afraid Shane will freak out. But then he remembers they’ve almost kissed before and it didn’t change anything between them. Also, Shane isn’t moving away. Ilya wonders if he will. They can’t stay frozen like this forever. As slowly as he is capable of moving, Ilya places his hand on Shane’s jaw, his touch feather light. Shane can back away any time now. He doesn’t though. Ilya watches as Shane’s eyes flutter close. He can’t wait any longer. He closes the distance between them until their lips touch.

Immediately, Ilya wants more. He lightly touches his tongue to Shane’s lips so they part open for him. They explore each other’s mouths with their tongues for what could be several minutes or possibly a single second. Ilya feels like he’s floating. He puts his other hand on the back of Shane’s head, drawing him closer. He feels Shane’s hands rest on his waist before he moves them up under Ilya’s shirt, pressing his palms against his bare back. Ilya needs them to be horizontal, like this second, needs to see how far this can go before Shane freaks out and runs. He tries to bend backward a little, keeping hold of Shane’s head, but Shane pulls away. Not abruptly, as Ilya had feared, but slowly.

“Whoa,” Shane whispers.

Ilya laughs. He can't help himself. "Yes," he answers.

"I–I have a girlfriend."

Ilya goes still. He lets his hands fall down to Shane's shoulders. "I know this."

"But–"

"It's okay, Hollander. Was just a kiss. No big deal."

Shane frowns. "No big… really?" He looks at Ilya's mouth. "Kind of feels like a big deal."

Ilya is surprised to find that he is suddenly the one who feels like running. Usually it's Shane who is constantly on the edge of panic. Somehow their roles have reversed: Shane is looking at Ilya calmly, as if kissing his best friend is a normal thing he expected to do today. Ilya is the one wondering if he's going to have a panic attack.

"It's not," he insists to cover up the swirl of complicated feelings he is experiencing. "Just… two friends. Experimenting."

Shane raises his eyebrows. "So this was… nothing?"

*Of course it wasn't nothing, how could it be nothing?* Ilya thinks. Instead, he smiles at his best friend, reassuring and confident. "Right. You have a girlfriend you're going to sleep with after prom, like one of those American movies."

Shane laughs. "What?"

"You know." Ilya waves a hand to indicate it doesn't matter what he's saying. He's pretty sure his hand is shaking. "And you will give me all the details after."

Shane nods slowly. "Or… I don't sleep with Jessica." Ilya doesn't answer so Shane continues, mildly panicked. "Not because of this! Or kind of because of this." He puts his face in his hands. "This was easier when we were kissing instead of talking."

Ilya agrees. He pulls Shane's hands away so they can get back to it. They can figure out what it means later.

# Chapter 4: Keep it to Yourself

Chapter Summary

Shane returns and gives Ilya the post-prom update.

Ilya spends Shane's prom weekend wandering the streets of Ottawa, smoking cigarettes and ignoring anyone who looks in his direction. Despite trying to think about literally anything else, images of Shane and Jessica keep popping into his mind: dancing, kissing, whatever. It did not surprise Ilya that Shane didn't break up with her two days before their prom. He had made a commitment to her; he didn't break promises. But would he definitely abstain from having sex with her, like he had said the other day? Did Ilya even want to know? He's still staying with the Hollanders, so he won't be able to avoid Shane on Sunday when he's supposed to come home. Then Monday will be Shane's eighteenth birthday. The Hollanders wanted to make a big deal, although Shane had of course protested. Ilya had gotten him a present, a photo of them at Juniors with Shane's gold medal mounted in the frame. Now he was embarrassed about it and wondered if he should even give it to him. He wondered how the fuck he had gotten himself into such a mess, lusting after his best friend like this.

In a month he would be eighteen too, old enough to check out the Lookout then, a gay bar he had found online during some surreptitious searching when he was trying to figure out his sexuality. Maybe he would meet someone there who could take his mind off Shane and the all-consuming thoughts about what it would be like to do more than kiss him and pretend it meant nothing.

Shane arrived home Sunday afternoon, looking exhausted but otherwise normal. Ilya wanted to corner him immediately and interrogate him about Jessica but that wasn't his style. Moreover, Shane didn't like to be cornered. He would have to wait until Shane was ready to talk. Luckily, after he had greeted his parents and showered, he appeared in the guest room where Ilya was camped out, pretending to read.

"How was it?" Ilya asks, barely looking up from his book. Shane's hair was still wet from the shower, his face flushed from the heat of it. He looked perfect, even with dark circles under his eyes.

"Good," Shane says. He sits on the edge of Ilya's bed. "I mean, the prom was fun. Kind of. Jessica made me dance."

Ilya laughs. "Torture."

Shane grins. "Exactly." He hesitates, looking down at his fingers absent-mindedly drawing circles on Ilya's comforter. "That part was fun but then I think she was kind of disappointed. After."

“Oh?” Ilya feels his hands clench around the book. He tries to keep his breathing steady.

“I mean we… fooled around or whatever. But I told her I wasn’t ready for–” He drops his voice then, adorably, “*actual* sex.”

Wild relief courses through Ilya’s body. He hopes it doesn’t show on his face. “She was upset?”

“At first I guess but then I–did the thing. That you showed me.” He clears his throat, still unable to meet Ilya’s eyes. “She liked that.”

Ilya laughs. “Good for you, Hollander.” He means it, too. It’s fun to make someone feel good that way. He’s weirdly proud of his friend. “Did you like doing it?”

Shane frowns. “Honestly? Not really.” Finally he looks up at Ilya. “Does that make me an asshole?”

Ilya shakes his head no. “Of course not.” He hesitates before taking a small chance, emboldened by Shane’s honesty. “Maybe girls are just not… what you’re into.”

Shane sighs. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Afraid?”

Shane scoffs. “Come on. Do *you* know any gay hockey players? There’s no way I could have like, a normal life. What if someone found out? They’d kick me out of the league and I haven’t even made it there yet.” He flops down on the bed, covering his face with his hands.

Ilya considers this for a few minutes. Shane is not wrong: professional sports are no bastion for queer people. Even in Canada, where gay marriage is legal and people are way more accepting than they are in Russia. He can’t lie to Shane about the facts of the matter. But he also can’t bear to see his best friend look so defeated. “No one has to know,” he says finally. Shane looks at him in disbelief. “You can keep a secret. Don’t volunteer information about your life. Say you are focused on hockey if anyone asks. Is not a lie. Hockey is your whole life.”

“Not my whole life,” Shane protests. Ilya gives him a look and they both laugh. “Thank you for being cool about this,” he says quietly.

Ilya smiles at him. “We have the same secret, right?”

Shane frowns. “I guess but you can date girls. Like, for real.”

Ilya shrugs. “Yes. And I will also date men.”

Shane stares at him, aghast. “What about the league?”

“The league will not own me, Shane. I can have a private life. Also this is a problem for next fall, yes? We have to be drafted first." He offers what he hopes is a reassuring smile. "One thing at a time.”

Ilya can see Shane digesting this information. He hopes that he has helped, that he has made it seem like a normal life is possible for both of them. He wants to tell Shane that they'll always have each other, no matter what. That they will be drafted together and still talk all the time, that their careers will be joined together forever, that their jerseys will be retired in the same ceremony twenty years from now. He wants to kiss Shane again and convince him that they can keep even bigger secrets with each other, as long as Shane wants. He'll do whatever Shane wants.

In the end, he keeps it all to himself. But Shane offers him a gift that makes the conversation they have had entirely worth it. "You're my best friend, Ilya."

Ilya, overcome with emotion, says nothing but nods. He rests his hand briefly on Shane's shoulder. Nothing else needs to be said today.

# Chapter 5: Celebrations and secrets

Chapter Summary

Yuna is a marketing genius. The draft is super fun. The after party is even better.

**2010-2011 Draft and Rookie Season**

The league wants a story. Yuna understands this. She has the perfect one for both boys to tell.

She talks to Irina about it first, because after all, it's as much Irina's story as it is Ilya's. Yuna promises discretion; Irina's safety and mental health are everyone's priority. Reluctantly, Irina has continued her treatment with a therapist and agreed to take medication, though no one else knows besides Yuna and Ilya. Her therapist combined with her permanent residency card have helped her to not fear the wrath of her estranged husband anymore. The life she and Ilya have made in Ottawa is a safe one. She is able to see now that she was brave to take a chance, that she saved herself and her son (one of them at least; she will never forgive herself for leaving Alexei). Now Ilya is going to be a hockey player like he always dreamed, which is thrilling for both of them. Still, the idea of her son being rich and famous is baffling. To her, he is still a little boy, clutching her hand in the airport. Now Yuna is telling her that they have to make plans to supplement Ilya's career, in case he gets hurt. Irina bristles at this (isn't it bad luck to mention such a thing out loud?) but she trusts Yuna implicitly. The Hollanders have been good friends to them. Maybe Irina doesn't totally understand Yuna's (lengthy) explanation about branding and sponsorships but she gets the gist: Ilya has a chance to make a lot of money in addition to achieving his dream. She won't stand in the way of that. "I don't keep secrets anymore," she tells Yuna. They smile at each other, two proud mothers.

Next, Yuna has to convince Ilya.

"I do not want to have a *story*," he says stubbornly when she sits him and Irina down with her plans. She has a notebook. Ilya is touched that she is so invested in him but also wary. "The story is I am the best hockey player they have seen in years. Easy."

Yuna smiles patiently. "Honey, just listen, okay? It's not just about hockey. It's about setting you up for a secure future. You won't play forever, even if you want to. Do you know how many players will be drafted this year? Most of them will be totally forgotten after a couple of years. If you want to set yourself up as a brand, you have to share something about yourself."

Ilya snorts. His mother pokes his arm. In Russian, so he knows she is serious, she tells him, "*Be respectful, Ilyusha. She is trying to help you."* Ilya nods, briefly chastised.

“I’m just suggesting you offer a little bit of it in interviews after the draft. We don’t have to put out a whole statement, just float some facts out there. You and your mother came here with almost nothing–we don’t have to say *why* you came, it doesn’t matter. Just that you came here as a child and have worked hard to achieve your dreams. And! You and your best friend are being drafted together. Sponsors love things like that. They’ll be throwing contracts at you left and right.”

Ilya knows she is right. Not about him not playing hockey forever; he will play until they have to physically force him off the ice. But the idea that he will be able to take care of his mother forever is a very tempting one. She has sacrificed for him. He needs to take care of her now. He finds himself nodding. Yuna grins. She is way too excited about this. Ilya decides to be grateful for her support.

On the night of the draft, he and Shane sit together and let their picture be taken approximately thirty million times. True to her word, Yuna has laid the foundation for him and Shane to be the most talked about draft picks this year. Not just because they will presumably be first and second chosen, but also because of Ilya’s immigration story and his friendship with Shane.

When his name is called first, Ilya almost knocks over his chair. He reaches for his mother and picks her up in an embrace, babbling at her in Russian and kissing her on both cheeks over and over. She is crying happy tears, holding Ilya’s face in her hands and saying his name over and over like a prayer. Next, Shane smiles at him despite his clear irritation at being second (Ilya will never let him forget it). He tries to shake hands but Ilya embraces him as well, lifting him off the ground even though Shane weighs almost two hundred pounds now. Shane laughs, shouting, “Put me down, asshole!” The cameras are flashing. The crowd is laughing and cheering. Ilya makes his way to the stage. He thinks he will remember this moment for the rest of his life.

Not two minutes later, Shane’s name is called. He ducks away from Ilya’s grasp this time, kissing his mother and hugging his father before pressing his cheek against Irina’s face, still wet with tears. He walks purposefully to the stage and accepts his hat and jersey from Montreal.

They will be officially separated for the first time since they met in Juniors. It’s not really a surprise to either of them but still, Ilya is a little sad. He comforts himself with the thought that at least it will be fun to play against each other for a change. He knows all of Shane’s tricks by now. He will delight in beating him.

It’s a long night. The draft goes on forever. They have their pictures taken, separately and together, what feels like a thousand times. They are both interviewed for their reactions and asked to talk about their friendship. *Seven years playing together! Incredible!* Ilya offers the bare bones of the story: that he and his mother immigrated here with almost nothing; that the Hollanders have helped them through the years; that he and Shane are almost like brothers. They smile until their faces hurt. They return to their shared hotel room and pretend they’re both going to sleep.

Within ten minutes, Ilya has turned to face Shane in the bed across from him. He waits patiently until Shane feels his eyes boring into him and turns to face him across the small

space between their beds.

“What,” Shane says, pretending to be annoyed.

“I can’t sleeeeeep.”

Shane hides a grin. Ilya can tell, even in the dark. “And that’s my problem because?”

“Because you can’t sleep either.”

They grin at each other. “How did you know that?” Shane asks fondly.

“I know everything about you, Hollander. We are the first best friends to ever be drafted together.”

Shane frowns, thinking. “I don’t know if that’s true.”

Ilya laughs. “Shut up, Hollander. I am joking. Press has been annoying.”

“Oh. Yeah. I guess we’ll have to get used to it.”

“We should celebrate.”

“What, now? We’re in bed.”

