

The Other Option

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The Other Option

by [AllieHollanov](#)

Summary

Ilya. He is still sleeping fitfully in Irina's bed, face crumpled and lips turned down. Irina leans over him and presses a single kiss to the crease between his eyebrows, and then leans back just enough to watch Ilya's big, blue eyes blink open at her.

She holds a finger against her lips, waiting until Ilya nods before she straightens up and beckons him to get out of bed. When Ilya is standing, Irina helps him into a clean sweater, his coat, scarf, and hat. Ilya looks terribly confused, but allows himself to be dressed like a toddler, watching his mother curiously but without question. He is twelve years old, certainly old enough to dress himself, and maybe Grigory has a point when he insists that Irina coddles Ilya too much, but, good heavens, that face, how could she not?

It is not until Ilya notices the suitcase by the bedroom door that his expression changes. His eyes darken at first, and then his face screws up minutely, looking at Irina with thinly veiled horror.

"Be completely silent, solnyshko," Irina breathes. "We have to go."

Irina Rozanova chooses differently.

Notes

i wasn't actually going to write this, it was going to live in random little scenes in my notes app just for me and then i started writing with absolutely no intention of posting it but here i am 200k words later with a brand new ao3 account (DO NOT tell the one direction fandom i am here they have been hunting me for years and i'm supposed to be retired)

i have read the books and watched the show so many times at this point that i have combined a lot of details and characterizations and plot points from both sources here, but hopefully i have done so consistently. in the case of ilya's family dynamic, especially, i took a lot of liberties.

i am historically bad at tagging so please call me the fuck out if i missed anything.

[edit 7/22] wow this fic has gotten a lot of attention since i was last online! for those just joining us- i've gotten quite a lot of feedback about how frustrating this fic gets toward the

end, so i'd like you to take a quick look at the tags and the total word count and maybe take some deep breaths between chapters! it's all gonna be ok! it's just a fanfic!

thank you for your comments and kudos <3

Chapter 1

January, 2003 – Ottawa, Ontario

Canada is weird. It seems brighter here than in Moscow, despite the fact that Ottawa is lit by the very same sun. The air is easier to breathe here, the culture easier to relax into, and everything, all of it, is so very weird.

The hockey, maybe more than anything else, is *very* weird.

Ilya has been playing nearly as long as he has been breathing, if not maybe a little before that, somehow. At twelve years old, he has broken records all over Russia; he was the best of his age group in his league back in Moscow, was being scouted already by big, *big* names. He knows hockey better than he knows anything else in the world.

But this– he does not know what this is.

These kids are awful; they are too clumsy on their skates, too eager on their shots, too slow on their passes. When one player knocks into another, he helps him up after, and the two skate away like nothing happened. When one player scores a goal, the other team claps politely for him. Ilya has never seen anything like it.

Where he comes from, hockey is rough, violent, exciting, even in the children's leagues. Ilya has probably taken more hits than all of these kids combined, probably double, maybe triple, and has dealt twice more than that. There was not a baby tooth in his head that did not fall out on the ice. He has broken his left arm three times, and his right arm once.

A player falls on the ice before him, lands hard on his knees and elbows, and starts to cry. Ilya does not belong here.

There are multiple reasons, actually, why Ilya does not belong here, and wanting to boo the crying player is not the biggest of them. Ilya is slumped down low in the bleachers of the community rink, watching a team practice that he is not a part of, desperately wishing to join them despite his disappointment in the way the game is being played. He only just moved to Ottawa this month; the rink has quickly become Ilya's home away from home, the only part of Canada that feels familiar to him.

He likes the hotel, and he likes Ottawa, and he likes the rink, even if he does not particularly like what is being done on it. One of the only things he arrived in Ottawa with were his skates, and between the scheduled practices of various teams of youth leagues around the city, Ilya usually has the ice all to himself. He misses playing on a team, misses playing against another team, but most days, just being on the ice is enough.

The staff at the hotel were helpful with getting Ilya enrolled in school, but Ilya's English is abysmal still, and he has not made many friends. The girls like him at school; they like to

touch his curls and his biceps and they giggle when he tells them, in Russian, that they are fucking bizarre. He does not mind it, not so much, but it would be nice if he could at least talk to them, or understand whatever the fuck they are saying through their giggles.

The boys at school have not seemed to notice that he is there. They have, of course; Ilya stands nearly a full head taller than anyone else in his class, and has at least twenty pounds of muscle mass on even the biggest of his classmates, and, oh, the Russian thing.

He only wears the same three outfits in rotation, and always the same pair of shoes. He keeps headphones in his ears when he is not sitting in a class or attempting to understand an adult. The only time anyone has seen him outside of school is when he is intently watching their hockey practice. Canada is weird, but Canada probably thinks Ilya is weird, too.

The captain of the hockey team is in Ilya's class. Ilya spends a lot of time watching him, when the other boy is distracted. He seems kind, strong, well-liked but not terribly social. He eats lunch with a few of the other kids on the team, and spends hours at the in-school gym at the end of each day. No one else on the team seems as dedicated as their captain, but Ilya supposes that is why he is the captain— and the fact that he is, like, *really* fucking good at hockey.

He skates laps around the other kids on the ice, scores on every shot he takes. He is quick, agile, thinks fast and acts faster, and, curiously, is completely nonviolent. He never lays a hand on another player, never shoulders anyone out of his way. He snakes around them, confuses them, disorients them, but never touches them, never gets physical. He is a goddamn ghost, and it is clear everyone attempting to play against him is quite haunted by him.

Ilya's leg bounces restlessly as he watches the practice wrap up; there are forty-five minutes between the time the team leaves the ice and the time the rink closes for the night, and Ilya intends to spend every second he can on the ice before he is asked to leave.

Most of the parents and siblings vacate the bleachers when the coach blows the whistle to call a team huddle. Ilya snatches his skates off the floor beside his feet and rushes down to the bottom row of the bleachers, hastily changing out of his sneakers and into his skates. As soon as the coaching staff has finished packing up and has vacated the ice, Ilya hops the boards and takes off like a shot.

He does not have a stick or any equipment; sometimes the coaching staff leaves random bits of equipment outside of the locked equipment room for the night, and Ilya has considered stealing from them more than a few times, but the risk of being thrown out of the rink for good keeps him honest. He works on his speed, mostly, his agility, replaying in his mind the practice he just watched and trying to figure out how the fuck the team captain did that goddamn thing with his feet.

Forty-five minutes passes all too soon. There is a chime as a voice comes over the intercom system, and Ilya only recognizes the words *closing* and *five minutes*, but he gets the gist of the message. He savors one last, lightning fast lap around the ice, making a little more snow than strictly necessary when he stops back at the bleachers and hops back over the boards.

It is not until his skates touch down on the solid floor that he realizes he is being watched. There is a boy just about his age a few rows up, almost exactly where Ilya was sitting earlier, his hands folded in his lap and his eyes locked on Ilya. He flinches and looks down as soon as Ilya makes eye contact with him, and Ilya's stomach flips nervously. He sits down hard to begin frantically changing back into his sneakers, wanting to avoid as much conflict as possible.

"Ilya Rozanov?" a voice says from behind him. *Blyat*.

Ilya looks up, fumbling the lace of his sneaker and giving up on it as he straightens up and steels himself for the interaction. He does not speak, just sweeps his eyes over the other boy, who he now realizes as the captain of the team from practice.

Ilya has spent a lot of time watching Shane Hollander, both at school and on the ice, and there is not a lot about him that Ilya has not already been able to observe. His freckles are a new discovery, though, thanks to the proximity, as are his warm, chocolatey doe eyes.

"Shane Hollander," the boy says, with a goofy little smile. "I wanted to introduce myself." He extends a hand to Ilya, too close, not quite meeting his eye.

Ilya shakes his hand, nodding once when Shane manages to look at him again.

"You're an awesome skater to watch," Shane says, tucking his hands into the pocket of his hoodie.

"Yes," Ilya says; he thinks Shane is complimenting him. He is not quite sure how to receive it.

Shane laughs, shaking his head and making to turn away. Instead of leaving, though, he sits down beside Ilya on the bleachers, bouncing his leg while Ilya finishes tying his shoes. Ilya is not sure what to do now, what to say, what Hollander wants from him, so he just straightens back up and looks straight ahead at the ice.

"Anyway, I should go, my mom is waiting for me," Shane says, standing abruptly and thrusting his hand out again. Ilya cannot help but allow a small smile, shaking Shane's hand again for the second time in less than a minute and standing up as well. Shane nods awkwardly and turns to go, and Ilya grits his teeth.

"Ah, you," says, too loud, voice echoing around the rink. Shane stops in his tracks, whirling around as if to check that Ilya is talking to him. "Very, ah," Ilya gestures to the ice, "ah, very good."

Shane's smile almost splits his face in half. "Thank you," he says earnestly, eyes locked on Ilya for just a moment more before he nods again and turns to go. He disappears around the bleachers and Ilya hears the exit door bang open a second later, and then Ilya is alone once again.

It is a fifteen minute walk back to the hotel, but running, Ilya makes it in less than ten. It gets very dark very fast here in Canada, and cold, too, but not nearly to the degree that Moscow

gets dark and cold. Running probably is not even necessary here, not the way it would be at this hour in Moscow. Canadians do not stop you on the street to rob or kill you— probably they would offer you a ride, and maybe a sweet.