Ilya snorts. “You are so boring. What will you do when beautiful people start throwing themselves at you when you are a big, hot hockey star? Not as hot as me, of course–” Shane throws a pillow at him, which Ilya catches, laughing. “Come here.”

Shane hesitates but only for a second. He climbs into bed with Ilya, like they’ve done a hundred other times, though not recently. After the afternoon they spent kissing, they had mutually agreed to forget about it. (Ilya hoped forgetting about it was a temporary affliction). They decided they had to spend their final year of high school focused only on graduating and playing hockey. Jessica had been gently dumped by Shane a week after the grade eleven prom and Ilya took a break from dating so he could focus. Hollander was an annoyingly good influence on him.

He is also currently in bed next to Ilya, which had been the plan for some time. Ilya has thought long and hard about how he wanted to celebrate draft night and he has decided: he wants to make sure Shane knows how to give a proper blow job. At least, that’s what he tells himself and what he plans to tell Shane. It’s a way to give Shane some confidence before they have to be separated and start their rookie season. Not that the new distance between them matters. They’re adults now. It’s normal to move away from your best friend and your mother and your other family. This was always the plan. Ilya isn’t going to be a baby about it.

Shane is staring at him, waiting to hear how Ilya wants to celebrate. He has to play this right.

“I was thinking,” Ilya said.

“Didn’t know you were capable, Rozanov.”

“Ha, ha, Mr. Joke Man–”

“--Mr. *Joke Man*–”

“--fucking listen!” Shane made a show of shutting his mouth, tucking his lips under his teeth. “I was thinking, you don’t want to go to MLH a virgin.”

“What the fuck, Ilya!”

“No, listen! I know you don’t think it’s possible but you *will* be able to hook up with guys. There are men in Montreal who don’t know about hockey and who will want to do things to that mouth.” Shane blushes, Ilya’s favorite sight. He will miss those freckles in a couple of months. *Nyet. Focus.* “You can’t live like a, a priest. You are nineteen. You will want to fuck somebody.”

Shane hides his face with his hands now and groans. “I cannot believe we’re talking about this.”

“We talk about everything,” Ilya reminds him, grinning. “I think we should practice. On each other.”

Shane’s hands slowly move off his face, coming to a rest on his ribcage. He takes four deep breaths. Ilya waits. This is part of the game they play: Ilya says something outrageous, Shane takes deep breaths while he considers saying yes (he rarely says no to Ilya). Ilya is practiced at waiting for Shane to make a decision. He is rewarded for his patience when Shane asks, “You’ve been thinking about this?”

Ilya shrugs, trying not to give away his excitement. His *need*. His whole body is tense. He tries to get himself to relax, envisioning himself lighting a cigarette and inhaling a deep breath. He’ll have to quit soon, a disappointment. He loves smoking. Maybe he can still occasionally steal one.

“*You’re* not a virgin,” Shane continues when Ilya doesn’t answer the question.

“Not with girls. With guys, though, yes,” Ilya corrects. “I can also be… discreet. Boston is big city.”

Shane considers this. “It would be a secret.”

“You and me? Yes, of course, Shane. I’m not stupid.”

“I didn’t say you were! Sorry. I’m just–caught off guard I guess.” He reaches out a tentative hand, landing on Ilya’s waist.

Ilya’s body buzzes with the touch. He slides his hand up under Shane’s chin, cupping his jaw the way he’s done with dozens of pretty girls. The way he did the last time they kissed, come to think of it. At this moment Ilya is convinced he’s never seen anyone as beautiful as Shane Hollander, eyes half closed, freckles covered over by flush, lips full and ready to be kissed. Ilya presses his lips to Shane’s, just like last time.

They keep it to just kissing for a long time. Ilya thinks Shane is too nervous to move his hands, which has made Ilya a little reluctant to move his. But he can feel Shane's erection pressing lightly against his thigh and he wants it to press harder. He pushes his own hard dick against Shane's, eliciting a surprised moan from both of them. Shane reaches his hand into Ilya's curls and pulls. Ilya is absolutely giddy.

"Mmm, didn't know you wanted to be rough, Hollander," he growls into Shane's ear. He starts kissing down his jawline, going as slowly as he can allow his mouth to move.

"Fuck off," Shane answers, breathy and desperate sounding.

Ilya kisses along Shane's collarbone, starting a path down the center of his chest. He finds the V between Shane's hips and runs his tongue along it. "Is this okay?"

Shane laughs, just on the edge of hysterical. "Yes, Ilya, what the fuck."

Ilya shrugs, sticking his tongue out experimentally to lightly touch the base of Shane's cock. "Good to ask."

"Right, okay, it's okay, it's *so good*, Jesus Ilya–"

Ilya grins. He has been the grateful receiver of some excellent blow jobs. He plans to put his knowledge to good use now. He takes a deep breath and lowers his mouth slowly down Shane's dick. He wraps his fingers around the base and starts a painfully slow rhythm, which he keeps up until Shane starts moaning and breathing harder, a sign (Ilya thinks) that it's time to speed up. He pulls off at the last second so he can watch Shane come. When it's over, he flops back next to him. They both catch their breath. "I'm sticky," Shane says finally. Ilya laughs, on the edge of hysteria himself now. "I am!" Shane complains.

Ilya stands and walks to the bathroom. He returns with a warm washcloth for Shane, which he throws onto his chest. "Here. Baby."

"Fuck off." Shane wipes his chest off, grateful to Ilya. For several reasons. "Do you want– can I?"

Ilya grins. "You kind of have to now, no?"

Shane laughs, pushing himself up and rolling over onto Ilya. "I thought you said consent is important."

"Sure, yes, you're right, Hollander. Don't suck my dick, I'll live."

"I'm just fucking around." Shane ducks his head a little. "I want to."

"You do?" Ilya puts his hands behind his head, grinning. "That's kind of sexy, Hollander."

"You gotta stop calling me that, my team is gonna call me that."

"You will think of this every time your team says your name?"

Shane blushes furiously. “I think I like you better when my dick is in your mouth.” Ilya giggles. Shane crawls down Ilya’s body until he reaches his target. Tentatively, he swirls the tip of his tongue around Ilya’s dick. Apparently emboldened by the initial taste, he flattens his tongue against the tip, earning a gasp from Ilya. He watches Shane wrap his mouth around Ilya, taking his length into it as far as he can. He moves his mouth up and down, fast and hard, until Ilya is tapping him on the shoulder. Shane pulls off at the last second. “Holy shit,” he whispers, watching Ilya erupt. He flops back down now, both of them still catching their breath. Again. “That okay?”

Ilya chuckles. “Yes, *Shane*, it was okay. Obviously.”

Shane heaves himself out of bed, grabbing another washcloth and throwing it at Ilya as it had been thrown at him. He winces.

“What?” Ilya asks, furrowing his own brow.

“I just–what if someone finds out?”

Ilya sighs. He should have known Shane would be weird about this. “Who will find out? It’s just you and me who know and neither of us will tell anyone. Right?”

“Right.” Shane sits on the bed, shoulders hunched over, away from Ilya.

Ilya places his hand lightly on Shane’s shoulder. “Hey.” Shane turns his head to look at Ilya. He looks scared. It makes Ilya’s stomach ache. “It will be okay. I promise.” He pulls Shane down so they are both lying down again, this time so Ilya can hold Shane until he’s calmer.

They fall asleep that way.

# Chapter 6: Miss me yet?

Chapter Summary

The boys are separated but get to meet again during their first MLH game.

Irina travels to Boston with Ilya, just as the Hollanders drive the two hours to Montreal with Shane. Ilya is traveling very lightly to his new city. He has found a furnished place to rent until he starts getting paid and can upgrade to something bigger and more permanent. His signing bonus was more money than he had ever seen in his life but he doesn't want to spend it all at once. (Hollander's influence of course; he really has been annoyingly good for Ilya, though he never plans on admitting such a thing). Irina doesn't trust him to unpack his meager belongings, especially since his apartment is temporary, so she has insisted on joining him. Also, she wants to say goodbye properly.

Ilya had all but begged her to move with him to Boston. He has a five year contract with the Raiders so he'll be settled for a while. He offered to find her somewhere nice to live, in a Russian speaking neighborhood even. She kissed and hugged him when he asked her but ultimately wouldn't agree to the move. She wants to stay near Marlena and her other friends. More importantly, she told him it was time for him to be alone and learn how to be a grown up.

He does not feel like a grown up. He is not even old enough to go to the bar in Boston, which is unfair, not to mention deeply annoying. He plans to make some friends on this team as soon as possible so they can buy him some vodka. He did spend a small chunk of his signing bonus on a very expensive and imported bottle but he plans on saving that for special occasions. Privately, he thinks he and Shane can drink it in a toast to their first game together, even though he knows Shane is not a big drinker.

They've been in touch, which is a relief. Ilya was a little worried about what would happen when they were separated after being around each other all the time for so long. Part of him assumed that Shane would move on: make new friends, get involved in a new routine, and forget about Ilya altogether. He is relieved when Shane texts him during training camp. They continue texting each other as their first real season gets underway. The conversation revolves around hockey and their new cities, nothing else. More than once Ilya wants to ask Shane if he misses him yet but he worries the answer will be no and that would kill him.

Their first game against each other is in Montreal. They haven't seen each other since they moved to their separate cities. Ilya is not nervous to see Shane, exactly but he doesn't know how to label the feelings he is having leading up to the game. He isn't interested in trying to figure it out. He hates investigating his own feelings, preferring instead to put them on the ice or into the excellent pastime of picking up girls with his teammates. It turns out he can drink in Boston if he's out with the other Raiders. Bartenders recognize the team and they're

pleased to meet the hot new superstar they've drafted. He quickly gains a reputation with his teammates for somehow knowing exactly where to go after games and pulling some of the sexiest women they encounter. It's fun. Shane would hate it.

He has already told Marlow that he isn't sure if he'll go out while they're in Montreal. He declines to give him too many details, except to say he hasn't seen his best friend in months and pretty girls are found everywhere. Marly gives him a predictably hard time but in his golden retriever kind of way. He likes Marly. He's easy to be around.

His whole team is easy, really. It helps that Ilya is fun and talks a lot of shit and can back it up with his talent. Shane hasn't said much about his teammates, except that he's sort of made one friend, Hayden Pike, who Ilya privately thinks doesn't belong in a professional hockey league. But whatever. He's glad Hollander has someone to hang out with and isn't sitting alone in his apartment all the time.

Ilya is delighted to face off against his best friend. They've never gotten to play against each other in a real game. The league also loves it; they have been playing up the rivalry for weeks now. "From Best Friends to Rivals" is advertised everywhere, with some dorky shot of him and Shane staring at each other over the puck like they want to kill each other. In reality, they had giggled through the entire photoshoot, irritating everyone around them, even Yuna. Shane has even attempted to chirp Ilya in the leadup press, in a laughably bad way that made Ilya want to bite him. All the more reason not to waste a night in Montreal in some stupid club when he can be teasing Hollander instead.

"What do I get when I beat you tonight?" he asks Shane when they bend down over the ice together, waiting for the puck drop.

Shane startles before he lets a small smile stretch across his face. "Who says I'm gonna let you win?"

Now Ilya is startled, so much so that Shane wins the faceoff. Ultimately the Metros win the game by one goal. Ilya can see how useful Shane is to them, how they already rely on him to do most of the heavy lifting. He doesn't like it. He hasn't decided if he'll ask Shane about it or not. In the end, he figures it can wait; it's early in the season anyway. Also, he's hoping there won't be a lot of talking tonight.

They haven't exactly hammered out the details but Ilya feels sure he can easily get Shane into bed. Draft night was excellent; surely Ilya isn't the only one looking for a repeat performance. His suspicions are concerned when Hollander appears in the doorway of the visitors locker room, eyes searching for Ilya. Before their eyes meet, Marlow notices Hollander and shouts, "Rozy, your boyfriend is here!" The locker room dissolves into good-natured laughter.

Shane looks mildly panicked but Ilya saves him immediately, chirping back, "Aww, Marly, do not be jealous, I will still sleep in your room tonight and keep the scary monsters away." More laughter before everyone goes back to dressing or showering or packing up. "See you assholes later," Ilya calls over his shoulder as he pushes Shane down the hall. "Relax, Hollander," he says under his breath. "They are just teasing. Nobody thinks–"

“I know,” Shane says quickly. Ilya does not believe him but he knows not to push. Shane clears his throat when they get to the parking lot. “Do you want to get a drink or…”

Ilya grins at him. “Or.” Shane blushes. Oh, how Ilya missed that blush! He would bite Shane’s cheeks right now if they were alone. “Show me your apartment.”

Shane nods, unlocks his car, and drives Ilya home.

When they park, Shane hesitates. “People don’t think it’s weird, us leaving together?”

Ilya sighs. “No, Hollander. They know you are my best friend. The whole league advertises this, that we practically lived together, that this is the first time we’ve had to compete against each other, blah blah blah. Stupid hockey players are not going to figure out that it’s more than that.”

Shane frowns. “More?”

*Blyat.* “Not *more*,” Ilya says quickly, waving his hand dismissively. “You know what I mean.” He holds his breath until Shane nods. He follows him into the apartment.

Shane is babbling about real estate prices and investing and the cost of having something custom built when Ilya presses him against the counter and kisses him hungrily. Shane kisses back for a minute before he stops to catch his breath, Ilya kissing down his neck. “You missed me, huh?” Shane says, giggling.

“Just your mouth,” Ilya answers. To his pleasant surprise, Shane drops to his knees right then and there.

# Chapter 7: If I tell myself it doesn't matter (maybe it won't hurt as much)

Chapter Summary

> A glimpse into the years between 2011 and 2016: family traditions, Stanley Cup wins, and the beginning of Shane trying to get a little distance from Ilya.

**MLH Seasons 2011-2016**

It's not that Shane and Ilya grow apart exactly. Their friendship is long established; a few months in between seeing each other shouldn't make a dent in the years they've built between them. They get to see each other a few times during the season when Boston faces Montreal. The league loves those games so they can play up their “friends into rivals/bestie vs. bestie” nonsense campaign. They generally do press together on those nights, Shane giving his wooden press smile and Ilya being as annoying to the reporters as possible. Afterward, they go out with each other’s teams to whatever local bar is nearest their respective arenas. And every time, despite Ilya thinking it can’t possibly continue, they fall into bed together.

Offseason, other traditions begin. Ilya and Shane spend North American Christmas with Irina and the Hollanders, even though Ilya and Irina don’t celebrate their Christmas until January. There are no hookups during their shared holidays. They spend those nights apart, Shane at his childhood home with his parents and Ilya with Irina in the (nicer) apartment Ilya has bought for her, even though he also buys his own condo in Ottawa (Shane insists that real estate is the best investment and Ilya listens to him because he always listens to Shane). Somehow Ilya misses Shane more on those nights when they are in the same city but not sleeping next to each other. Every Christmas he tries to come up with a good reason to have a sleepover but he can’t think of a way to broach the subject so he always gives up. He doesn’t think too hard about why it’s so important to him.

During their summer breaks, Ilya spends a week in Ottawa with the Hollanders at their family cottage, until Shane has his own built down the road. Ilya loves those weeks in the middle of nowhere: seven blissful days and six gorgeous nights spent with Shane, mostly alone. When his week is up, he spends the rest of the summer with one teammate or another (he is welcomed by many of them, even though he flirts shamelessly with their wives and girlfriends), rotating through their Cape Cod or Vineyard beach houses, playing with their nieces and nephews, charming their cousins. He wonders sometimes what Shane does with the rest of his vacation. Ilya imagines he meditates mostly and tries not to blush in front of his parents when he remembers asking Ilya to fuck him against a tree in the woods.

Because that’s something they do now (not just in the woods, of course). At some point after their rookie season, Shane decided it was time for Ilya to fuck him so they could lose *that*

virginity to each other too. Ilya is told that Shane has a plan: when he's no longer a virgin, Shane wants to try to meet someone in Montreal. Someone closeted like him, maybe, or at least someone who's willing to be discreet. He just wants to have enough experience not to embarrass himself with someone else. That's how he presents it to Ilya, anyway. Ilya doesn't care about the reason. Fucking Shane Hollander sounds like a dream to him (another feeling he will not be examining further). They make a plan (Shane loves a plan) and meet at a hotel in Vermont during a couple days off. In truth, Ilya skips a practice day to make it work but he keeps that little detail from Shane (he would not approve of Ilya missing practice just to fuck). In some chain hotel that is about an equal driving distance for them both, Ilya's dreams come true. He opens Shane up slowly and reverently, verbally asking every time he adds a finger to make sure Shane is okay. Shane rolls his eyes at the frequent check-ins but Ilya can read his best friend and knows that he appreciates the slow-going, no pressure path Ilya takes. Once fully inside Shane, Ilya fucks him as slowly and gently as he's ever fucked anyone. When it's over, he tries very hard to pretend it wasn't the best and most intimate sexual experience of his life. He's afraid if Shane knows, they won't get to do it again and he wouldn't be able to stand that.

He tries very hard over the next few weeks not to think about what that night means to him. He and Shane are just friends, *best* friends, who are helping each other out. They're just friends who fuck around, like he and Svetlana do sometimes when she's in between lovers. If Shane sleeps with other people, he doesn't tell Ilya. Ilya tries not to think about that either, focusing instead on his usual one night stands in between stolen nights with Shane.

The Olympics approach but Ilya elects not to go when he's asked. He can't return to Russia wearing another country's jersey. In fact, he doesn't want to return to Russia period; there is no one there he misses, no one he wants to see. The people he loves are all in North America now. Also, he doesn't think his mother would be able to stand him going back there. She is better, Ilya knows this, but he worries that the smallest thing will undo her and Sochi is no small thing. Yuna stays in close touch with her, casually mentioning to Ilya that they've had lunch together or gone shopping when she texts him every few weeks to check in. He is lucky to have the Hollanders. He almost misses them when he's in Boston.

The Hollanders ultimately decide not to go to Russia either–there are so many travel issues with Sochi, they can't justify taking the risk. Ilya hates that Shane is in Russia alone. Or, not *alone*, obviously he's with his teammates and a bunch of other athletes. Ilya wishes *he* was with Shane, is the thing. What if he needs Ilya to translate or protect him or–whatever. Shane doesn't need him, not anymore than any other friend. And it doesn't matter anyway.

"It doesn't matter" is Ilya's favorite refrain to himself and he finds he has to use it often. Like when Shane said he would try to meet a guy, or when he acted cagey about his phone for a while after that. When he mentioned traveling for some brand deal and Ilya imagined Shane would find someone to hook up with there, a photographer or stylist (though Shane is notoriously terrible at realizing when someone is flirting with him). Any time Shane crosses his mind in a way that comes too close to the secret truth of Ilya's deeper feelings, Ilya rejects the thought with his trusty refrain: *it doesn't matter.*

He goes home to Ottawa during the Olympic break and stays up at odd hours to watch Shane play live. He also watches Russia get obliterated by Latvia of all teams and feels, for the first

time, mildly conflicted about becoming a Canadian citizen. It was the right choice for his mother to leave Moscow, and he's grateful she took him with her. It had not occurred to him before, at twelve or fifteen or even nineteen that he would feel this strange kind of homesickness for a place he doesn't really miss. He could not admit to himself (or to anyone else) that he was sad to not be able to play for his home country. Maybe that was part of the reason that it didn't seem right to play for his adopted home either. He would always, he began to understand now, be halfway between two places. The only home he recognized was the abstract one he felt when he was with Shane and their families were together.

That is too heavy a thought to hold for too long so Ilya pushes it away with all the other hard thoughts he'd pushed down for so many years. He puts it in the box with Moscow and his father and Alexei, who tries to DM him on Instagram every so often, demanding money for their father, saying he's sick. Ilya doesn't believe any illness afflicts his father. If anything, he thinks it is Alexei who is sick, probably looking for money to spend on drugs or women or whatever. Ilya blocks the DMs. He tries not to let them haunt him.

It is a relief when Shane comes home from Sochi, silver medal in hand, complaining about how gross and weird the Olympic Village was. Ilya feels better when he and Shane are within driving distance of each other. He is also ready to move on from all Olympics talk. His complicated feelings about it need to be silenced.

Montreal gets knocked out of the playoffs some time in May. Ilya pretends to be sorry about it while his team continues on. He actually is a little sorry that he won't play against Shane in the finals but also somewhat relieved. It wouldn't be as good a win if it meant Shane had to lose. And the Raiders do win, amazingly. In June Ilya holds the Stanley Cup over his head for the first time and cries unabashedly. After the horn sounds, his mother and all three Hollanders run onto the ice, slipping and sliding towards him. If Shane is jealous that Ilya got here first, he holds his tongue. He is the last one to hug Ilya, letting himself grab the back of Ilya's hair like he does during sex as he screams *congratufuckinglations* into Ilya's ear. The next day, the photo of them hanging on to each other is pictured side by side with the photo of Ilya holding the Cup over his head.

The following year, their roles are reversed and a similar picture is posted: this time with Ilya's arms wrapped around Shane's waist trying to lift him up in celebration. Shane is laughing even though a second later he was loudly calling Ilya an asshole (affectionately). When the picture shows up online and in the papers, Shane tells Ilya his team gave him tons of shit about it. Ilya can tell Shane doesn't mean in the same, friendly way the Raiders tease about their friendship. He suggests Shane should tell his team to fuck off; they wouldn't be Stanley Cup champions without Shane Hollander as their center. "What matters," Ilya insists to his best friend when they are lying in bed next to each other after the MLH awards that year, having celebrated by Ilya fucking Shane almost through the mattress, "is that we are both champions. No one can fucking touch us."

Mostly, Ilya is happy. He and Shane both have Cups now. They have managed to keep their casual friends-with-benefits thing going on for years now. His life is a dream of hockey and sex and partying and brand deals (thanks to Yuna). He has enough money to take care of his mother forever, and Marlena and her family too, if they'll let him. He wonders, idly, how long this kind of happiness can possibly last.

The answer, he discovers, is just until North American Christmas, 2016.

At the Hollander's house in Ottawa, Shane drags Ilya into his childhood bedroom as soon as he walks in the door. Ilya grins at him, sure they are about to reenact their first hookup for old time's sake. *What a lovely Christmas gift*, he thinks. Instead, Shane breaks Ilya's heart wide open when he says, just as casually as if he's talking about the weather, "I met somebody."

Ilya is practiced at keeping his face neutral. He does it when Coach is yelling something or when a girl asks him if she can see him again the next time the Raiders play (the answer is no. No repeat hookups, that's his rule. Except for Shane and Sveta). So when Shane throws this bomb at him, Ilya does not flinch. Rather, he forces his mouth into something that resembles a smile. "Good for you, Hollander."

"I just wanted to tell you because…" Shane rubs the back of his neck, looking away from Ilya for a moment. "We're just dating I guess but I can't–I don't want to cheat on him."

Ilya absorbs this blow as well. He is sort of surprised to find that he is not crumbling into dust in front of Shane. He is standing here, pretending to be totally fine, even as he can feel a deep ache growing in the center of his chest, making it hard to breathe. "You are, what, boyfriends?" *Already?*

Shane blushes, still not looking Ilya in the eye. "Not exactly. I just, I don't feel right about hooking up with more than one person at a time." Now he does look up at Ilya, having apparently just heard the words that came out of his own mouth. "Not that I'm judging! I know you see other people–I mean, *we're* not seeing each other obviously, that's not–I just–"

"Hollander. Relax. You are going to have panic attack." When Ilya is stressed, he drops his articles. He doesn't notice, focusing on pretending to be happy for his best friend and not giving into the urge to throw himself out the nearest window.

Shane exhales, lowering his shoulders. "Sorry. I don't mean to be weird."

Ilya smiles at him. "You are always weird." *I love that about you. Unfortunately it seems I love everything about you. And you are going to fall in love with someone else and I will have to live with it because our lives are so tangled up together. I won't ever be able to get away from you, even if I wanted to.* "What's his name?"

"Miles," Shane says, smiling. "Rose Landry introduced us."

"...Rose Landry from the movies?"

"Yeah, they're filming in Montreal, I met her at some bar JJ made me come out to last month. She and I were talking and she kind of *guessed* about me, which is embarrassing but she promised she would keep it a secret. I guess there are lots of secretly gay actors." Ilya nods as if this is all normal information to receive. He will need to lie down in a dark room for a week to figure out how this chain of events could have happened without him knowing. "Anyway, she introduced us and he's… nice. And hot." Shane shrugs. "Maybe it'll turn out to be nothing but. It's something right now."

*Something*. Ilya nods again, pretending to be fine when actually he wants to run out into the snowy night and keep walking until he freezes and slips into a long, peaceful coma. “Good. Good for you.”

Suddenly Shane’s arms are around him. Ilya freezes. “I was worried you’d be mad,” Shane says into Ilya’s neck.

Ilya wraps his arms around Shane and fixes his voice so it doesn’t betray him. “You’re my best friend, Shane” he says, which is the truth. “I’m happy if you’re happy.”

He wishes that was the truth as well.

# Chapter 8: A lot of people love you

Chapter Summary

> Shane wants Ilya and Miles to meet. Cliff Marlow is ride or die. Hockey is a violent sport (but everyone's ok, I'm not a sadist).

**April 2017–Montreal**

Ilya knows he is not at his best tonight.

He had been playing well in the weeks before this. After All Stars he pushed down the thought of meeting Miles, telling himself that it was entirely possible he and Shane would break up before they were forced to meet. Ilya texted Shane occasionally, avoiding the topic of the maybe boyfriend but keeping in touch, trying to pretend everything between them was normal. He cannot lose Shane. If all they can be is friends, he will learn to adjust.

All of this character development and maturity disappear the moment the plane touches down in Montreal.

Now, in the locker room before the game, he feels Cliff eyeing him. His teammate knows something is up, even if he doesn't know what it is. After all these years of playing together (and drinking and picking up women and sharing a room on roadies), he supposes Cliff Marlow knows him better than anyone else at this point. Except maybe Shane. Another brick to the chest.

"You okay, Roz?" Cliff asks now, attempting to be casual but sounding deeply concerned instead.