Ilya has found the quickest and most secret way down to the basement level of the hotel since moving in a few weeks ago; he enters through the back of the hotel, down the service stairs behind the kitchen which takes him under the lobby, and then through the laundry room and into the common area of the housekeepers' quarters. The door to his room opens with a key card, just like the movies, and Ilya's breath is still coming in puffs when he swipes the card and shoves into the room.

His mother is stooped over the countertop in the tiny kitchenette, stirring a pot atop a hot plate. She is already smiling at him before he comes through the door, probably having tracked the sound of his heavy footsteps all the way from the service stairs. She is good at things like that.

"Hi, *solnyshko*," she hums; her soft voice, her familiar Russian, her gentle smile, they are enough to turn this dark, dreary little hotel room into a home. Ilya drops his skates by the door and rushes over to hug her, peering into the pot in front of her. "*Soup in a moment. Go shower first,*" she says, pulling a face to suggest that Ilya stinks when he pulls back to look up at her.

Ilya swallows his whine of complaint about soup *again*; he knows it is one of the only things his mother can afford on her housekeeper's salary, and they sell it in the hotel lobby, so she can get it discounted. There is a free breakfast and lunch program for low income families at the school where Ilya is enrolled, and he tries to take full advantage of it, stuffing as much fresh fruit and bread into his backpack as he can get away with, but even so, they eat a lot of soup, a lot of cereal, and not a lot else.

Ilya leaves his mother be, and stoops to retrieve his pajamas from the end of the bed where Irina, at some point, folded them. There is a fresh towel waiting for him in the bathroom, which consists only of a shower stall and a toilet, and he kicks the door closed while he pulls his sweater off over his head.

He inspects himself in the mirror for a bit while the shower heats up. There is the faintest of marks left behind on his cheekbone from the injury he sustained the night he and Irina left Russia, but other than that, he is not sure his skin has ever been so clear, so unblemished and unbruised. His chest is more defined than ever, starting to look more like a man's chest than a boy's. He has been sneaking into the hotel gym whenever he has trouble sleeping, which is often. He is stronger now than he ever has been, but the nightmares do keep him up.

The room is small, cramped, dark, but Irina has done her damndest to make it cozy. She draped an extra bedsheet over the empty wall beside the bed to create the illusion of a window, and she has collected a multitude of lamps and knickknacks from street corners and from the hotel's forgotten objects room. Neither of them want to call this room home for very long, but for as long as they have to be here, it definitely could be worse.

The soup is ready by the time Ilya has finished his shower. There is no table for Irina to set for dinner, but she makes a point, every night, of propping the coffee table up on Ilya's school

books to make it an appropriate height for eating at, and pushes it between the bed and the sofa so that she and Ilya can sit across from each other over their steaming bowls of sugar and carbs to talk about their days.

Ilya pulls the towel off of his head and hangs it over the back of the bathroom door, settling down on the edge of the bed just as Irina carries over two bowls of steaming soup.

“Did you get time on the ice today, solnyshko?” she asks, blowing delicately over a spoonful of soup.

“Yes, a bit,” Ilya says. *“The team from my school was practicing, but there was a little time for me when they finished.”*

Irina turns her eyes down to the bowl in front of her as he speaks. Ilya knows she is disappointed that she cannot afford to pay for Ilya to join the team, but Ilya has never asked, and never would. It is not something they talk about.

“You had fun?” Irina asks meekly.

“Yes, very much,” Ilya nods. *“I spoke to the captain of the team before the rink closed. He complimented my skating.”*

“Oh, the captain?” Irina says. *“You said he is very good, yes?”*

“Very good,” Ilya confirms. *“He only would be better if he had any real competition. He is so much more talented than anyone else on the team.”*

“I bet he would find his match in you,” Irina says. *“Ilyusha, next year—”*

“He is very nice,” Ilya says quickly, anything to get his mother to not finish that sentence. He loves hockey, but he loves his mother more, and he does not want her feeling inadequate about anything, surely not her inability to allow him to play on a hockey team, of all things. She saved his life, that will always be enough for him.

Irina seems to know exactly what he is doing, but she allows it gratefully. *“You should befriend him,”* she says. *“Maybe he will play with you some night when he does not have practice.”*

“Maybe,” Ilya says. It is unlikely that he will befriend Shane Hollander. As nice as it would be to play against someone of his skill level, Hollander is much too nice, and Ilya does not quite know what to do with that. The language barrier would also be an issue; Ilya has already decided to hold off on trying to make any friends until he has at least a slightly better grasp on English.

“He could help you with your English, maybe,” Irina offers. She has always been so good at reading minds.

“Yes, maybe,” Ilya says again, quieter. Still unlikely. He crushes a noodle against the side of his bowl with the back of his spoon, and then smiles for the peace of mind of his mother, her eyes conducting a thorough search of his face. *“How was your day?”*

"Oh!" Irina gasps, springing up from the sofa and rushing to the kitchenette. Ilya watches her, amused, slurping carefully on a spoonful of broth. *"I found this today, for you, little one."* She presents Ilya with a small toy sports car, electric green, only the size of his thumbnail. She places it down on the table and pushes it, and the tiny thing rumbles messily across the table to Ilya, moving feebly on its lame little wheels.

Ilya smiles as he picks it up. He is not a child— well, not small enough to still play with toy cars, anyway— but he has always had a fascination with sports cars, and is touched by the gesture.

"It was left behind in the lobby," Irina explains. *"I am supposed to turn it in, but it is so small, I could not imagine it would be terribly missed. And I know how you love cars, and I thought..."* she trails off, smiling embarrassedly, like she always does when she brings Ilya some tiny treasure left behind in the hotel.

"Thank you, Mama," Ilya says, rounding the table to plant a kiss to Irina's head. He looks around the room, which really is not much to look at; the bed takes up most of the room, and the sofa takes up what is left of the space. There is a tiny kitchenette just inside the door, and the bathroom beside that. There is a ledge that separates the kitchenette from the door, and Ilya shuffles to it, placing his new toy car amongst the other knick knacks Irina has displayed there, a place of honor.

Irina watches him with a smile on her face that Ilya recognizes from Moscow, but it feels so different, so much more natural, more real. His mother did not smile often in Russia. No one did. Ilya returns the gesture, and the rest of the soup goes down like the best meal he's ever eaten.

Shane has grown quite tired of the slander against the new kid.

Sure, he does seem a bit odd on the surface; he's quiet, doesn't smile often, hardly speaks even when spoken to and even then, it's usually just little grunts or one word answers. He clearly struggles with English, and he's insecure about it, so he keeps to himself. That's not so weird— these kids are just mean.

His team, especially, has been quite insensitive toward the poor kid, especially during practice. The new kid can often be found in the bleachers during their practices, just watching silently, with a pair of skates at his feet, and nothing else. Shane's teammates shout rude things at him, sometimes, call him names, but Ilya either does not care, or does not know what they are saying. Last night after practice was not the first time Shane has stuck around to see what Ilya does when they all leave, but it was the first time he approached him, at the advice of his mother.

“He’s probably lonely,” Yuna had said just the other night, over a grand dinner of grilled fish and homemade vegetable risotto. “You should talk to him, find out what his deal is.”

Shane didn’t tell her that he’s seen Ilya skate, and that he’s better than any skater Shane has ever seen. He didn’t tell her that he’s worried Ilya might be even better than Shane himself; Shane is the number one youth player in Ottawa, currently, of any age group. He’s broken every youth level record there is, and even created a few new ones. Ilya Rozanov might be able to give him a run for his money, and that’s as exciting as it is terrifying.

Shane has never been challenged much at hockey. He’s not allowed to play with the older kids, because he’s so small, but the kids his own age are painfully average, boringly predictable, and *so* fucking slow. All his life, he’s been wishing for someone like Ilya Rozanov to come into the picture, but now that he’s here, he’s a bit worried it might be too much.

Ilya doesn’t talk to anyone at school, doesn’t have any friends yet, and he’s been here almost a month. Shane watches him almost every day from his usual seat in the cafeteria at lunch, noticing the way he nibbles at a bit of his cafeteria food and then packs most of it away in his backpack, like he’s saving it for later. Shane is fascinated by him.

Today, he manages to catch Ilya’s eye when Ilya looks up from taking a small bite of his pasta. Ilya looks away immediately, but turns back a couple seconds later, a slight flush to his cheeks.

Shane waves, a gesture that goes unanswered. He raises his hand again, turning it around and waving toward himself this time, beckoning Ilya over to him. Ilya shakes his head minutely and becomes very interested in the plate of pasta in front of him.

One of Shane’s friends is trying to ask him something, probably about practice or the game they have this weekend, but Shane stands abruptly and gathers his things.

“Where are you going?” Joe asks, indignant. “Hollander! I’m trying to— what the hell?”

Shane is already gone, marching across the cafeteria with his backpack and lunchbox. Ilya is still determinedly not looking at him, but when Shane drops into the seat across the table from him, Ilya finally looks up.

“Hi,” Shane says, offering Ilya a friendly smile. Ilya returns it confusedly. “Can I sit here?” He says it slowly, annunciating each word very clearly and pointing to himself, and then the seat.

Ilya hesitates and then nods, his smile fading into a smirk that makes Shane’s face heat.

“We met last night,” Shane says, in case Ilya doesn’t remember.

“Yes,” Ilya says, his smirk growing.

“Yeah,” Shane says. His confidence dwindles the longer Ilya stares wordlessly at him. “Cool.”