Ilya wants to lie. He wants to say that he's fine, he's ready to kick Montreal's ass, he's going to go out tonight and end up in someone else's hotel room, preferably a couple so his attention can be fully occupied. But he can't say any of that because he makes the mistake of looking into Cliff's eyes and seeing the real love and concern in them. A tiny part of him breaks.

"No," he says quietly. Honestly.

Cliff nods. "Something up with you and Hollander?"

Ilya frowns at his teammate. "What do you mean?"

Cliff shrugs, going back to putting on his gear, keeping it casual so he doesn't scare Ilya away. Cliff may actually be his best friend on this team. "Usually you're happy to be here.

See your bestie, you know. But I haven't heard you talk about him recently. Thought maybe you two had a fight or something."

Ilya wants to wave Cliff off. He wants to say something snarky and dismissive. He wants to not feel like he's been punched in the chest and unable to recover from the blow. In that moment he waivers, just for a moment, but it's enough for Cliff to see. So Ilya gives in. "Not a fight," he says quietly. Cliff waits. Fuck, when did Cliff develop emotional intelligence? "He is seeing someone now so…" He shrugs, trying to convey that it's normal for two friends to grow apart and not hang out as much when one is in a relationship.

But Cliff must see something else in that shrug because he says back, also quietly, "That sucks, man." Ilya stares at him for a second, trying to figure out if Cliff has any fucking idea what he's talking about. Cliff claps him on the back. "Want to go out tonight? Drown your sorrows?"

Ilya shakes his head, looking down at the helmet he's holding loosely in his hands. He seems to have gotten dressed through muscle memory; he doesn't remember putting all this gear on but he appears to be ready to step onto the ice. "I have to meet the… person he's seeing. Tonight."

Cliff flinches like he's been hit. "Jesus. No wonder you feel like shit." Ilya chuckles in spite of himself. "I'll call you after a half hour and say there's an emergency?" Ilya raises his eyebrows at his friend, who shrugs. "My sister used to have me do it for her when she was stuck on a shitty date. Sometimes I'd even show up and grab her." He grins, fox-like. "Guys didn't bother her again once they saw me."

"You are crazy, Marly," Ilya answers, genuinely smiling for a second. "Also very good friend. Thank you. And thank you for not–you know. Being weird about this."

"We're in Boston, man. It's pretty fucking queer here. I've been to Pride."

"Okay, shut up now please."

Cliff laughs and pulls Ilya into a half hug that Ilya lets go on for more than a few seconds. He hasn't been hugged in a long time, he realizes. The aching loneliness dulls for just a moment.

During warmups Shane skates over to him, like he does every time they play each other. He pokes Ilya with his hockey stick to get his attention. "Hey," he says, smiling. "Ready to uh, hang out later?"

Shane's face is so hopeful and bright, it makes Ilya's heart hurt. "Yes. I have been thinking of good questions to ask."

Shane frowns. "Questions?"

"Yes, like, what is your intentions with Hollander? Will you make him an honest man?"

"Fuck off, don't say any of that."

Ilya shrugs. "Best friend questions, you know."

Shane smiles again. “I really want you to like each other, you know?”

Ilya nods, attempting a genuine smile (and probably failing). “Go back with your team, they are glaring at us.”

Shane looks over his shoulder and then back at Ilya, rolling his eyes. “I can’t believe I’m saying this but I’m ready for the summer. I need a break from these assholes.” He skates backward, pointing his stick at Ilya. “See you after!”

Cliff skates up to him then, lightly tapping their helmets together. “Come on, man.”

The game is fine. Montreal is good, even though Ilya is sure they would be hot garbage without Shane. He carries a lot on his back. Ilya is still worried about Shane’s plan to come out to them. Hockey players are not known for their queer allyship. He was surprised, honestly, how easy Cliff was about it. He repeats the phrase "Boston's pretty fucking queer" in his head a few times, turning it over thoughtfully. Maybe Shane would come to Boston. He physically shakes himself out of that thought. *Now you are really dreaming, Ilyusha*.

He thinks later it was probably this moment, daydreaming about playing on the Raiders with his best friend, that makes him miss the body coming at him full speed. He gets slammed into the boards and then, for a second, everything is black.

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He’s half conscious in the ambulance, trying to keep his eyes open because that’s what the voices around him keep telling him to do. He’s being asked other questions too but his head hurts and it’s hard to focus. Shit, his mother will be anxious. She had thought about coming tonight but at the last second wasn’t feeling up for the drive so she was back in Ottawa. She was watching on television with the Hollanders, he thinks. She will be beside herself. He reaches up to touch the crucifix she gave to him when they first came to Canada, rubbing it for luck. “Mama,” he must say out loud because someone answers that his coach is going to call her. They keep telling him not to worry, just to keep his eyes open.

In the hospital there are X-rays and other tests and so many questions before finally, finally he is allowed to rest. They must give him something for the pain because when he opens his eyes he feels like he’s floating. It’s not unpleasant. He thinks he’s been very hurt but there is no collar around his neck and a quick wiggle of his toes under the sheet show him that it's not as bad as it could have been. He wonders who won tonight. It was tied when he–he isn’t sure what happened, actually, now that he thinks about it. Someone must have knocked him out but he can’t remember. He finds a wire with a button on it wrapped around the railing of the hospital bed so he presses it and waits to see what will happen.

A nurse appears (a very pretty one, lucky for him) and smiles at him. “You’re awake!” she says brightly. “How’s your pain, one to ten, ten being the worst you’ve ever felt?”

He tries to laugh but it hurts. His ribs then. Broken or bruised? “I am Russian hockey player, I never have pain.”

She laughs, a bright sparkly sound in the quiet of the room. “Sure, Mr. Rozanov.”

“Ilya.”

“Ilya. You’re on continuous meds at the moment but if you have any breakthrough pain, let me know, okay? I’m going to tell the resident you’re awake.”

“Wait–” She turns back from the door, smiling. He must not be so bad off if she’s smiling. “What happened?”

“You took a bad hit last night. Concussion, a moderate one, and a couple broken ribs. Your spleen is a little inflamed too, so we’re going to have to keep you a couple days until that resolves. But overall you were lucky.”

Ilya snorts. Lucky. Okay. He wonders what a spleen is even for.

“Your mom was here for a while but I sent her home with your friend. She looked like she needed some sleep.” Her smile softens. “You’ve already had some visitors. A lot of people love you, Ilya.”

He feels tears prick his eyes. He tries to blink them away. “Thank you,” he whispers. “Can you call her please? And tell her–”

“Yep, I’ll tell her you’re awake and asking for her.”

“Wait! Sorry. What friend?”

“Oh. Shane Hollander. His parents were here too, and a few of your teammates. It was quite a crowd last night! I’m sure they’ll be back today. It’s early yet.”

Ilya nods and closes his eyes again, succumbing to a dreamless sleep.

He wakes up to his mother, praying in Russian at his bedside, holding on to his hand for dear life. “Mama,” he croaks. She looks up, surprise at his voice dawning on her face first, followed by a flood of relief before she starts to cry. “Shh, shh, Mama, *I am okay, it’s okay*.” He tries to reach over to stroke her hair the way she would do to him when he was little but moving hurts so he squeezes the hand she’s holding instead.

“*Ilyusha, oh my God, Ilyusha, I was so afraid, I saw it on television with David and Yuna, they had to bring me, I’m sorry I wasn’t here, I should have been here–”*

*“No, Mama, please, I am fine. You’re here now. Please don’t worry.”*

They sit like that for a long time, holding hands, Irina trying to compose herself. Every so often another tear slides down her face and she tries to wipe it away as if Ilya can’t see. He wants to know what happened but he can’t ask her; he won’t. He has scared her. He never wanted to scare her.

They are interrupted with a knock at the door and Shane’s (beloved, anxious) face appears when it opens. “You’re awake!” He nearly runs to Ilya’s bedside, placing a hand on Irina’s shoulder and squeezing when he gets there. “Irina, my mom brought coffee and donuts and sh–stuff. If you’re hungry.”

“Thank you, Shanya,” she says, reaching up a hand to cover his with her own. “You boys,” she says, shaking her head. “I don’t know why we let you play this–this–” She can’t seem to find the English word and Ilya does not supply it for her.

“Mama.”

She sighs and stands. “*I will have coffee but I will come right back. I don’t want you out of my sight.”*

*“Yes, Mama.”* He turns his attention to Shane after the door closes behind his mother. “I ruined your night. I’m sorry.”

“Shut up,” Shane says kindly, sitting in the chair Irina has left vacant. “You scared the shit out of me, Ilya. Comeau’s sorry–I mean, he didn’t mean to–you landed weird is all.”

Ilya snorts. “Why do I doubt that Comeau is sorry for anything he’s ever done in his fucking life.”

Shane laughs at that. “Well I reamed him out anyway. I overheard him call you my boyfriend after. He’s an asshole.” Shane rests his chin on the bedrail and appraises Ilya. “How are you really?”

“It fucking hurts. But it’s okay, not a big deal.”

“Not a big deal? You’re out for the playoffs, Ilya. That sucks.”

Ilya attempts a shrug. “I will have plenty of time to meet your boyfriend now I guess.”

Shane blushes. “I don’t–don’t worry about that.”

“Why not? You were all excited yesterday.” Was that just yesterday? Ilya feels like he’s been asleep for a week.

“We’re kind of not talking right this second.” Ilya raises an eyebrow and waits. Shane isn’t looking him in the eye anymore. “He didn’t seem to understand why I was so worried about you, I guess he wasn’t watching the game–”

“He doesn’t watch you play?”

Shane grimaces. “He’s not really a hockey fan. Anyway. He was trying to be supportive but he… wasn’t. Not really. And I got pissed and then he got pissed and–whatever. It doesn’t matter.”

“You fought about me?”

Shane grins. “Egomaniac.”

“Sounds like you were fighting about me, Hollander.”

"Shut up." Shane's face turns serious suddenly. "You're more important to me than anything else, Ilyusha."

Tears prick his eyes again. He's going to blame the narcotic. He doesn't usually cry like this. "You never call me that."

"Well you don't usually almost die in front of me." He reaches out a hand to grab Ilya's and squeezes. "I was really afraid," he whispers. He clears his throat. "We're still in the playoffs but if we get knocked out I'll come right to Ottawa and stay with you. I know you have your mom and all but–"

"That is very nice, Hollander. Thank you." He yawns involuntarily and feels his eyes beginning to get heavy.

"Oh and Marlow is here. Want me to send him away so you can rest?"

Ilya's eyes are fully closed now. He thinks he answers but he can't be sure. He's drifting away again…

# Chapter 9: Taken, kind of

Chapter Summary

Forced to talk to each other! Communication is key!

Luckily for Ilya, Montreal does get knocked out of the playoffs fairly soon after. Apparently the Admirals went on a tear, shocking everyone and annoying Ilya. Scott Hunter is so *perfect.* He's like an older, somehow more boring version of Hollander. Not as hot, though. No one is as hot.

True to his word, Shane comes home to Ottawa and sets up in Ilya's guest room when his team's playoff run is finished. It's probably an overreaction on Shane's part; Ilya is basically healed now, although he still gets headaches and has had to do some vestigial physical therapy, which is annoying at best and frustrating at worst. Shane's company helps. Privately Ilya fears Shane wishes he was at his cottage, living his normal life, and not stuck in boring Ottawa with nothing to do except ask Ilya ten times a day how his head feels and if his ribs are still bothering him. Ilya is grateful for the company though so he doesn't insist Shane go home. He's selfish, maybe, but he doesn't care. He's hungry for more time with Shane.

His curiosity about Miles gets the best of him after a couple of days. Hollander hasn't even mentioned his boyfriend's name since coming to stay with Ilya. "What happened with Miles?" he asks finally, trying to keep the scorn out of his voice when he says the guy's name.

Shane, predictably, blushes. "We kind of stopped seeing each other."

Ilya tries to ignore the jump his heart makes at the statement. "When? Why?"

Shane shrugs. "I told him I was going to hang out in Ottawa for a bit with you and he told me he didn't think it was working with us." He looks quickly at Ilya. "Not that it's your fault! We really just aren't compatible. We don't have anything in common, except… You know."

Ilya snorts. "You can say sex, Shane, we're alone."

Shane throws a pillow at him. "Fuck off."

He wishes he could keep his mouth shut, just this one time, but he can't help himself. "You never gave me any details about that."

"About what, my sex life?"

"Yes, Hollander. We used to tell each other everything."

“You never tell me about yours.”

Ilya shrugs. “What do you want to know?”

Shane leans back on the couch, considering. “How many?”

“How many…?”

“How many people have you hooked up with?”

Ilya grimaces. The truth is, he isn’t sure he knows the number. He’s not ashamed of that, everyone involved had fun, but for some reason he doesn't want to tell Shane that it's been… a lot. He could guess, probably: figure out how many weeks in a season, how many nights out with his teammates, how many people he brought home or went home with. Before he can come up with a ballpark figure, Shane interrupts his thoughts.

“That many? You can’t even count?”

Ilya starts to laugh but promptly stops when he sees Shane’s expression. He doesn't look angry exactly but he’s definitely not amused. Ilya doesn’t know how to read Shane's face in this moment, which makes him feel a little off balance. It’s rare that he doesn't know how to talk to his best friend. He aims for a light tone when he says, “I don’t keep track. There was no one worth seeing again. No one serious.”

“No one?” Ilya shakes his head. Shane considers this. “Why not?”

Ah, more truths he cannot share. He smiles at Shane. “Picky, probably.”

Shane nods slowly. “So I’m the only person you’ve hooked up with more than once?”

*Danger danger danger*, Ilya’s brain chants at him. He reminds himself that there's nothing to be afraid of; it's only Shane. This should be easy. “You and Sveta. My two friends with benefits.”

Shane frowns. “Why don’t you get serious with her?”

*Because I’m in love with you, dummy.* “It’s not like that with us. I love her but not in the way you mean.” He lets that lie for a second. Then he gets nervous again. “So many questions today, Hollander.”

“You said we’re supposed to talk about everything. This is part of everything.”

Ilya nods. He did say that. Fuck. He pauses before saying, “I’m going to lie down, my head…” His head is fine. He just can’t stand this interrogation for another second. He’s afraid he’ll say something crazy if he doesn’t leave this room and Shane’s suddenly questioning gaze.

“Do you need anything?”

“No, no, I’m fine. Thank you.” He walks to his bedroom, only shutting the door halfway behind him. He lies down and stares at the ceiling. So the Miles thing is over. And Ilya of course is not seeing anyone. There isn't any good reason he and Shane couldn't be together in some way. But Ilya is afraid. He's afraid of being found out and losing his career, obviously (though he thinks he could live with that. He has enough money. He could find something to do with himself). Underneath that though is the real truth: the deep seated fear that Shane could do better. That being with Ilya would be a mistake for him. That Shane could have a better life with someone else, someone easy. Someone without dark moods and a sketchy background.

A soft knock at his door interrupts his spiral. “Ilyusha?” His whole body warms with the pet name. It's the second time in two weeks Shane has used it. It’s killing him but in the most exquisite way.

“Da.”

Shane eases the door open and stands in the doorway, looking at Ilya expectantly.

“What, Hollander? Why are you looking at me like that?”

Shane walks forward, stopping at the end of the bed. His brow is furrowed. “Can you tell me what’s really going on? Please?”

Ilya frowns at him. “What do you mean?”

Shane looks around helplessly, nearly wringing his hands with anxiety. “Something has been weird with you since Christmas. You barely talk to me. You barely hug me. You avoided me during All Stars–”

“No, I didn’t, it was a crazy weekend–”

“Fuck off, Ilya! Don’t lie to me! Just tell me what is going on, please.”

Ilya feels his whole body tense. He is frozen, the way he used to feel when his parents fought, afraid to move, some part of his brain telling him that if he’s perfectly still the danger will pass. The feeling is worse now because he’s an adult, not a child afraid of his father. He’s an adult and Shane is asking him a perfectly innocent question. No one is yelling, no one is being hurt (except for Ilya and he’s successfully kept that to himself so far). He could lie. He wants to lie, tell Shane that he's overthinking things, that everything between them is the same as always. But he can’t make his mouth form the words. Instead he hears himself say, “You were dating someone.”

“...Okay? So we can’t be friends if I have a boyfriend?”

Ilya shakes his head, wishing Shane could read his mind and understand without him having to elaborate. When they were younger and playing together, it felt like they shared some psychic connection. He always knew where Shane was on the ice and what his next move would be. Their chemistry was undeniable. He misses it now, being understood so thoroughly. It's him who's put the distance between them.

“It’s not that,” he says, almost whispering now. He can’t bear to look in Shane’s eyes. He’s afraid of what he’ll say if he has to look at him, what he won’t be able to take back once the words leave his mouth.

“Then what is it, Ilya? Please just tell me what's going on.”

Ilya hesitates. “You should be with someone wonderful. Someone who can give you everything you want.”

“...Okay? ”

This would be so much easier if he didn’t have to say it out loud. He covers his eyes with both hands and takes a deep breath. Shane is right, probably: they have to talk about this. Maybe if Shane knows about Ilya’s feelings, he will gently reject him and then Ilya could get over him. The thought of rejection is devastating but Ilya thinks he can stand it if it means he gets to keep his best friend. It would be terrible for a while but then they could go back to normal. “And I wish… I wish I could be that person for you.”

Silence. Ilya wonders if the earth will open up and swallow him whole. That would be good. Or maybe he could evaporate, become part of the atmosphere instead of having to live in this painful, awkward moment, a moment that he brought upon himself because he’s an idiot who can’t just keep his mouth shut.

“Why can’t you be?” Shane says quietly.

Now it is Ilya’s turn to be silent. Has he misheard? Or misunderstood? “What?”

Shane gently pulls Ilya’s hands away from his eyes so they can look at each other. Ilya melts beneath his gaze. He is so completely in love with this man, it physically hurts. Some wild part of him wants it to keep hurting forever, like an addict forever chasing their first high. “Why can’t you be that person?”

Ilya shakes his head, pushing himself up to a sitting position so he can hold onto some dignity. “Shane. I cannot give you what you deserve.”

“Why do you keep saying that? You’re my best friend. We have great sex. Isn’t that, like, the dream? That’s what Rose says, everyone’s basically just looking for a best friend they also have sex with.”

“You talked to Rose Landry about this?” Ilya’s head is spinning.

Shane blushes. “Well I couldn’t talk to you about it. Obviously. Since you’ve been avoiding me.” Ilya tries to protest but Shane cuts him off. “She asked why it didn’t work out with Miles and I told her what happened and she pointed out that… that maybe it wouldn’t work out with anyone because I’m already taken, kind of.”

“Taken,” Ilya whispers. What a beautiful word.

Shane sighs heavily. “I don’t think we’re doing this right.” He pulls on Ilya’s hands so he’s fully sitting up and they are facing each other. “Ilya. When you got hit in that game, I felt like

I was going to die. I've never been so fucking scared in my life. That's probably what pissed Miles off, I couldn't stop talking about how terrified I was that I could lose you."

"Sorry," Ilya says, uselessly.

Shane shakes his head. "No, listen. After that, when he and I stopped seeing each other or whatever, Rose took me out for coffee and basically, like, laid it out for me. That this thing between you and me is obviously more than a friendship." He rests his hands on either side of Ilya's face, searching his eyes. "All this time, I thought I was alone in this. I thought I had all these feelings that you didn't have. That's why I started dating someone, I thought maybe I was just hung up on you and I had to find a way to move on–"

Ilya starts laughing. He can't help it. It bubbles out of him uncontrollably. This is so stupid. They are both so stupid. Shane is trying to keep a straight face but Ilya's laughter has always been contagious to him. Soon they're both lying on the bed in hysterics. Tears are running down Ilya's face. He feels unhinged.

They settle down eventually, unconsciously syncing their breathing until they are both calm. Shane props himself up on one elbow so he can look down at Ilya. They grin at each other. "So," Shane starts. "What was all that shit about what I deserve?"

Ilya shrugs. He has emotional whiplash from this conversation. "I want you to be happy. Maybe someone else would make you happy. Someone who isn't five hours away from you, who doesn't play the same stupid sport, who isn't–"

"Ilya. Shut up." Shane leans down and kisses Ilya, slowly at first. It's been so long since they've kissed. The tears return but Ilya doesn't care. Within minutes they're tangled up in each other, pawing at each other's clothes. "Wait, your head–"

"I lied, I'm fine."

"Asshole."

Ilya laughs into Shane's neck. It's an overwhelming relief to be touching each other again. Ilya pushes thoughts of Miles out of his mind and devotes his focus to Shane's perfect body. He flips them so he's on top and starts kissing his way down Shane's chest, slowly and carefully, like he's making a map of his skin in case this really is all a dream.

"Wait," Shane says and Ilya freezes. He knew it was too good to be true, he knew it wouldn't be this easy, he– "I just want to be clear. This is it, right? You and me? No more seeing other people, no more lying to ourselves and each other. You and me. Together. For real."

Ilya nods. "Together," he whispers like a prayer. "For real. Forever, if you want."

Shane smiles. "I do want." They kiss again. Ilya is soaring. "I love you, Ilyusha. I've loved you for a really long time."

"I love you too. Let me show you how much."

# Chapter 10: Everyone knew but us

Chapter Summary

Ilya and Shane decide to tell their parents.

“What are we going to tell our parents?” Shane moans.

They’ve spent an entire day and night in bed, cuddling and fucking and kissing and reminiscing. Ilya reminds Shane that their first kiss was his idea and Shane reminds Ilya that he has also had good ideas over the years, like losing their virginity to each other. Shane shyly tells Ilya that he thinks he actually fell in love with him the first time he saw Ilya on the ice. He admits that he tried to convince himself it was just an admiration thing at the time and then later a best friend thing, a delusion he was able to hold onto until Ilya kissed him for the first time. “After that,” Shane says, smiling at Ilya like he hung the moon, “I was cooked.” This is the best thing Ilya has ever heard.

It has been such an incredible 24 hours that Ilya wonders if he actually never woke up after Comeau checked him and is instead living inside some kind of beautiful coma dream. It’s fine with him if he is; he's not interested in waking up. Shane’s distress about their parents sounds real though and Ilya can't imagine his coma dream would have Shane feel anything except joy and orgasms.

“What do you mean?” he asks sleepily, running a hand over Shane's ribs. He thinks he won't ever be able to stop touching him. Maybe they can just stay in this bed forever. Or at least all summer.

“I mean, we have to tell them something, right? We can’t just keep it a secret from them.”

Ilya shrugs. “So we’ll tell them.”

“Ilya.”

“Shane.”

Shane groans again and Ilya laughs. “I’m being serious!”

“I am too,” Ilya insists. “Your parents know you’re gay. My mother will be… fine when I tell her about me. Probably. She already loves you. They are friends, the three of them. They will be happy for us.”

“You think?”

Ilya shrugs. “Probably. My mother has survived a lot worse, I think she can handle her son being in love with someone.”

Shane blushes and grins. “I’m still not used to hearing that.”

Ilya grins back. “I want to say it all the time,” he confesses.

“Me too.”

They grin at each other for a while, just two idiots in love, confounded by their good luck. Shane breaks the silence finally. “You know, you never really told me about what happened in Moscow that made you and your mom leave.”

Ilya hums. “Not much to tell.” Shane raises an eyebrow (a gesture he absolutely stole from Ilya, which Ilya will tease him about later). “My father… he scared her. He hated her, I think. I mean, he must have loved her at first but I don’t remember that.” *She probably doesn’t either.* “He was hurting her.” He does not elaborate further, refusing to let the memories of his weeping, frightened mother surface again, ruining the happy little bubble he is ensconced in now with Shane.

“So you left to get away from him?”

Ilya nods. “There’s a special visa for domestic violence.”

“Oh.” Shane looks vaguely ashamed. “I’m sorry, I didn’t–”

Ilya waves him off. “It was long time ago now. She’s safe, I’m safe. We haven’t heard from him.” He doesn’t add that he has heard from his brother, sporadically, but still, there is some semi-annual attempt at contact. He has to save that information for another day. There have been enough confessions for now.

“She’s so brave,” Shane says. “I didn’t realize… I always just thought of her as a regular mom.”

“She is a regular mom,” Ilya answers, feeling protective of her.

“No, I know, I just… that must have been so hard. And scary. To leave like that, to take a chance in another country where you barely speak the language, barely know anyone.” He pauses, thinking. Ilya loves to watch Shane’s brain work; he can almost hear his thoughts. “That’s why she was always weird about you playing?”

“How did you know about that?”

Shane blushes. “I overheard my parents talking a couple of times. I thought she was just, you know, overwhelmed. I know she had that whole time that she wasn’t–that she had a bad time. I thought that was the reason but then I heard them say she was afraid. They didn’t say why though.”

“You never asked me.”

“Like you would have answered,” Shane retorts. He considers Ilya. “No more secrets now, okay? Not from each other.”

Ilya nods. “I will try. And not from our parents either. It will be fine.”

Shane grimaces. “I hope you’re right.”

“Of course I am.” Shane taps him lightly with a pillow. Ilya catches his wrist, smiling. “Since we are talking about this, what do you want to do about everyone else?”

“...what do you mean?”

Ilya sighs. “My team will wonder why I am not picking people up at bars anymore.” Shane frowns but Ilya grins at him. “I have a reputation to uphold, Hollander.”

“Gross.”

Ilya laughs. “They know about me,” he offers, to Shane’s visible shock. “They are fine with it, I think. If they aren’t, they haven’t told me. Marlow must have told them to fuck off about it.”

“Marlow knows?”

Ilya nods. “He knows me very well. Not as well as you obviously.”

Shane huffs. “I would hope not.”

“Ooooh, Hollander, are you jealous?”

Shane rolls his eyes. “Fuck off.” His expression darkens. “I don’t know if my team would be like that.”

Ilya nods thoughtfully. He is quite sure Montreal would not be nearly as welcoming as Boston, since they barely tolerate Shane as it is. He keeps his thoughts about the Metros to himself though and offers instead, “So you don’t tell them.”

“What if they ask? They’re always asking me about girls and shit, I hate it.”