“Cool,” Ilya repeats, eyes flickering to Shane’s mouth. “I am, ah— English is not,” he waves his hand indiscriminately near his head.

“Yeah, I figured,” Shane says, confidence renewed. “Russia, right?”

“Russia,” Ilya says. “Moscow.”

“Moscow,” Shane nods. “Um, Ottawa,” he says, gesturing to himself.

Ilya nods. The vibe turns awkward again.

“So, um, do you play hockey?” Shane asks slowly. “Or just skate?”

“Hockey,” Ilya says. “Very different in Russia.”

“Oh, really? How so?” Shane asks.

“More, ah,” Ilya flounders, and then makes a fist.

“Oh,” Shane chuckles. “Yeah, well.”

“How do you say?” Ilya presses, gesturing to his fist.

“Violent?” Shane offers. “Aggressive?”

“Vio—“ Ilya tries, and frowns. Shane repeats it slower. “Violent,” Ilya says, and then repeats it a few times under his breath. Shane’s heart swells.

“It’s like that here, too, but not at this level,” Shane says. “Kids, y’know?”

“Boring,” Ilya smirks again, popping a noodle into his mouth.

“Yeah, kinda,” Shane laughs. “Why haven’t you joined the team?” Ilya falters, looks down at his pasta again. Realizing his overstep, Shane backtracks. “You’re probably too good,” he shrugs.

Ilya looks up at him through his eyelashes and winks. Shane can’t figure out how he feels about that.

“Do you want to play sometime?” Shane says. “With me?”

Ilya blinks at him. “I do not, ah, have,” he holds his hands in front of him like he’s holding a hockey stick.

“A stick?” Shane says. “Oh, I have extras. I can give you one.”

“Yes,” Ilya says quickly, and then looks mildly ashamed. “Ah, thank you.”

“Yeah, no problem,” Shane says. “After school? Today?”

Ilya grins. “Yes. *Cool.*”

“Cool,” Shane agrees, hiding his own grin behind a bite of his turkey sandwich.

He watches Ilya take another small bite of pasta and then put his fork down, covering the container the school serves the pasta in and trying to figure out how to pack it into his backpack without making a mess. Shane quickly dumps the apple and protein bar out of his lunchbox, offering the whole thing to Ilya.

“Here, use this,” he says, taking the container from Ilya when he makes no move to do it himself. “There’s an ice pack. It’ll go bad just sitting in your backpack all day.”

Shane packages up the lunch box and zips it closed, sliding it back across the table to Ilya, who looks like he has been slapped across the face. Shane worries he’s overstepped again, but Ilya reaches for the lunch box and cocks his head. “You do not need?”

“You can give it back to me later,” Shane says. “At the rink.”

Ilya nods, ducking his head in an attempt to hide his shy smile. “Thank you,” he says quietly.

“Where do you live?” Shane asks, in an attempt to redirect the conversation.

Ilya flushes, inexplicably, and pretends not to understand the question. Shane repeats himself slower, trying to mime the words with his hands, but the bell rings to end lunch before Ilya can continue to avoid the question.

“See you later?” Shane confirms, as they both stand up from the table.

“Later,” Ilya nods. “Hockey.”

Just like that, he’s gone, tucking Shane’s lunchbox under his arm and hunching his shoulders in as he attempts to disappear into the throng of kids leaving the cafeteria. He doesn’t blend in well; he’s taller than every single other kid in the school, and he walks the way an arrow flies from a bow, straight, fast, and intimidating. Shane catches up with the boys from the team, brushing off their questions about his lunch date with the Russian kid, and spends the rest of the day thinking about which stick he’s going to give to Ilya.

Ilya does not miss home. He does not miss a single thing about it, he does not ever want to go back to Russia as long as he lives. This, this is where he belongs, this is his true home, the only home he will ever need.

Shane’s hockey stick is very slightly too short for Ilya, but he makes it work, feeling every tap of it against the ice like the very beat of his heart, thrumming through his veins and keeping him alive. The ice under his skates, the puck in his control, this is home, this is *Ilya*, and he has been away for so, so long but *fuck* it feels good to be back.

Even better than playing again, it feels downright *incredible* to have found such an even match in Shane Hollander. They are two very different players, that much is apparent from the moment they step onto the ice, but it makes the game interesting, makes it fun, makes it so *good* that Ilya wants to bottle it and keep it forever.

Shane is fast, but so is Ilya. Ilya is an excellent shot, but so is Shane. They keep each other on their toes, laughing and swearing at each other and calling out insults and compliments, each of them giving it their all, both of them thoroughly impressed with the other.

They have been at it for well over an hour, but they've got to wrap up soon; practice for the peewee league starts in twenty minutes. Shane is the one to call it, eventually, skating over to the boards and snatching his water bottle to take a long pull.

Ilya takes a couple extra shots, just in case he does not get a chance to do this again. He does not know when the next time will be that he gets his hands on a stick and a puck, he wants to savor this, wants to milk it for everything it is worth.

Shane is watching him when Ilya finally collects the puck and skates over to meet him at the boards. Ilya reaches for the Gatorade his mother proudly gave him the money for when he told her he was, after all, going to play hockey with Shane Hollander, and Shane watches him take a few sips, still panting and drenched in sweat.

"Wow," Shane says, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. "You are, like, *insane*."

Ilya frowns into his Gatorade. "Insane?"

"Talented," Shane corrects himself quickly. "Really talented. Not, like, crazy."

Ilya does not really understand him, but he thinks it is a compliment. "I was best, in Moscow," he shrugs. "You are very good."

"Thanks," Shane chuckles.

Ilya watches him for a moment, fascinated by the twinkle in his eye. "Can we, ah, again?"

"Um, I think there's a practice starting soon," Shane frowns. "So I don't think—"

"Later?" Ilya asks. "Ah, different day?"

"Oh!" Shane lights up. "Yeah, hell yeah! I'd like that."

Ilya beams, nodding his agreement. He takes one last sip of his Gatorade and then caps it, regretfully moving to hand his borrowed stick back to Shane.

"Oh, you can keep that, if you want," Shane says, pushing the stick back toward Ilya. "It's just a spare, I have plenty."

Ilya could cry. "Yes?"

"Yes," Shane says, laughing softly at him. "All yours, man."

Ilya hugs the stick to his chest like a little kid. “Thank you,” he says, so earnestly that Shane looks a little confused.

“You’re welcome,” Shane says anyway, offering him another smile. “So, um, about the team —“

“I, ah,” Ilya points toward the door of the rink. “Home.” He cannot let Shane know that he cannot be on the team because he cannot afford to be. Shane will pity him, or offer to help, or something, and Ilya cannot allow that. He would sooner never play hockey again than become a charity case.

“Oh, right, of course,” Shane says. He looks disappointed. “Will you sit with us at lunch tomorrow, at least? I think you’d like the other guys,” he says, his unguarded optimism hitting Ilya in a weird place.

“Maybe,” Ilya says tightly.

Shane nods, ducking his head. “Well, thanks for playing with me. See you tomorrow.”

He turns to go, but Ilya uses the stick in his hand to tap his hip before he gets far. Shane turns back, eyebrows raised.

“Thank you, Hollander,” Ilya says, his accent exceptionally thick.

Shane grins. “Any time, Rozanov.”

Ilya runs home again, not out of fear, or out of habit, but sheer joy. Irina is still working when he gets back to the hotel, so Ilya keys himself into the room and takes his time in the shower. He retrieves his leftover pasta from the refrigerator where he stashed it earlier and transfers it into a pot, setting it on low heat on the hot plate so that it will be ready to eat whenever Irina gets back.

He grabs Shane’s hockey stick— well, his own hockey stick, he supposes— and settles down on the bed, inspecting the tape on the blade. It is old, used and worn, but Ilya finds comfort in the fact that Shane did not give him a brand new stick. Second hand kindnesses are easier to accept than outright gifts.

Irina comes into the room almost silently; she has moved as quietly as a mouse for as long as Ilya can remember, floating around their home back in Moscow like a lovely apparition. She looks exhausted, but she still manages to offer Ilya the warm smile she keeps on reserve just for him.

“*Hi, Mama,*” he says.

“*Hi, moy lyubimyy,*” Irina says softly. “*Have you eaten?*”

“Yes,” Ilya lies, nodding toward the pot on the hot plate. “*I brought it from school.*”

“*Darling boy,*” Irina coos, peeking into the pot. “*How was your day?*”

“Excellent,” Ilya says, sitting up quickly. “Mama, look.”

Irina turns from where she is spooning a bit of pasta into a bowl, eyes widening at the hockey stick Ilya is brandishing at her. *“Ilya,”* she says sharply, voice low. *“Did you steal that?”*

“No, Mama,” Ilya scoffs. “It was a gift. The captain of the hockey team asked me to play after school, and brought me an old stick to keep.”

Irina’s lips tighten into a perfectly straight line. For a long, terrifying moment, Ilya thinks she is going to make him return the stick to Shane, but then she crosses the room and hands him a bowl of pasta, despite his lying about having already eaten.

“It is old?” Irina says, taking the stick from Ilya’s hands and turning it over in her own. *“You are sure?”*

“I am,” Ilya says. “I tried to give it back, but he did not want it. He says he has others.”

“He is very kind,” Irina says, placing the stick down against the wall next to the door, just beside Ilya’s skates. *“You thanked him?”*

“Yes, twice,” Ilya says.

Irina crosses back to the kitchenette to spoon the rest of the pasta into a bowl for herself. She looks at Ilya expectantly once she gets back to the sofa. *“Well?”* she says. *“How was it?”*

“It was amazing, Mama,” Ilya gushes. “He is incredible. We had so much fun. It was not easy, but it was not easy for him, either. We are going to play again sometime.”

“That is wonderful, Ilyusha,” Irina says. *“I am so happy for you.”*

“He wants me to join the team,” Ilya says, before he can stop himself. He regrets it immediately; Irina’s eyes turn impossibly sad.

“Moy lyubimyy,” she says to her pasta. *“I–”*

“I know,” Ilya says quickly. *“I know I can not. And I do not want to,”* he lies. He has never told a lie that his mother has not seen through.

“By next year, maybe,” Irina says. *“I will find a second job, or–”*

“No,” Ilya says. *“You work so hard already. I do not need to be on the team.”*

“Solnyshko,” Irina shakes her head. *“I am so sorry.”*

“Do not be.”

“I am,” Irina says. *“I did not give you a choice. I pulled you from your home, your life, hockey, your friends– all because I could not bear it.”*

"Mama," Ilya says, putting his bowl down on the coffee table and all but crawling over it to arrive at Irina's side. "You saved me," he says softly, wrapping his arms around her waist. "I have never been happier in my life, hockey or no. It was killing us. He was killing us," he breathes.

"Oh, my love," Irina says, close to tears, pressing her face into his hair. "You are too small to be saying such things. To have lived through such things."

"I love you, Mama," Ilya says. "More than hockey, more than Russia, more than anything."

"I love you, precious boy," Irina tells the curls in his hair. "I love you more than life."

When the pasta is gone, the bowls rinsed clean, and the day's laundry done, Ilya climbs into bed and receives a multitude of forehead kisses from his mother. She has insisted since they arrived at the hotel that Ilya take the bed, as growing boys require proper rest and comfort. She claims to be very comfortable on the sofa, and the way she falls asleep almost immediately upon resting her head on the pillow does not betray her, but Ilya is well aware of the sacrifices she makes for him, and is well aware that there are sacrifices she has made that he cannot even begin to comprehend.

One month in Ottawa has damn near undone all of the suffering that Ilya faced back in Moscow. He falls asleep wondering how long it will take to do the same for his mother.

The hockey team practices twice a week, Tuesday and Thursday nights, for an hour at a time. There are optional practices on Saturday mornings, but Shane is usually the only one who shows up consistently for those. He loves his team, he really does, and is so proud to be their captain, but he's kinda, like, bored.

Playing with Ilya is the best thing that's happened to Shane in recent memory, if not *ever*. Shane has never been challenged like this, hasn't had to work this hard since he was first learning to skate, and it's exhilarating. They have been meeting up after school every day that Shane doesn't have practice, and sometimes even on those days, too, when Shane is still fired up after practice is done and Ilya's waiting in the bleachers for his time to shine. The other players have noticed, and some have even tried to join in, but none of them can keep up with Shane and Ilya, and none of them stick around very long.

Every day is a constant struggle to not drop to his knees at Ilya's feet and beg him to join the team, but he's sort of learned his lesson about that. Ilya shuts down every time Shane brings it up, and it's definitely not just a language thing. Ilya avoids all mention of the team like the plague, despite sitting at the end of their lunch table every day now, smiling and nodding politely when they speak too fast and too much for him to keep up.

It does not go unnoticed, to Shane, at least, that Ilya has only worn three different outfits in the entire month and a half he has been here. He has two different pairs of jeans, both ragged and worn, and a pair of sweatpants with a tiny hole in the seat that has been obviously sown shut several times. He has one sweater, one t-shirt, and one hoodie, one pair of shoes, and one coat. He eats approximately one third of his lunch each day, and meticulously packages the rest to bring home. The headphones he constantly has in his ears are not actually plugged into anything, the cord tucked into his otherwise empty pocket. It's not hard to connect the dots; Ilya's family cannot afford basic essentials such as clothing and food, there is no way they'd be able to afford the hockey team's fees.

As Ilya's sole friend in the whole of Canada, Shane feels a certain level of responsibility for him. He can't imagine Ilya would be terribly receptive to outright charity, but there has got to be a way to include him in the team without having to pay to be there. He's much bigger than Shane; even the stick Shane gave him was a bit of a stretch, there is no way Ilya could fit into any of Shane's other equipment. Equipment aside, though, there are fees to cover the cost of renting the rink, transportation to travel games, and probably even more things that Shane has never even thought about.

Luckily, the head coach of Shane's team is his very own father, David Hollander, and there is no better place to discuss team matters than at the dinner table.

"So," he says, pushing a steamed pea around his plate. "You know my friend, Ilya?"

"Your friend, Ilya, who you talk about every single day and spend every waking moment with after school?" Yuna teases. "I think we've heard of him."

Shane smiles, embarrassed. "I, um. I kinda have a problem."

Yuna's teasing smile falls away. "With Ilya?"

"Not with Ilya, exactly," Shane says.

"Did he do something?" Yuna asks. "Did *you* do something?"

David places his hand over his wife's where she's clutching her fork. "Let him talk, Yuna."

"He's, like, incredible at hockey," Shane says. "Like, Mom, *incredible*. Dad, you should see him play, it's the craziest thing I've ever seen."

"This doesn't sound like a problem," Yuna whispers to David. "Has he gotten to the problem yet?"

Shane laughs, rolling his eyes playfully at his mother. "He can't afford to join the team. Or, well, his family can't, I guess, and he won't admit that that's why he won't join, but I know that it is."

"Oh," Yuna says, slumping back in her chair. "That's so sad."

"We can cover his fees," David shrugs, like it's that easy. "If he's as good as you say."

“I don’t think he’d accept it,” Shane says. “He kinda shuts down whenever I bring it up.”

“There are scholarships,” Yuna says.

“True, all he’d have to do is write an essay,” David says.

Shane rubs at his face. “He barely speaks English, he’s not going to be able to write an essay.”

“You could help him,” Yuna says. They’re really not understanding the depth of this problem.

“Nevermind,” Shane says quietly, turning his attention back to his peas. “Thanks anyway.”

“He wouldn’t let you help him?” Yuna asks.

“I don’t think so,” Shane shrugs.

“Well, we’ll create a new scholarship,” David says, but the exaggerated wink he gives Shane tells him that this idea likely wouldn’t be admissible in a court of law. “The, uh, Transplants Scholarship, or something. The season’s halfway over, anyway, so the fees can be reduced, and he can participate in some sort of special try-out for eligibility for the scholarship, which might just conveniently cover the rest of the costs...”

“Really?” Shane says, sitting up a little straighter. “You can do that?”

“We’ll think of a better name for it first,” Yuna says, side-eyeing her husband.

“Thank you,” Shane gushes, grinning so hard it squeezes his eyes shut. “Thank you, thank you!”

“Easy now, kid, he’s still gotta meet the requirements of eligibility,” David says.

“David, you just made it up on the spot specifically for him,” Yuna says.

“Jeez,” David sighs. “Tough crowd.”

Shane is so excited about the prospect of Ilya joining the team that he almost can’t sleep that night. He’s not very good at lying, so hopefully Ilya will just take him at his word tomorrow when Shane tells him about the “scholarship” and he won’t ask too many questions.

He doesn’t see Ilya until lunch, but he doesn’t want to bring it up in front of the rest of the guys, in case Ilya doesn’t take it as well as Shane is hoping. He waits until the bell rings to send them back to their classrooms for the afternoon, and then presses close to Ilya’s side to walk with him out of the cafeteria.

“Hey, I meant to tell you something,” he says, desperately hoping to sound casual. Ilya hums, and Shane takes it as an invitation to keep going. “I was talking to my dad last night– oh, my dad is the head coach of the hockey team, did I tell you that before? Anyway, I was talking to him about–”

“Shane,” Ilya says, touching his arm gently. “Slow.”

“Oh, sorry,” Shane says, just as quickly. “Sorry,” he says again, slower. Ilya smiles. “My dad, he coaches the hockey team,” Shane repeats, much slower this time, waiting until Ilya nods in understanding. “I told him about you, how good you are.”

Ilya looks down quickly, like he already knows where this is headed. Shane barrels on.

“He said there’s a scholarship, um, like, a contest?” Shane says, watching Ilya’s face. Ilya nods sharply. “And if you qualify, you can be on the team without having to pay.”

Ilya becomes very interested by the group of students to his right. Shane elbows him from his left.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yes,” Ilya says.

“Do you, uh, understand?”

“Yes,” Ilya says again. “Is free money.”

“Uh, sorta, I guess,” Shane shrugs. “Not really. You just get to play for free.”

Ilya nods, lips twitching. Shane can’t tell if he wants to smile or shout.

“Think about it,” Shane says, a hair short of pleading. “Will you?”

Ilya shrugs. “What is... to *qualify*?”

“To win it,” Shane says. “It’s skill-based, I think. Um, if you’re good at hockey, you win,” he says. “So. You’re probably over-qualified.”

Ilya loses the battle against his smile. Shane’s shoulders relax a little. “How?” Ilya asks.

“How do you apply for it?” Shane clarifies. “I don’t know, I’ll talk to my dad.”