“Tell them part of the truth, yes? That you are in a relationship. Leave it at that. Say we’re private people, you do not share details.”

Shane considers this. “So we just what, continue hanging out like normal?”

“Yes.” Ilya sits up. “This is a good idea, I think. We will tell anyone who asks that we are not single. We ignore any follow up questions. With press too, if it comes up.”

Shane pales. “Oh my God,” he mumbles, covering his face again.

“Shane.” Ilya pulls Shane’s hands away from his face, just as Shane had done to him twenty-four hours before. “We do not have to officially come out. But we shouldn’t have to hide.

This is compromise, yes?"

"You know you drop your articles when you're stressed?"

Ilya snorts. "Okay, grammar police."

Shane laughs, a welcome sound. "Sorry. I still love you."

Ilya smiles. "How long do you think that's going to work on me?"

"Forever," Shane answers smugly.

Ilya knows he's right.

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Shane offers to go with Ilya to talk to his mother but Ilya says no. He can handle Irina. Probably.

It's only when they are sitting at her kitchen table in Ottawa, in comfortable silence with two mugs of tea between them, that he begins to worry.

His mother has been well for a long time. If she has the occasional bad day (as Ilya does, as everyone does, he thinks) she doesn't tell him. She socializes with friends and volunteers at a children's nursery school and smiles most of the time. Ilya trusts that the worst of it is behind them now. A tiny, frightened part of him wonders if his confession will send her back to the darkness but he doesn't let himself dwell on that fear. He promised Shane they wouldn't have to hide. He has to start somewhere.

"*Mama,"* he starts. She looks up at him and smiles. She looks so young when she smiles. Ilya is reminded of how rare her smiles were in Moscow, how he hoarded them like a dragon with his gold. He says a silent prayer that she'll continue smiling even after he tells her the truth about himself. He clears his throat. "*I have to tell you something. It's a good thing but… you will be surprised probably."* Irina says nothing, just waits patiently for her son to continue. Ilya can see her hands tighten around her mug though. He can't drag this out any longer. "*Shane and I are in love. With each other. We're together now and I'm so happy, Mama, and I hope–I hope you can be happy too, even if this is not what you expected."*

For the rest of his life, Ilya will remember this moment, when his mother shifts from a tentative smile to a full on school girl giggle. It erupts from her, so loud and shocking that she covers her mouth to hold it back. Ilya frowns at her, about to assure her that he is not joking, when she manages to speak, waving a hand in front of her face. "*Ilyusha, did you think this was a surprise?"* Ilya does not answer, his whole body frozen in shock at his mother's giggling, joyful response. "*Of course you're in love with each other. The rest of us have eyes, you know. I don't know what the two of you have been thinking all this time, pretending you aren't meant to be together."* She reaches across the table to take both of Ilya's hands in hers. "*Please don't worry, my love. I love you. I love Shanya. I wish you both all the happiness in the world."* She gives his hands a squeeze before pulling her own back to take a sip of her tea. "*Yuna and I have been wondering when you boys would figure it out. She wanted to tell*

*you but I thought we should let you find your way to each other on your own time. What will you do now?"*

Ilya shakes his head, still trying to understand what's just happened here. He expected tears at the very least, if not a dramatic Russian tantrum. They may live in Canada but his mother is Russian Orthodox; he always thought she would want him to marry a woman and have babies and…maybe he isn't being fair. Shane is right: she has always been brave.

"*I don't know,"* he admits. *"We're still getting used to the idea."* He barks out a laugh. "*All this time, you knew? Since when?"*

Irina shrugs. She is being wildly calm about this, Ilya thinks. His entire world has been shaken to the core and his mother is acting like he's just told her he wants to order Thai food for dinner. "*It wasn't one moment,"* she says thoughtfully. "*It was more that one day we looked up and you were both men instead of boys. And you looked at each other like the other was the only person in the world."* She smiles, a little sadly now. "*It's a lucky thing, my darling, to be loved that way."*

Not for the first time, Ilya wonders if his father ever loved his mother. They never talk about Ilya's father or his brother, for that matter, which might be an even more difficult a subject to broach. Ilya has wondered from time to time if Irina ever talks about them with anyone: Marlena or her therapist or even Yuna, her apparent partner in crime. He doesn't want to bring them up now but he feels obligated to at least open the door in case Irina wants to. His mother had left everything behind to give him this life, this dream, this safety. She had left behind two people she loved, even though they hurt her. Ilya has never asked her about this but now he feels that was an oversight on his part. He will ask her now. He will let her tell him. He owes her that.

"*Were you ever… loved like that?"* he asks gently.

Irina hesitates. "*Maybe. In the beginning with your father."* She shakes her head. Neither of them can bear to mention Alexei, though Ilya knows his mother wishes things had been different with him. *"I have been lucky in other ways, Ilyusha. I do not regret my life."*

*"You could meet someone still, Mama."* Irina laughs, wiping her eyes. *"You could! You are very beautiful and your son is rich, you can have your pick of men."*

"*My good boy,"* she says fondly. "*Shanya is lucky."* Ilya blushes, much to his mother's delight. He stands and kisses her gently on the cheek, whispering *thank you*. They say goodbye and Ilya walks to his car to call his boyfriend and tell him how everyone knew but them.

# Chapter 11: Scott Hunter Night!

Chapter Summary

> Scott Hunter Night welcomes everyone, even closeted gays (Shane) and chaotic bisexuals (Ilya and also me). Happy Pride Month!

Ilya can feel Shane vibrating next to him on the plane, staring out the window with an alarming intensity. His jaw is clenched so tightly Ilya fears his boyfriend is going to break a tooth. Ironic, considering he's one of the few hockey players Ilya knows who still has all of his own teeth.

Ilya knows it's his fault that Shane is so stressed out. It was his idea to go to New York for a weekend and casually appear at some gay bar's Scott Hunter Night (a collection of words that makes Ilya want to gag, though he secretly admires and respects Hunter after his little Cup stunt a few weeks ago). Shane had flat out refused at first, asking Ilya if he had actually lost his mind. Ilya had waited out the little explosion before he calmly laid out his reasoning.

"Hunter needs our support," he said, knowingly leaning on Shane's sense of duty to boost his argument. "You do not have to come out to him but I am going to." Shane began to protest but Ilya had put his hand up. "I want to be out, Shanya." He rarely uses the nickname, preferring moy lyubov or solnishko, but he's not above deploying it when he wants something. "You do not have to come out with me. You can just be my ally friend, okay? But I am doing this, I am going to New York to shake Hunter's hand and tell him that he is not the only queer player in this league. I want you to come with me but if you are scared–"

"I'm not scared," Shane retorts immediately, an edge in his voice. One benefit of having known Shane for so long is that Ilya can read him like a book. He knew even a hint of accusation that Shane was too scared to do something would make him immediately want to do it. Maybe it wasn't fair to goad him like this but Ilya decided the ends justified the means in this case. He truly didn't want Hunter to feel alone, sure, but he also needed Shane to see that Hunter's life hadn't been ruined when he came out so publicly. In his heart, he wanted their relationship to be public, the way Hunter's would be now. Ilya worried that Shane would hide in the closet until they retired and Ilya didn't want that for either of them. He didn't need Shane to be on the same timeline as him but he did need him to see that things could be better on the other side.

Which is how he ended up on this flight from Ottawa to New York, Shane about to break one of his perfect teeth with his anxious grinding.

Ilya briefly touches Shane's thigh, making the other man jump and turn to him with what can only be called wild eyes. Ilya would smile at him if Shane didn't look so distraught.

“You can stay at the hotel,” Ilya whispers to him. “I will go and say hello and then come back and–”

“I'm fine,” Shane insists. Ilya raises an eyebrow at him. “Okay not fine maybe but…” Shane sighs, dropping his chin to his chest. “I'm trying to be.”

Ilya wishes they were flying privately so he could wrap his arms around his boyfriend and squeeze his anxiety out of him. He settles for smiling at him and nudging his shoulder into Shane's. “I know, moy lyubov.” He hands Shane a piece of gum. “Chew on this instead, you are about to break your teeth with your clenching.”

Shane shoves the gum into his mouth and does some of the yoga breathing he's so obsessed with. “I've never been to a gay bar before,” he admits, as if Ilya doesn't know this. He turns to Ilya then, as if he's just thought of something. “You have though, right?”

This feels like dangerous territory. They haven't revisited the discussion about Ilya's past hookups, which was a welcome relief to Ilya. He didn't want to see Shane's angry face again unless it was on the ice and Ilya was winning against him. “Yes…” Ilya answers, fingers crossed he's not going to be interrogated when he has nowhere to escape to.

“What's it…what is it like?”

Ilya sighs with relief. Not an interrogation then, just a way for Hollander to prepare himself. Ilya should have expected this actually. Shane has always liked to know what he's walking into. “Like regular bar but with better looking people.”

Shane chuckles. “Oh yeah?”

Ilya shrugs. “Usually. Especially the bartenders.”

Shane frowns now. Whoops. “Is that so.”

Ilya raises his hands in mock surrender. “I am allowed to look, no? I'm not dead, Hollander.”

This earns him a (very small) smile from Shane. “So I can look too then, right?”

Ilya rolls his eyes. “If you must,” he concedes. He leans into Shane's space just a little and tilts his head to whisper, “just as long as you remember who will take you back to the hotel and what I will do to you when we get there if you behave yourself.”

Shane's entire face reddens and he shifts in his seat. “Knock it off, Ilya. There's still an hour until we land, you want me to have blue balls the whole time?”

Ilya chuckles and sits back in his seat. He laments that they are both too big to have a quick fuck in the bathroom. Would have been nice to have another first together.

***

Ilya was quite pleased with what he'd convinced Shane to wear tonight. “You cannot go to gay bar in button down shirt like closeted businessman,” he insisted once they got to their

hotel room (and had quickly sucked each other off, of course).

“I *am* closeted,” Shane pointed out, to Ilya's eye roll. In the end, he had followed Ilya's advice, agreeing to a tight black T-shirt and dark jeans. Ilya wore something predictably loud and Eurotrashy, which of course looked perfect on him. They stood in front of the mirror together, Ilya messing with both their hair. “It'll be hard to keep my hands to myself tonight,” Shane said, surprising Ilya, who was normally the one initiating any flirting between them, even now.

“Oh? Why is that, solnishko?”

Shane smiles at Ilya in the mirror, wrapping his arms around his waist and resting his chin on Ilya's shoulder. “It’ll be hard not to let everyone know that you're mine. Everyone would be so jealous of me if they knew that I get to go home with the hottest guy in the bar.”

Ilya turned to face his boyfriend, half hard already. “You are torturing me now? Saying those sexy things to me right before we leave?” He moves his mouth to Shane's ear, whispering, “you will make me fuck you before we even get out the door.”

Shane smirked, pushing Ilya away by an inch. “You'll just have to wait patiently.”

“Ah, this is payback from the plane? Come on, Hollander, I did not torture you on purpose!”

“Bullshit,” Shane says, laughing. “Come on, the faster we get there the faster you can bring me back to the hotel and fuck me into the mattress.”

Ilya groans as he follows Shane to the door.

They're on the VIP list, which Ilya is pleased to hear, even though he knows Hunter was surprised to hear that Ilya even wanted to come. He knows what Hunter thinks of him. Admittedly, he's an asshole on the ice but that doesn't mean anything. He is capable of being sincere. It's fun, actually; it unsettles people who think they already know him.

Ilya resists reaching behind him to grab Shane's hand, putting that idea on the list of things that are for *one day.* One day when they're both out; one day when the league and the sport are more welcoming; one day that can't come soon enough for Ilya's liking.

Hunter’s very hot boyfriend (Skip? Trip?) is standing next to him when Ilya and Shane make it close enough to greet them. He smiles at their approach while Hunter looks suspiciously at Ilya.

“Rozanov,” he says (as mildly as he can stand, Ilya thinks). His face softens when he sees Shane over Ilya's shoulder. “And Hollander! Wow!”

Ilya smirks, directing his attention to the boyfriend. “I hope he is not rude like this to you,” he says.

The boyfriend laughs and holds out his hand. “Of course not but then I don't have your reputation of bothering him at work. I'm Kip.”

Ilya shakes his hand, remembering that yes, the boyfriend is Kip. Strange name, but cute. “Friendly chirping,” Ilya corrects. He leans in a couple of inches. “He likes to be teased, no?”

Kip cackles at this. Hunter and Shane both frown at Ilya, who pleasantly smiles back. Shane and Kip shake hands now and Ilya moves in front of Hunter, holding out his hand as a peace offering. Hunter takes it hesitantly. “I'm surprised you showed up.”

Ilya swallows a rude response. He is here to be helpful, not antagonistic. “I told you we would. What you did was brave, Hunter. I am impressed.”

Hunter's face softens a minute amount. “Thanks, Rozanov.”

“Also I wanted you to know you are not alone. In the league.” He waits as understanding dawns on Hunter's face. “I am bisexual. Out to my team, or some of them at least. It's big, what you did, for players like me. Like us.”

Hunter's face has gone through a series of emotions during Ilya's little speech. Ilya fears the man is going to say something annoyingly heartfelt and earnest to him so he cuts that off immediately. “Also had to see what Scott Hunter Night would be like. So far, boring.”