Ilya nods again, still not looking at Shane, but it’s fine, Shane can deal with that. Ilya might join the team! “Okay,” Ilya says simply.

Shane spends most of the night up with his parents, constructing a reasonable, subtle, but challenging list of skill-based requirements which Ilya will have to complete in order to prove his worthiness to waive his fees to play on the team. Even if there was a possibility that Ilya could not qualify for the scholarship, Shane still thinks he’d totally nail it.

Chapter 2

February, 2003 – Ottawa, Ontario

David Hollander is a simple man. He loves his wife, his son, his job, hockey, tennis, hearty dinners, early morning sunrises at the lake. He likes justice, balance, fairness. He likes to be helpful, to make people happy, to make good things happen. He likes the smile on his son's face where he's sitting up in the bleachers, watching his new friend Ilya Rozanov complete a series of borderline ridiculous skill-based challenges.

There's nothing this kid can't do. It's almost annoying. David has gone way off script, and Ilya seems to know it; he hits every curveball out of the park with a smirk on his face, so impressively that David is starting to confuse his sports metaphors. David would like him to screw up just one time, just one little thing, so that David can have a reason to at least pretend to consider declining Ilya's admission to the team. He does not get such grace from the boy.

"Dad," Shane hisses from behind the boards. David turns to look at him. "Enough, already. Just tell him he's in."

"I don't know," David sighs, shaking his head. "The scholarship board will need to review the footage, we probably should get the school administration involved, I'm just not sure that —"

"Dad," Shane says, unimpressed.

"Alright, kid," David calls, whistling lowly when Ilya stops on a dime, making a little snow with his skates as he pivots to face David and Shane. "You're in."

Ilya stays frozen on center ice, beaming under his helmet. "Yes?"

"Yes," David says, loud and clear, like he's talking to a space alien. "You're on the team. Practice tomorrow, four o'clock sharp. Don't be late." He makes his way out to center ice to shake Ilya's hand, and Ilya's eyes flick to Shane in the bleachers, amused.

"Thank you," Ilya says. "Thank you, Mr. Hollander."

"Coach," David says sharply, but there's no heat in it, and there is a friendly smile. "Good job, kid."

Shane is out on the ice before David can even get out of the way, stealing the puck from in front of Ilya and racing away with it. Ilya's on his tail instantly, like a reflex, like it's something innate. He's a star in the making, David knows it. They both are.

It's another hour and some change before David can drag Shane off the ice to head back home. Shane chatters excitedly the entire drive, which admittedly isn't very long, but David

isn't sure he's ever heard Shane talk so much or so animatedly in his life. This Ilya kid is really bringing him out of his shell, which is amazing, considering David's only heard the kid say about eight different words so far.

Shane talks all through dinner, and all through clean-up after dinner, and all through the movie David and Yuna are trying to watch after dinner. He only stops when it's time for bed, but then he knocks on their bedroom door with just a few more parting thoughts. It's nearly midnight before they're able to get him to shut the hell up and get into his own bed.

"I've never seen him like this," Yuna says as she settles into bed beside David. "Where has this Ilya kid been all his life?"

"In Moscow, apparently," David says. "Yuna, Shane isn't lying. I thought Shane was the best player in the world for his age group, but Rozanov is going to be a tough competitor."

"Well, it's a good thing they're playing for the same team, then," Yuna snorts. "God help us all if they ever get drafted to separate teams when they make it to the big leagues."

When, not *if*. It's never been an *if*, not for Shane.

"I just hope it stays friendly," David says, melting into his pillow, half asleep already. "Two kids this talented, this could turn into a pretty heated rivalry, you know?"

It doesn't take long to all go completely, horribly wrong.

Well, okay, that's dramatic. It does get concerning pretty fast, though.

It's the first team huddle of Ilya's first practice with the team. The other kids have been eyeing him warily all day; David knows from Shane's incessant rambling that Ilya has a reputation at school for being generally strange and off putting, but it really just boils down to the ignorance and learned xenophobia of a group of twelve year old, mostly white, Canadian boys. Shane has been quietly protective of Ilya since they got on the ice, sticking by his side and whispering to him whenever he doesn't seem to understand what's being said.

"We're going to start with some 1v1 drills," David says. "Everyone have a partner?" There's some shuffling as the boys separate themselves into groups of two. Shane, of course, hooks his stick around Ilya's. "Good. Alright, Shane, Rozanov, come on. I want you two to model this exercise for everyone."

It's a simple passing exercise; Ilya doesn't seem to understand when David explains it to them, but once Shane takes the lead with the drill, he catches on quickly. The prejudiced snickering from the team goes silent once they see Ilya's masterful performance with the drill. *Good*, David thinks.

“Perfect,” David says, clapping a hand on both Shane and Ilya’s shoulders in appreciation. The movement startles the hell out of Ilya; he flinches like David is going to hit him, and he loses his balance on his skates, going down hard on his behind. The team starts a raucous laughter, but before David can raise his voice to tell them to pipe down, Shane slams his stick against the ice loudly.

“Shut up!” he yells, silencing the rest of the boys. David can’t recall ever hearing Shane yell before, and he’s sure none of the other boys have, either. “He is part of this team, just like the rest of you,” Shane bites. *And he’s better than all of you combined*, David thinks; Shane is probably thinking it, too, but he’s a good enough captain to not say it.

David helps Ilya up, trying to meet his eye, but Ilya looks completely mortified under his helmet, keeping his gaze firmly down. David keeps his hands to himself after that, backing away from the boys to give them room to continue their drill.

“Let’s keep it sportsmanlike, gentlemen,” David says, waving his hands to dismiss them. “C’m on, let’s get going.”

Practice goes on without incident. The other boys give Ilya, and by proxy, Shane, a wide berth, only interacting with either of them when strictly necessary. It’s not often necessary; Shane and Ilya do the work of an entire team just between the two of them. David could dismiss every single other kid here and still probably win nationals this season. It’s exciting, refreshing, and most of the other boys seem to come around, by the final few minutes of practice, shooting Ilya thumbs up and cheering for him when he demonstrates his phenomenal skills.

It’s only five minutes before the end of practice when the nail in the coffin is driven home. David has split the team in half to simulate real gameplay, and to keep things fair, has given Shane a pinny and left Ilya without. They’re neck and neck, racing toward Shane’s team’s goalie, when one of Shane’s teammates comes out of nowhere and checks Ilya *hard* into the boards. It happens so fast, David actually doesn’t see it happen because he blinks, but Shane’s teammate is on the ground, and Shane is shaking his hand out, looking back at David with wide eyes.

“Jesus Christ,” David mutters, rushing over. “Shane Hollander, penalty box, *now*.”

Shane looks like he’s going to cry, but he doesn’t follow David’s orders. He turns to check on Ilya, instead, who has already picked himself up and dusted himself off, unaffected.

“Shane, *now*,” David says firmly.

Shane puts his head down and skates off, for the first time in his entire life, to the penalty box.

“Rozanov, alright?” David asks. Ilya nods, skating away like David’s world isn’t rocking on its axis. “Peterson, alright?”

“No!” Tommy Peterson cries, but he is. He’s got a fat lip where Shane’s fist collided with it, *oh, God*, but he’ll be fine by morning. David helps him up, and then waves to the rest of the

team.

“Practice over,” he calls, “good work today, boys.” The team begins shuffling their way off the ice and into the locker room, and David sighs as he makes his way over to the boards to collect an injury report form. Christ, he’s never had to fill one of these out before, and the first time he’s doing it is because of *Shane*?

Shane doesn’t move from the penalty box, head down, probably crying, if David knows him. Apparently David doesn’t know him very well, because when he finally gets to the penalty box, Shane is just scowling at his skates.

“I’m not sorry,” Shane says, not even lifting his head when David sits down beside him.

“No?” David says.

Shane shakes his head, and then hiccups a little. David says nothing, just waiting. Shane looks up at him eventually with tears in his eyes. *Yup, there he is.* “Is he okay?” Shane asks, voice shaking.

“Fat lip, you got him pretty good,” David shrugs. “He’ll live.”

Shane nods and looks down again. “I just— they’re so mean to him.”

“He’s a tough kid,” David says. Probably tougher than any of them realize.

“I just got so mad,” Shane says. “Peterson picks on him all the time, at school. Ilya doesn’t even realize, because Peterson either doesn’t do it to his face, or he talks too fast, or he uses big words, but I just wanted to— I wanted to hurt him,” Shane says, half ashamed, and half still feeling the pull toward violence.

“I’m not going to tell you that you’re wrong for sticking up for your friend,” David says thoughtfully. “And I know that violence is a part of this game, but you’re *twelve*, Shane, you can’t be laying kids out like that.”

“I know,” Shane says miserably.

David lets him sit with that for a moment, and then nudges him with his shoulder. “I’m proud of you,” he says softly. “Not for the punch, that wasn’t cool, but for, you know, being a good kid,” he says. “Strong morals, just like your dad.”

Shane laughs a little under his breath. “Did you ever punch anyone at McGill?”

“No,” David lies.

“Okay,” Shane says, and David can almost hear him roll his eyes.

“Go shower,” David says, standing up from the bench and ruffling Shane’s sweaty hair. “Your mother will be home late tonight, so it’s just us for dinner. Salmon and rice?”

“Sure,” Shane says, and then he’s gone, skating across the ice like a bullet and exiting through the opposite side, where the locker room door is.

David does a few laps around the ice to collect the equipment left behind, and by the time he’s done, Shane is waiting by the door, bag slung over his shoulder. He’s chatting with Ilya, who still appears entirely unaffected by the afternoon’s events.

“Boys,” David greets them, once he’s changed out of his skates and crossed the bleachers to meet them by the door. “Ilya, do you need a ride home?”

“Ah, no thank you,” Ilya says. “Is close.”

“Still, you can jump in our car,” David offers.

“No,” Ilya says, already backing out the door. “Thank you, for practice. Was good. Tomorrow,” he says, nodding at Shane, and then he’s gone.

As he and Shane buckle themselves into the Volvo, David watches Ilya cross the street, look behind him, and then take off at a dead sprint.

Yuna always works late at least one night a week; her work ethic is quite literally unmatched, probably where Shane gets it from. David has always been a hard worker, but Yuna makes him look like a total loser by comparison.

Shane is already in bed by the time Yuna gets home. David is in bed, too, propped up against the pillows with his reading glasses on and a novel in his lap. David puts his finger in between the pages as he closes his book to watch Yuna come whirling into the room, looking as effortlessly perfect as she did thirteen hours ago when she left the house.

“Hi, honey,” Yuna says, taking her hair down and toeing off her ballet flats. “How was practice today? Is Rozanov living up to the hype?”

Right into it, then. David reopens his book to replace his finger with the bookmark Shane made for him for Fathers’ Day in preschool, and then puts the book down on the nightstand.

“Uh oh,” Yuna says.

“He’s incredible,” David says. “Honestly. Shane wasn’t wrong. He’s one of the best players I’ve ever seen.”

“As good as Shane?” Yuna asks doubtfully.

“Yes,” David says immediately. “Different style, for sure, but every bit as good. He’s exactly what Shane needed, someone to actually challenge him. Watching the two of them play is just

amazing.”

“Well, that sounds promising,” Yuna says.

“Yes,” David says. He takes a deep breath before he continues. “I don’t think Ilya is safe at home.”

Yuna Hollander is not often stunned into silence. She blinks at him once, and then twice.

“Oh,” she says softly, sitting down on the edge of the bed. “Okay. Why?”

“I went to pat him on the back, and he jumped out of his skin,” David says. “He thought I was going to hit him, Yuna. The poor kid fell over on the ice because I touched his shoulder.”

“That could mean a lot of things,” Yuna says. “It could also mean nothing.”

“Yeah,” David says. “I don’t know, it just— it felt...” he trails off, shaking his head. “He adamantly refused when I offered to drive him home, and then he quite literally took off running.”

“I’ll talk to Shane about it. I’ll be subtle,” Yuna says. “Maybe he’s said something to him about it.”

Shane. “Okay, I need you to sit down for this one,” David says gravely.

Yuna looks down at her lap, and then back up at David. “I am, honey.”

“Oh, right,” David says, dragging one hand down his face. “Shane punched someone at practice today.”

Yuna’s jaw damn near hits the floor. “Shane *Hollander*?” she hisses.

“Yes, him,” David says. “It happened so fast. Peterson pushed Rozanov into the boards, and the next thing I knew, Shane had laid Peterson out.”

“Oh my *God*,” Yuna gasps. “What did you do? Is Peterson okay? And Ilya? Is *Shane* okay? Did you punish him? What—“

“I talked to him,” David says, resting a hand over Yuna’s knee to settle her. “He was pretty upset. I guess the other kids have been kinda cruel to Ilya at school, especially Peterson. I told him I was proud of him for sticking up for his friend, but that what he did was totally unacceptable.”

“He *punched* him?” Yuna says, like she still just can’t believe it. She puts a hand over her mouth and turns away slightly, and it takes David a harrowing moment to realize that she’s *laughing*.

“Are you laughing?” David scoffs, but he’s laughing now, too, as Yuna begins to cackle into her hand.

“Oh, I kinda wish I could’ve seen it,” Yuna says. “I can’t even picture it.”

“It was uncanny, I’ll tell you that much,” David laughs, while Yuna wipes tears from her eyes. The laughter subsides before long, and a hush takes over. “I’m worried Rozanov isn’t a very good influence on Shane,” David says eventually. “I mean, Yuna, Shane has never—“

“I know, I know,” Yuna says, sober. “I’ll talk to Shane. Maybe we’ll have the Rozanov family over for dinner this week,” she says, giving David a pointed look.

That’s that, then. David’s job is finished, handed over to the boss. He still feels uneasy about the whole thing when Yuna eventually settles into bed next to him, flicking the lights off on her way. Ilya Rozanov is a wildcard, completely unlike anyone David has ever met, but he’s become very important to Shane in a very small amount of time, and David is not going to let his son end up down whatever dark path Rozanov has recently emerged from.

Chapter 3

The hotel is dark when Ilya gets back from practice. The lights that usually flood the back door with stark white light are out, but Ilya is able to find his way through the door. The kitchen is dark and quiet, too, which is unusual; he feels his way down the stairs, and the laundry room feels absolutely cavernous with only the light from the machines to guide his path. He feels his way along the wall to his and Irina's room, his heart pumping with inexplicable anxiety.

In blinding contrast to the darkness of the rest of the hotel, the usually dimly lit, cozy room Ilya shares with his mother is lit like an airport runway when he gets through the door. He squints against the light, trying to block it with his hands, dropping his hockey equipment next to the door and scanning the room for his mother.

"*Mama?*" he calls softly. From here, he can only see her hand, draped over the edge of the sofa, pale and still in the bright light.

He fumbles for the light switch on the wall, turning off the blinding overhead lighting and switching on the lamp Irina placed on the ledge next to the kitchenette instead. As his eyes adjust to the light, he creeps over to the sofa with the intention of covering her with a blanket while she sleeps. When he gets closer, though, he finds her eyes wide open, staring blankly at the ceiling.

He freezes. "*Mama?*" he says again. Irina does not react. She does not move at all, does not even blink. Does not breathe. She is not breathing.

"*Mama,*" he says, more frantically this time, reaching for her dangling hand. It is cold to the touch. "*Mama!*"

She is dead. Ilya knows this, but accepting it is a different beast.

He drops to his knees, pressing her cold, dead hand to his face and screaming. He screams until his throat hurts, until his lungs threaten to give out, and then cries with all the strength he has left.

In his horror and despair, he does not hear the footsteps behind him until it is too late. He scrambles to his feet, but he is already being lifted off the ground by the back of his hair; he yelps in pain and struggles against the grasp, but he is not strong enough to get free.

"*Stupid boy,*" his father's voice growls in his ear. "*You thought you could run and hide? You are just as weak and useless as she was.*"

"*No!*" Ilya shrieks, and Grigory drops him back onto his knees. He receives a swift kick to his side, and it knocks the wind out of him, sending him choking and gasping in a heap on the floor.

"Useless," his father spits. "Stupid, awful, weak little boy. You will never be anything, you are the worst mistake I ever made."

"Go away!" Ilya cries, curling in on himself. "I hate you! What have you done?"

"Ilyusha," his father says, but that— that is not right. His father never called him that. "Ilyusha," he says again, singing it this time, his voice soft, almost like— almost like...

Ilya's eyes snap open, and he scrambles away from the hands on his body, tangling himself in the sheets of the bed and fighting like hell to sit up. He bites back another scream, making it all the way to the opposite edge of the bed and rocketing to his feet.

His mother is sitting by his pillow, hand still outstretched, her eyes soft and worried. She is breathing. She is alive.

What?

"You are safe," Irina hums, standing slowly and reaching for him hesitantly, like he is a wounded animal. "You are here, with me, solnyshko. It was a dream, my little darling."

Ilya cannot breathe. His chest is so tight, and his entire body is trembling. Irina rounds the bed, and Ilya watches her with wide eyes, choking on his own tongue and curling in on himself as she approaches.

"Okay, moy lyubimyy," Irina whispers, taking Ilya in her arms slowly and gently. Ilya does not fight her, pressing his face into her neck and trying to figure out how to breathe. "You are okay, Ilyusha, breathe, darling, just breathe."

It comes back to him all at once, the ability to breathe in and use his limbs at his whim. He gasps and throws his arms around his mother, sobbing into her collarbone. *"Mama,"* he cries, and she hugs him a little tighter.

"There you are, my sweet boy," Irina sings. "Easy, my love, easy."

"You were— Papa—"

"Only a dream, little darling," Irina assures him. "You are safe in our room, sunshine boy, in Ottawa. Papa is in Russia, he cannot hurt you."

"He was here," Ilya whimpers, even as the panic begins to subside. "He was— and you were —"

"I am perfectly alright, my baby," Irina says, pressing a kiss to Ilya's damp forehead. He is drenched in sweat, but he is cold, now, pressing closer to Irina's warmth. "You are alright, and we are safe. It is nearly morning, moy lyubimyy. You will be going to school soon, to see Shane."

Ottawa. School, Shane. *Shane.* Ilya is safe.

"Mama," he breathes, pulling away from her just to see her face once more, to make sure she is real.

"Yes, my sweet little love," she grins at him, stroking a hand over his cheek. She is so warm, so alive. *"Back to bed, my darling, come now."*

Ilya crawls back into bed like a toddler, reaching for his Mama and burrowing gratefully into her embrace when she climbs into bed with him. She strokes his hair, down his back, all the way back up his spine and over his scalp and to the tip of his nose, and then back. Ilya is asleep again in minutes.