Hunter rolls his eyes. Shane clears his throat. “I think it's nice,” he says, sincerely. And oh, Ilya loves him. He loves that Shane is kind and sweet and weird and so incredibly hot… he even loves the meaningful look to knock it off he's serving to Ilya right now.

“Very nice,” Ilya amends. “I like boring. Why do you think I am always hanging out with Hollander?”

Kip laughs again. “Damn, no one is safe, even your best friend.”

Ilya smiles. Kip is really hot. “You want to dance?”

“No!” both Hunter and Shane say simultaneously. Kip and Ilya share a look, grinning at each other. Kip raises an eyebrow and tilts his head in Shane's direction. Ilya raises his eyebrows in turn before he puts his hands on Shane's shoulders and turns him toward the dance floor. “Fine,” he says easily. “Hunter will not share so I will make Hollander dance with me and everyone can be unhappy. Nice to meet you, Kip.”

He steers Shane down the steps of the VIP area and toward the dance floor, Shane looking desperately over his shoulder the entire time. “You know I can't dance,” he hisses. “Also people are going to figure it out if we dance together.”

“Ah yes, you can't keep your hands to yourself, you said.”

Shane rolls his eyes. “You are being very extra today.”

Ilya shrugs. “It's exciting, being in a place like this with you. Even if nobody knows. It is like looking into the future maybe?”

Shane's face softens. “Oh, Ilya, I'm sorry–”

“No, no,” Ilya cuts him off. “We are having fun. No serious talk. One dance, then we leave, okay?” Shane looks around nervously. “There are like four hockey players here, Shane. They are distracted, they don't care. Also they will think I'm being asshole, torturing you for tricks.”

Shane sighs, resigned. “Kicks,” he corrects. “Kicks and giggles.”

Ilya frowns. “This language –”

“I know, I know. Come on. *One* dance. And then you have some promises to make good on.”

Ilya grins wolfishly and leads his boyfriend to the dance floor.

He knows Shane doesn't really want to be here. Ilya is touched that he's agreed to show up at all, much less dance. In return he keeps his hands to himself on the dance floor, even though he wants nothing more than to pull Shane's hips close to him and grind against him until Shane begs to be taken back to the hotel and fucked senseless. He settles for grabbing Shane's hand and twirling him in a circle, which does make Shane laugh. They last for two songs, which pleases Ilya immensely. When the second one starts to bleed into a third, Shane cocks his head at the door. Ilya follows him out.

He is shocked when they get into the elevator at the hotel to find Shane pressing him against the wall the moment the doors close. Shane presses his already hard dick into Ilya's thigh, peppering his face and neck with breathless kisses. “You look so fucking hot,” he mutters while he runs his hands all over Ilya's chest and arms. Before Ilya can respond, the doors are opening and Shane is speed walking down the hall to their room.

Scott Hunter Night actually turned out to be a pretty good time.

# Chapter 12: Daydream with me

Chapter Summary

The Metros suck in every timeline. Ilya has a plan.

**Late January 2018**

Ilya knows Shane is not telling him what Montreal's locker room is really like this season. He can tell, when they play against each other at home or away, that something is not quite right with the Metros. The team is competitive, of course, though Ilya believes that without Shane they would be a far worse contender on the ice. It's afterward, when he and Shane are alone, that Ilya can tell something is wrong. Shane is desperate to get away from his teammates, desperate to be in Ilya's bed, begging to be taken apart like he's trying to escape something. Ilya appreciates all of this but he is also beginning to worry. Shane doesn't seem like himself after those games, whether his team wins or loses.

Ilya has tried to broach the subject before, months ago even. During preseason he offhandedly mentioned to Shane that his team had ribbed him about Scott Hunter Night. He had taken the opportunity to come out to them as bi, at which point Marly had clapped him on the shoulder and said loudly, "The Raiders are allies, right boys?" There had been a smattering of "fuck yeahs" and reluctant nods but more of the former, for which Ilya was grateful. He knew not everyone on his team was okay with it but he didn't care. He was there to play hockey. His personal life was his own, as he had insisted to Shane on their draft day. Coming out publicly had been much of the same. Ilya didn't give a shit about some homophobic comments sent his way; he ignored and blocked as necessary. He had everything he wanted. He wasn't going to let some faceless internet assholes rob him of his joy.

Shane, on the other hand, had apparently not had the same reception from his team. He hadn't even come out but there had been photos online of him and Ilya in New York. Comeau and Drapeau had outright asked him why he had shown up to support "that little fairy perv." Shane had shut that shit down immediately, threatening bag skates if he heard anyone use slurs in his locker room again. Ilya was proud of him, and told him so, but he could tell it had shaken Shane a little. In Ilya's dreams, Shane moved down to Boston and they played together until they retired, their jerseys hanging in the rafters until the end of time. Sadly, Boston could not afford them both. It was only a daydream anyway.

As the season goes on, it seems like Shane begins to fold in on himself. He isn't sleeping well, he tells Ilya. He doesn't say why. Ilya gently suggests getting something to help him sleep from the team doctor but Shane shakes his head furiously. "I'm fine," he insists. "It'll get better."

Ilya worries. He worries enough that he calls Irina and babbles at her about nothing for ten minutes before she interrupts him to ask what is wrong.

"*It's Shane,"* he admits. *"Something is wrong in Montreal and he won't talk to me about it."*

Irina sighs. *"Yuna thinks so too."*

*"She does?"*

*"Mmm. She says he doesn't seem happy, even on the ice. She's very worried. Do you think his team–knows? Or suspects?"*

*"I don't know. I just know they are assholes."*

*"Ilyusha."*

*"I'm a grown man, Mama. That's what they are."*

Irina kindly does not point out that he's a grown man who still calls his mother when he doesn't know what to do, for which Ilya is grateful. *"He won't tell you?"*

*"Not really. He says only that they gave him a hard time about seeing Hunter over the summer. And they asked him a lot of questions about me, if he knew already and what he thought about it. I thought maybe he was overreacting but that team… they have always acted like he owes them something. Like they* own *him."*

His mother considers this before answering. *"I think this is not a problem you can solve for him, my love."*

He knows she is right. He also knows that he can't stop himself from trying.

He has an idea. It's maybe a little out there but he's been thinking about it for weeks and he wants to talk about it with Shane. He's had crazier ideas in the past and look where it's gotten them: happy, together, even if it's complicated. He waits until they're in a cocoon of post-orgasm afterglow, when Shane is lying in his arms, his head resting on Ilya's chest. The only sound is the room is their synchronized breathing. It is a perfect time for problem solving, Ilya thinks. (He is wrong).

"I have been thinking. Maybe I will not retire in Boston," he begins.

Shane's head nearly flies off Ilya's chest when he says this. "What?"

Ilya shrugs. "I like it there but…maybe I am ready to move on." He tucks Shane's head back onto his chest. "Anyway, I miss playing with you. Don't you? Miss it?"

Shane pops up again, frowning in confusion. "You want to come to Montreal?"

Ilya snorts. He can't help himself. "Fuck no." Shane's frown deepens so Ilya rushes to continue. "No, I was thinking, what if we moved to a team together? A new one for both of us. We are both free agents this summer."

Shane lays his head back on Ilya's chest but his body is tense. Ilya can feel Shane's muscles tighten beneath his hands. He regrets bringing the subject up right after sex. His boyfriend was perfectly calm and happy before he started talking. *Selfish,* he thinks. *Maybe also dumb.* He attempts to retreat. "It was just an idea. Forget it."

They lay in silence for a few minutes. Ilya is sure Shane has fallen asleep. He's about to rescue his rapidly numbing arm from underneath his boyfriend when Shane says quietly, "I've never thought about leaving Montreal." Ilya freezes, waiting. "I thought I would retire there."

"Thought?" Ilya says quietly, matching Shane's whisper.

Shane sighs. "I haven't really told you but. It hasn't been good this season." Ilya's arms tighten around Shane, as if he's tensing for a fight. Shane absentmindedly pats his arm. "It hasn't been *bad*," he continues. "Just… they've never really been *warm* to me, you know? I thought it was getting better the past couple of years but then this season, everyone's being so weird. Just because of the New York thing. I'm not even out, Ilya, and they're acting like I'm some kind of traitor for supporting another hockey player. A great hockey player!" Ilya rolls his eyes, which he thought Shane couldn't see but Ilya gets poked in the ribs for it anyway. "And they fucking hate you, though they won't say it's the bi thing. But we all know it is, they didn't talk this much shit about you before, at least not in front of me." He blows out a breath. "It makes me think, even if I wanted to, I would never be able to come out if I stayed there. I would have to pretend for what, ten more years?" He sits up now, getting more animated as he talks. "I've stood up in some of their weddings, Ilya. I've been to their kids' baptisms and first birthday parties and all kinds of stupid shit I didn't want to do and the *one time* I do something out of character that's vaguely gay, they don't want to fucking talk to me. It's fucking stupid."

"They have said this to you? Called you a traitor?"

"No, it's more like… it's chilly in the room, you know? Like, the only people who consistently talk to me are JJ and Hayden. The other guys ignore me unless I ask them a direct question. I've started to think about giving up my C."

This makes Ilya sit straight up in bed. "Okay, now I am really worried."

Shane shakes his head. "Don't be. If they don't respect me after three Cup wins and all the years I've spent–I'm just starting to think about how unhappy I am there." He looks Ilya in the eyes, not confused or anxious anymore, but with something nearing excitement. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I don't need to stay in Montreal." He takes one of Ilya's hands in his own, absentmindedly rubbing his fingers over the knuckles. "Would you really want to try to go somewhere together? Who could even afford both of us?"

Ilya tries to keep his grin under control but it feels like it might split his face in half. "Not just any somewhere. What about going home?"

Shane frowns. "Home." Ilya waits patiently while the wheels turn in Shane's head. Slowly, Shane begins to smile too, though not as brightly. "Ilya. Ottawa sucks."

“Not if we are both there! Listen. What if we just… met with some people there? Privately. See what the culture is like. They have new coach, Brandon Weibe–”

“Yeah, I saw that.”

“Of course you did,” Ilya says, fondly rolling his eyes. “Shane. We could go home and play together while we still have good years in us. There are rumors that they’re trying a rebuild–”

“How many seasons have we heard that though?”

“Shane. This year it could be for real. We could build a dynasty. *Together*.”

Shane pulls at his eyelashes, a sign that he is stressed. But Ilya can see that he is seriously considering it, which is actually more than Ilya hoped for. “I wish…” Ilya waits, holding his breath. “I wish things were easier.”

Ilya’s heart sinks, though he keeps his face neutral and tightens his arm around his boyfriend reassuringly. “I know,” he whispers. This is what he meant about Shane deserving more: a better team certainly, but also a boyfriend who doesn’t make his life harder with crazy ideas in the middle of the night. “We don’t have to do anything,” Ilya says with more confidence than he actually feels. “I just want you to be happy.”

Shane sighs. “I’m not happy being five hours apart all season long. I’m not happy that my teammates are–” He doesn’t finish the thought, though Ilya has some ideas of how to describe the Metros. “The only people I would really miss would be Hayden and Jackie and it’s only two hours away, right? We could still see them and the kids.”

“Are you really considering this?”

Shane looks up at Ilya, smiling. “It’s a pretty good idea.”

Ilya laughs. “Only pretty good?”

“Let’s see what our agents say.” Shane yawns. “And let’s sleep on it.”

They kiss goodnight like an old married couple and Shane falls asleep within minutes. Ilya stays awake for a while, staring at the ceiling and daydreaming about what a real life with Shane and hockey and home could be like.

# Chapter 13: Every day is Pride Month when you're a Centaur

Chapter Summary

Epilogue: a Sports Illustrated cover story about the boys. Happy Pride!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**June 2020**

*Sports Illustrated* Pride Edition

Cover story: "First Husbands of Hockey"

[*Accompanying photo: Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov both wearing Centaurs jerseys, standing next to each other and holding hands. Both are grinning.*]

*By now everyone in the hockey world and outside of it knows that two of the MLH's most valuable players (literally, both have been awarded the prize several times) are in love and engaged. What very few people know is the whole story of how they got there. Until today. Happy Pride from Sports Illustrated* 🏳️‍🌈

The hockey world was shocked on July 1, 2018 when MLH superstars Shane Hollander (Montreal Metros) and Ilya Rozanov (Boston Raiders) were both traded to the Ottawa Centaurs for the 2018-19 season. It was an inexplicable move at the time: the Centaurs had maintained a historic losing streak for years while Hollander and Rozanov were (and still are) two of the most talented players in the league. As captains of their respective teams, they have earned four Stanley Cups between them, not to mention every other MLH award under the sun (the only one they do not share is 2009's Rookie of the Year, which went to Hollander). The announcement that both historic players were leaving their legacy teams seemingly came out of nowhere. Hockey fans and sports journalists all wondered what had happened. What would make those two leave their years-long hockey homes for their (losing) hometown team? A strong sense of loyalty? A chance for a new challenge? A bet they somehow both lost? (This last guess was a trending Twitter topic for nearly a week after the announcement was made).