When he wakes again, he is alone. Irina is in the shower; Ilya can hear it running, can hear her humming to herself through the wall. He sits up in bed and glances over at the clock on the bedside table; two minutes until his alarm for school will go off. He drops back to his pillow to stare at the ceiling for as long as he has left, his midnight panic coming back to him in flashes.

He has been having nightmares about his own father since he was very small, it is not new, and it is not unusual. It is not the first time he has had that particular dream since arriving in Canada, but it is the most intense that it has been so far. It always entails some version of Ilya coming back to the hotel to find his father in the room, berating Irina, hurting her, or, as of last night, killing her.

The alarm clock chirps, and Ilya smacks it silent as he rolls out of bed. He did not get a chance to do his laundry after hockey practice last night, so he puts on the same clothes from yesterday and starts gathering his school books in his backpack. Irina emerges from the bathroom in her housekeeper's uniform, lighting up at the sight of him.

"Good morning, solnyshko," she says cheerfully, rounding the bed to plant a kiss to Ilya's cheek. *"How are you feeling, my little love?"*

"Good, Mama," Ilya says. It is not a lie; his nightmares rarely haunt him into the following morning anymore.

"Good, baby," Irina says. *"You are ready for school?"*

"Yes, Mama," Ilya says. *"I think Shane and I will play after school today."*

"Okay, Ilyusha," Irina says. *"No practice today with the team?"*

Ilya shakes his head. *"Not until tomorrow morning."* And thank goodness for that. Ilya has embarrassed himself enough for the week in front of his new teammates.

"Tomorrow morning," Irina says, as if committing it to memory. *"Okay, Ilyusha. You will eat before school?"* she asks, following him to the bathroom and watching him brush his teeth.

"I will eat at school," Ilya says. *"I will bring home what I can."*

"You are a good boy, Ilyusha," Irina says, ruffling his hair. *"The very best. I simply cannot remember how I lived before you, my darling."*

Ilya smiles at her around his toothbrush, spitting into the sink and then kissing Irina's cheek. She yelps and laughs, wiping the toothpaste from her skin, and Ilya loves her so much his heart could burst with it.

"Goodbye, Mama," he says, giving her a more proper kiss to her other cheek once his mouth is clean.

"Goodbye, *solnyshko*," Irina hums, handing him his backpack and sending him on his way.

The walk to school is much longer than the walk to the rink, but Ilya does not mind it. There is less urgency to be quick when it is light out; he wonders if that instinct to run through the darkness will ever leave him, or if it is as ingrained in him as his Russian blood.

He gets to school well before the first bell each day, because the cafeteria serves free breakfast for low income students until ten minutes before class starts for the day. He scans the cafeteria as he walks in, searching for a head of soft black hair and a pair of warm brown eyes. Shane recently caught on to Ilya's schedule and started showing up early, too, just to spend some extra time with Ilya, since he does not actually qualify for the program. Their breakfast dates have turned into sort of an impromptu, unofficial English lesson at the start of each day, before Ilya heads off to his dreadfully boring ESL classes.

Shane is not here yet. He still has not arrived by the time Ilya has finished his tiny plastic cup of cereal and his clementine and his three mouthfuls of orange juice. Hardly a minute before the first bell, Shane comes rushing into the cafeteria, falling into the seat across from Ilya.

"Hi," Shane says, eyes wild. "I have to ask you something."

Probably this does not have to do with what happened at practice yesterday; he talked to Shane before they both left, thanked Shane for standing up for him, and Shane was very gracious when Ilya asked him not to do it again. Shane is much too sweet and kind to be punching people, especially not on behalf of a Russian bulldozer like Ilya.

"Okay?" Ilya quirks an eyebrow.

"Will you come to my house tonight?" Shane says, much too fast. Ilya's English has gotten a lot better over the last few weeks, but he takes a moment to suck his teeth. "Sorry," Shane huffs. "Uh, will you come to my house? Tonight? For dinner?"

Alarm bells go off in Ilya's head. He is not sure why.

"Ah," he replies eloquently.

"My parents," Shane gestures to himself, wincing, "want to, uh, meet your parents."

Ah. There is the source of the alarm bells.

"Ah, sorry," Ilya says, mind racing with excuses. "I, um. Ah—"

"I know," Shane says, like he really does. "I know it's weird, and awkward, and abrupt— like, soon," he says. "But when you meet my mother you will understand why I really, *really* need

you to say yes.”

Ilya’s heart sinks. Shane is far too soft and kind to have a mean mother. He wonders what will happen to Shane if he is not able to get Ilya to come to dinner, and he suppresses a shudder at the thought of Shane being hurt for Ilya’s shortcomings.

“My mother,” Ilya frowns regretfully. “Works very long.”

“Right,” Shane deflates. “Uh, well, what time does she get off? We could have a late dinner.”

“Depends,” Ilya says. “Very late, sometimes. Not so late, other times.”

“What does she do?” Shane asks. “What is her job?”

Ilya weighs his options. “Maid,” he says, opting for truth.

“Oh, sweet,” Shane nods. Sweet? “Well, what about your dad?”

The color must drain from Ilya’s face, and Shane’s face somehow absorbs it. Ilya does not answer, becoming very interested in a flyer on the wall behind Shane.

“Well, maybe tomorrow night?” Shane suggests.

Shane is not going to let this go. Ilya supposes he should just get it over with.

“Tonight is better,” Ilya says. “Time is, uh,” he wobbles his hand in the air.

“We’ll play it by ear,” Shane says brightly. “Uh, like, come over whenever. Here,” he rummages in his backpack, pulling out a pen and a notebook and tearing free a piece of paper. He scribbles something down, and slides it across the table to Ilya. Ilya eyes it, amused. *Yuna Hollander*, it says, followed by a phone number, and an address. “Your mom can call my mom, if she needs to. And that’s our address, um, where we live, so you can just show up, I guess.”

“Okay,” Ilya says, folding the paper carefully and putting it in his pocket.

“Okay,” Shane says, seemingly satisfied. “Cool. Um, hockey today, after school?”

Ilya shakes his head, smiling and patting his pocket. “Have to, ah, get pretty.”

Shane blushes, laughing brightly. “*Ready*, you mean.”

“No, pretty,” Ilya winks, collecting his backpack as he stands up from the table.

“Where are you—” the bell cuts Shane off mid sentence. “Oh. Okay. Well, see you at lunch?”

“Lunch,” Ilya nods, and then Shane is gone, disappearing into the small crowd of students making their way out of the cafeteria to get to class on time.

Ilya spends the rest of the day fretting. His mother does not have a phone, he has no way to call and warn her of what he has signed them up for tonight. She also will not be able to call

and beg forgiveness for not being able to come to dinner if she works very late tonight. The best Ilya can do is rush home after school, set up camp in the laundry room of the hotel, and wait for his mother to come through with a laundry cart full of towels and sheets. It does not take as long as Ilya feared; he has almost finished his homework for the day when the service elevator slides open noisily and his tiny, exhausted mother steps out with a full cart.

"Ilyusha!" she says cheerfully, abandoning the cart to rush over and hug him. *"What a lovely surprise. No hockey, no Shane?"*

Ilya winces at her. *"We have been invited to dinner."*

"Oh!" Irina says automatically, and then her expression fades. *"Oh."*

"I am sorry, Mama," Ilya gushes, *"I tried to get out of it, but Shane says it is important, and he is so nice, Mama, it is so hard to say no to him—"*

"No, no, it is okay, Ilyusha," Irina assures him. *"Dinner might be— well, it will be nice to have real food,"* she says, already distracted, wiping her hands on her apron. *"I will have to— oh, what can I bring? Ilya, we have nothing!"*

Ilya wracks his brain. *"I will search in the lobby convenience store,"* he decides. *"Maybe, ah, some bread?"*

"I cannot— oh," Irina frets. *"Okay, Ilyusha, okay. There is money in the tin under the sink. Use whatever you have to."*

Ilya nods, making it three steps toward their room before he turns back to Irina. *"Mama?"*

Irina pulls her hand away from her mouth, where she was chewing her thumbnail, and raises an eyebrow at him.

"I love you," Ilya says softly.

Irina melts, a smile overtaking her worried features. *"I love you more than life, moy lyubimyy."*

Ilya finds a display of prepackaged salad kits in the sundry shop in the hotel lobby, and spends a while picking the one with the least amount of pink on the lettuce. There is a large bowl in their kitchenette which they can use to present the salad to the Hollanders when they arrive, and with any luck, the Hollanders will not think they are completely insane, or dangerously poor.

They are dangerously poor, though. Ilya uses more of his mother's savings than he feels comfortable using for the salad, but he knows his mother, knows that she would sooner not eat for a week than show up to someone's home empty handed. He brings his sad salad kit back down to the room to find Irina fretting once more, all of her clothing options laid out on the bed.

"They are going to think we are homeless," she says, resigned.

Ilya cocks his head. *"We are, Mama."*

"We are not!" Irina tuts. *"We are— ah, well, technically, yes,"* she says. *"We are without a home. We are simply between homes."*

"Of course," Ilya agrees, busying himself with the salad in the kitchenette while Irina mutters about having to wear a sweater with a hole in it to someone's dinner event; both of her sweaters have holes, but one of them only has one hole.

The sun has set by the time Ilya and Irina set off for the address Shane scribbled down this morning. Irina takes a map of Ottawa from the hotel lobby on their way out, and it takes a shamefully long time, but they manage to orient themselves and start walking in the right direction. It is a long, bitterly cold walk, but a taxi would be far too expensive and the bus would only take longer.