To accurately explain the professional hockey world's level of shock and confusion, we have to go all the way back to the 2009 MLH draft. On that night in June, best friends Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander were the number one and number two overall draft picks. It was no surprise they were drafted together. Even before their draft day, their names were rarely uttered separately. It's a great story: two best friends, growing up together in sleepy Ottawa, taking their Junior hockey team to a gold medal at the World Championship, turned into major league rivals, constantly competing for playoff spots, Cups, and league awards.

Boston and Montreal were already locked into a years-long legendary rivalry. Pitting these two against each other every single time they played was an absolute dream for the MLH (namely in ticket sales and publicity).

Despite their long and public friendship, the two could not seem more different when they joined their respective teams. Rozanov was the league's playboy for years, photographed with beautiful women in every East coast city Boston played, driving fancy cars, and generally being a menace on the ice. His teammates clearly adored him (he was named Captain of the Raiders just two years after his rookie season). Opposing players and fans of other teams openly hated his quick-witted chirps and raw talent. "I know he's always had this reputation of being an asshole," his longtime teammate Cliff Marlow tells me. "But when you're on his team, when you get to know the real guy, you just love him. He's good people." On the ice, though? Marlow laughs. "Yeah, on the ice he's the biggest dick you've ever met. But he's so talented it's like… what do you expect?"

Hollander seemed like the polar opposite of his best friend: known for his seriousness in the room and on the ice, as well as his apparent lack of a romantic life. It's not that people thought of him as anti-social, his ex-teammate Hayden Pike tells me; it's just that he was singularly focused on winning hockey games. Pike went on to tell me that Hollander never understood why the fans would want to know more about him than his hockey stats. When he was briefly linked in the press with Rose Landry in late 2016, both camps were quick to deny that they were anything beyond just friends. Pike laughs when I bring up the alleged relationship and the publicity that followed. "He was genuinely confused as to why people cared that he was out with a beautiful movie star and not interested that he had set his PBR [personal best record] in assists that season."

Rozanov, on the other hand, never shied away from the press and attention he received from fans and media alike. He was frequently linked in the tabloids with Svetlana Veratrova, daughter of famed Russian goalie Sergei Veratrov, but otherwise appeared to be happily unattached. For many, it was quite a surprise when he came out as bisexual via social media on the first day of preseason in 2017. His Instagram story was reposted and reblogged thousands of times, with fan reactions ranging the gamut, though most were supportive. His post was laughably simple, a gym selfie with the following caption: "I am bisexual. We have our own flag. Look it up."

Hollander, as the more private of the two, would come out the following year as gay, but he chose to do it in stages before releasing his own public announcement. He tells me that he started with his parents, who were supportive. "I guess they were ready for it, given that I never talked about girls," he says wryly. He claims he also came out to close friends shortly after he and Rose were pictured on the gossip pages together. When asked about whether he considered coming out to his team while he was still in Montreal, he admits that he had thought about it but ultimately decided to wait. The announcement came when he officially became a Centaur in 2018. He shared on his (seldom used) social media accounts: "Excited to start a new chapter in my hometown as an Ottawa Centaur! Growing up as a half-Japanese gay kid obsessed with hockey, I sometimes feared I wouldn't get to play professionally at all because of what I look like and who I love. I wish I could tell that little kid what I know now, that hockey is for everyone. Thanks especially to Ottawa for welcoming every part of me home."

The hashtag #hockeyisforeveryone went viral just hours later as fans flooded the internet with overwhelming support for Hollander. Rozanov insists on taking credit for the virality of the hashtag, telling me he helped craft Hollander's post, a fact which he's clearly (still) very pleased about. "I wanted Shane to write that he's super gay but he said no," he tells me.

"I'm regular gay," Hollander insists. To me, he adds, "It was hard enough being one of the only non-white players in the league, obviously that was something about me I couldn't hide. I spent a lot of years resisting the idea that I would also have to be a representative for the LGBTQ community if anyone found out about me [being gay]. But ultimately I'm glad I came out publicly. It's important, not just to me, but to any kid who thinks they can't play a sport they love because of what they look like or who they're dating."

Hollander and Rozanov were not the first hockey players to come out as LGBTQ, of course. Both credit Scott Hunter of the New York Admirals as a major factor in their decision to tell the world the truth about themselves. For those who missed it (although it's hard to imagine anyone did), Hunter famously kissed his boyfriend on national television when his team took home the Stanley Cup in June, 2017. "That was a turning point for us," Hollander tells me. "We watched it together and when it happened, it was like something shifted." Was that when they decided to move back to their hometown, I wonder? Hollander shakes his head no. "That [kiss] was just like…" He looks to his fiance to finish his thought, which Rozanov does succinctly: "It was the beginning of us thinking there were other choices for us. Also good to know we were not alone."

Not alone, certainly, but in a small group all the same. Before the famous Hunter kiss, other queer MLH players generally chose to come out only after their retirement. It's not hard to figure out why, given that the response from inside the hockey world was notably less positive than the fan response. Some veteran players and back office employees spoke off the record in various think pieces and op-eds about "woke culture" changing the game (and not for the better). MLH Commissioner Roger Crowell declined to comment for this article but sent a carefully-worded statement from his PR team that reads as follows: *Major League Hockey strives to be a place of inclusion for all players.* No follow up was offered but anonymous sources continue to offer "off the record" hot takes about hockey locker rooms remaining a bastion of traditional masculinity. In other words, leave the gay stuff out.

One has to wonder if any of those unnamed sources came out of Montreal. The evidence isn't conclusive by any means, but their status as a legacy team who opts out of Pride Night celebrations is something to consider. Further (and arguably more damning), only two Metros players (defenseman JJ Boizeau and winger Hayden Pike) publicly commented on Hollander's trade/coming out announcement. After nine seasons and three Stanley Cup wins, the silence from the rest of the team was surprising at best. When asked if his decision to delay his coming out had anything to do with his fear of reactions from his team, Hollander demurs. (The Metros PR team had no comment to make about their previous star player coming out as gay when contacted for this article. As for their lack of participation in Pride Night, they stated that all theme nights nights are optional and that participation is based on a number of factors. They offered no further comment on the subject).

Meanwhile, the Boston Raiders organization was overwhelmingly and publicly supportive of their captain after his announcement in 2017. Almost all the players on the roster that year

(and some retired veterans) commented on the post with Pride flag emojis and yellow and black hearts (the team's colors). Rozanov tells me this was not a surprise to him, though their public support was of course welcome. I'm curious if anyone in his personal life had a different reaction to his coming out, namely his mother (Rozanov does not keep in touch with his father and brother. The former is deceased and the latter lives in Moscow and is estranged from Rozanov and their mother). Although she became a Canadian citizen in 2007 (five years after she escaped her marriage on a domestic violence visa), Mrs. Rozanova grew up in a loudly anti-queer country, which has only become less safe over time for its LGBTQ countrymen. Was Rozanov worried about what it would mean for his mother to have an openly bisexual son? "Maybe a little," he answers. "But she loves me. She has been through worse than her son being something different than she expected." Rozanov has been historically tight-lipped about his childhood in Russia but he was a little more open in this interview, offering that he admires his mother for the choices she made. "I was young," he told me, with what can only be described as a Slavic shrug. "She sacrificed a lot to get us here so we could have a better life. I would not be able to live my true life in Russia for many reasons. I'm grateful to her."

Clearly, any backlash about him from the league or other teams has not reached Rozanov's ears. Most importantly, both he and Hollander tell me, is that Ottawa was more than ready to welcome their two favorite sons home. Coach Brandon Weibe stated at the time that the combination of the two players was "the kind of thing hockey coaches dream about." Still, rebuilds take time, even with two star players on the roster. 2018-19 showed a slow start to the season as their teammates clearly struggled to keep up with the hockey phenoms. The next season additions of winger Troy Barrett, goalie Wyatt Hayes (both formerly from Toronto), and rookie Luca Haas in 2019-2020 marked a turning point in the game for the Centaurs. That season found Ottawa in the second round of a playoff series for the first time in literal years (the team hadn't even made it to playoff contention since 2004, for those counting).

The city, the coaching staff, and the club itself were all thrilled. When Ottawa lost at home in game seven of the second round, the home crowd descended onto the ice as if they were advancing to the Cup finals after all. "I've never seen anything like that," Weibe admits now. "I kind of thought everyone had lost their minds or read the scoreboard wrong. We're so grateful for the fans though. That kind of support is unreal. It may be a small market here but it's a great city to play in."

With their postseason behind them and other teams focused on the Cup race, Hollander and Rozanov hoped that another announcement they had kept to themselves for many years could be quietly floated out with little fanfare. On Instagram just a week after their season ended, the two announced that they'd been in a romantic relationship for years and planned on getting married during the offseason.

Of course, the announcement was not received with anything resembling quiet. The internet, predictably, went a little crazy. For as long as they've been in the public eye, their friendship has been a core part of their brand. The fans wondered (in blog posts, social media comments, and probably in sports bars in Ottawa and beyond) when things turned romantic between the two. Neither cared to give an exact timeline but Rozanov offered this romantic

sentiment, smiling at his husband-to-be: “Hard to say. But I know I would have found my way to Shane even if we had stayed in Moscow. Some things are meant to be.”

Hollander smiles at this, though a noticeable blush accompanies it. He is certainly the shyer of the two, though he is visibly relaxed and easygoing in Rozanov’s presence. Earlier in his career, most of his teammates and coaches described him as “quiet, serious, and extremely focused.” In the past two years, since he and Rozanov moved back home to Ottawa and joined the Centaurs, these attributes seem outdated. This new, older, and dare we note happier Hollander is still serious about winning but he isn’t the “hockey robot” he was often called when he played with the Metros. When I ask him about this apparent change in his public persona, he hesitates before answering: “I was under a lot of pressure those first few years, being so young and having so much responsibility laid on me. [Ed. note: the Metros underperformed for several years before Hollander joined as their starting center. He was named captain his sophomore year with the club]. It was a lifelong dream of mine to play professional hockey. I also figured out that I was gay in high school. Trying to figure out how to manage my career while also keeping this huge secret from everyone was a lot. My biggest fear was that I wouldn’t be able to have both a professional life and a private one. If I was… stiffer before, when I was with the Metros, that’s more about keeping a very big secret from everyone than the organization.”

Still, the Centaurs organization presents a notably different culture, fondly referring to themselves as the queerest team in the league, with three out players (Troy Barrett came out last year just before Ottawa’s Pride Night). When asked about how a culture gets built in the midst of a hyper-masculine sport, Alternate Captain Zane Boodram denies that the team has done anything special to build this kind of community. “I know hockey players have a reputation for being obsessed with how aggressively straight they are and being old school or whatever but we’re just not that way here,” he tells me over the phone. Boodram himself is one of a few non-white players in the sport, which he notes makes it simple to accept other identities on the team. “Diversity is good for all of us,” he continues. “Ultimately we all want to play hockey with guys we like. We’re lucky that our roster is so welcoming.” I push back on that a little: is it just luck that makes a team work so cohesively, especially when there is so much noise outside? Boodram doesn’t hesitate with an answer. “Maybe not just luck. I know management and Coach have made an intentional effort to be welcoming and set the tone of the culture. It all comes from them. They wouldn’t accept players who aren’t the right fit.”

Hollander and Rozanov are also reluctant to take credit for the team culture. “It was kind of like that when we got here,” Rozanov says. “It didn’t hurt that everyone was very happy to have us,” Hollander adds, laughing. "We have big plans for this team."

All of this positivity is heartwarming, of course, and it’s clear to me when I visit for a preseason practice that it’s all genuine. Boodram and Rozanov, as alternate and captain, are cheerful and charismatic leaders. Hollander checks in on the rookies frequently, offering advice about improving their skills and rerunning drills as many times as they ask. This year’s rookies, lovingly referred to by vets on the team as “the kids,” all tell me they dreamt about playing on the same team as athletes whose posters they displayed on their walls. Does it matter to them that they happen to be married to each other? Luca Haas, in his sophomore

year with the team, answers for the group: “It actually makes sense. No one else is as good as them. They understand things about each other that maybe no one else could.”

Watching them interact during this interview process made that abundantly clear. The chemistry between them is undeniable, both on the ice and in the home they share, not far from where they grew up. When asked when they knew they were more than friends, they smile at each other conspiratorially. “We’d like to keep some of the details between us,” Hollander says carefully, reaching out to take his fiance’s hand. “But I can tell you it took us a long time to get here. I don’t regret any of it because it led us here but… I think we both knew for longer than we let on to each other.”

Rozanov brings their joined hands to his mouth for a chaste kiss before adding, “It is the dream, right? To fall in love with your best friend.” He looks directly at his fiance as he finishes, “I never guessed I could have this much.”

Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov will be married by the time this article drops. The entire staff of *Sports Illustrated* wishes them a long, happy life together. It looks like it’s only just begun.

Chapter End Notes

I can't thank you enough for reading. Your comments and kudos bring me so much joy.

I have so much to say about this story but I'll spare you. Hopefully what I've written conveys my feelings.

Happy Pride Month! I hope you all have Irinas and Yunas and Davids to love you and cherish you because you are perfect. And I hope you find the kind of love that makes you feel like yourself.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!