Irina is shaking by the time they arrive at the Hollander residence, whether from the cold or fear, Ilya is not sure. Ilya's own fingers are most likely frozen to the salad bowl he is holding, so Irina has to be the one to ring the bell.

The house is nice, not overly grand, but certainly nicer than any home Ilya has ever been invited into. Grigory Rozanov is far from a rich man; their home in Moscow was simple, run down but cozy, exceedingly homely. The Hollander residence is much nicer than their Moscow home, but not intimidatingly so, not so much that Ilya feels the need to run away.

Irina does not seem to share that sentiment. She is wide-eyed, nervous, digging her fingernails into the palms of her hands while they wait to be welcomed in. Ilya nudges her with his elbow, offering her a comforting smile when she flinches and looks at him.

"Oh, solnyshko," she breathes. *"What would I not do for you?"*

The door opens much too fast, and an overly excited Shane Hollander appears from within. "Hi!" he says, grinning at Ilya for a beat too long. "Come in, it's freezing."

Ilya steps aside to let his mother in first. She gives him a chastising look for his gentlemanly behavior, which is confusing, but manages to quickly paint on a smile as she steps inside past Shane.

"Mama, this is Shane Hollander," Ilya says, in Russian, and then, "Shane, my mother, Irina Rozanova," in English.

"It's so nice to meet you," Shane says, offering Irina a hand. Irina smiles confusedly, glancing at Ilya as she politely shakes Shane's hand.

Ilya translates quietly, and then turns to Shane. "She speaks no English," he explains.

"Oh," Shane says, looking between them quickly. "Well, that's— okay, you can translate."

Ilya smiles and nods, and turns to his mother. *"This is going to be a very long, painful evening,"* he says sweetly in Russian.

"I should disown you," Irina answers, just as sweetly, and pinches his cheek.

Shane looks awkward, but he smiles anyway. "Let me take your coats," he says, clumsily hanging up Ilya's and Irina's beat up parkas next to the door. "Um, the kitchen is through here," he says, pointing behind himself. "You can set that, uh, salad in there."

Ilya nods for Irina to follow after Shane, his grin splitting his face when Irina gestures to him that she is going to kill him.

"My mom is just freshening up, she got home a few minutes ago," Shane explains. "Irina, this is my dad, David Hollander."

Ilya translates quietly, while David turns away from where he's stooped over the stove.

"Hi! Oh, you didn't have to bring anything," he says cheerfully, shuffling over to take the salad from Ilya's aching fingers. "It's so nice to meet you, Mrs. Rozanov, we are just crazy about your son."

"She doesn't speak any English," Shane whispers to David, while Ilya translates for Irina.

"He is very worth going crazy for," Irina says in Russian.

"She says it is nice to meet you," Ilya tells David instead.

"Yuna, my wife, is just upstairs," David says, slow and loud, as if that is going to help Irina understand him. Ilya is already growing quite tired of translating. "She'll be down soon. Can I get you something to drink? Wine, seltzer? Oh, I think I have some vodka," he says, hurrying over to the refrigerator.

"Is he cooking dinner?" Irina asks quietly. *"Where is his wife?"*

"Upstairs, Mama, have we not covered this?" Ilya quips.

"Where are we?" Irina frets.

"I don't know if it's any good," David says, flashing a bottle of vodka he has procured from the freezer.

Irina shakes her head quickly, offering David a polite smile and then looking at Ilya. *"Ask if I can help him cook."*

"Mama, I do not think—"

"Ilya," Irina warns quietly.

"My mother is, ah," Ilya looks at Shane helplessly. "Can she, ah, do?" He gestures to the stove.

"Oh, no, no, don't worry," David says jovially. "I've got it all under control. It's just beef stroganoff. I found a recipe online for Pelmeni, but I didn't want to scare you away already,"

he laughs.

Ilya smiles, and turns to Irina. *"We should run away."*

"Lead the way," Irina mutters, still smiling politely at David.

Yuna makes her entrance then, entering the kitchen with an air of authority that puts the entire awkward, uncomfortable energy of the evening so far in a drawer. She offers both Ilya and Irina a confident smile, and Ilya bristles.

He has not met Shane's mother before, but from what Shane said about her this morning, he understands her to be a cruel, controlling woman. She looks completely harmless, however, very similar in size and stature to Irina, small and petite but lean and strong.

"Hi, I'm Yuna," she says kindly, pulling Irina into her arms for a hug. Irina goes very stiffly, but manages to get her arms around Yuna briefly before Yuna pulls away. "Ilya, I have heard *so much about you,*" Yuna says, pulling Ilya in for a hug, as well. Ilya widens his eyes sideways at Irina.

Ilya smiles tightly when Yuna pulls back, nodding once. "It is nice to meet you," he says, and gestures to Irina. "My mother, Irina Rozanova. We brought salad."

"Oh! So you did," Yuna says, peering into the bowl David placed down on the counter.

Shane pulls Ilya aside while Yuna begins to pester David about dinner. "I'm sorry about this," Shane whispers, wincing. "I know it's, like, super uncomfortable."

"I understand," Ilya says, glancing sideways at Yuna. "Is okay."

Shane follows Ilya's gaze, frowning. "Um, here, let's go to the living room, give your mom a little room to breathe," Shane offers.

Ilya nods, but when he turns to get Irina's attention, he finds her making her way to the stove, peering over David's shoulder, the one Yuna is not already peering over.

"You should stir more, or the bottom will burn," Irina says quietly, gaining both Yuna and David's attention, though they obviously do not understand her. She mimes stirring with her hands, nodding when David takes the cue and begins stirring.

"Oh," Shane says, shrugging at Ilya. "Or she can just make herself at home."

Irina glances over her shoulder at Ilya, flashing him a smile. *"You are going to be very sweet and polite and tell these people that this is very tasty, but solnyshko, I have not a clue what I am looking at here."*

Ilya laughs, sudden and bright, gaining the attention of everyone in the room. He flushes, ducking his head a little. "She says, ah, she is impressed," he lies, but he cannot wipe the smile off his face when Irina bobbles her head a little and turns back to the stove.

The evening proceeds in a similar fashion; Ilya and Irina make their own fun, and Yuna and David are very cordial and generous hosts, and Shane just keeps looking around like he has never been happier. Yuna pours Irina a glass of wine, mostly because Ilya does not have the language to tell her that his mother does not drink alcohol, and Irina takes exactly three very polite sips over the course of the evening, deciding a new favor that Ilya owes her with every sip.

“So, is it just the two of you?” Yuna asks, toward the end of the meal. Irina had been exaggerating, before; David’s cooking is actually quite tasty, and Ilya is so grateful for a hearty, home cooked meal, even if the salad they brought is completely disgusting.

“Yes,” Ilya says, not bothering to translate for Irina.

“You’re an only child, too, Ilya?” Yuna asks. “No brothers or sisters?”

Ilya considers lying, but Shane is listening very intently, and, inexplicably, Ilya does not want to lie to him. “I have brother,” Ilya says quietly.

“And where is he?” Yuna presses.

“Russia,” Ilya says, glancing at Shane.

“Oh, and, is your father still there, as well?” Yuna asks.

“Mom,” Shane says lightly.

“Yes,” Ilya nods.

Irina bumps her knee against Ilya’s under the table, and Ilya offers her a tight smile and a slight nod.

“What brought you two to Ottawa?” Yuna asks. She is doing a very good job of acting casual, but Ilya does not trust her, even if she has proven over the course of the evening to be much more pleasant and gentle than Ilya had assumed.

Ilya meets Shane’s eyes again, and Shane takes the cue. “Dad, dinner is really good,” he says loudly.

“Thanks, son,” David says, surprised.

“Very good,” Ilya agrees.

“It’s great,” Yuna says quickly. “Ilya?”

“Ah,” Ilya flounders a little, shaking his head.

“*What?*” Irina asks. “*Ilyusha?*”

Ilya considers lying to her but, like with Shane, he cannot bear it. “*She wants to know why we left Russia,*” he tells her under his breath.

“For a new life,” Irina says. “You do not have to tell her any details, Ilyusha, but be honest. They are good people.”

“I’m sorry, is this a sensitive topic?” Yuna says.

“You don’t have to say,” Shane clarifies, upon Ilya’s helpless glance in his direction. “If it’s, like, private.”

“Say something, Ilyusha, they are going to think we are criminals,” Irina mutters.

“We, ah,” Ilya glances around the table nervously. All eyes are on him. “It was—”

“Ilya,” Irina says, eyes wide.

“Ilya,” Shane says, “it’s okay.”

“I am sorry,” Ilya says, pushing his chair back from the table and fleeing. He does not know where he is going, he does not know the layout of the Hollander residence at all, but he finds a bathroom just past the kitchen, and locks himself inside.

For the first time since they left Russia, Ilya feels wildly out of place. Not just in a normal, *this is all new to me* kind of way, but in a deep, intrinsic way, like his very skin was not made to handle this kind of atmosphere. He grips the sink and determinedly does not look at himself in the mirror, staring at the drain cover and forcing himself to breathe through the panic.

There is a knock on the door almost immediately. Ilya’s face screws up with the effort it takes not to cry.

“Ilya?” Shane’s voice calls through the door. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” Ilya calls weakly. His first lie to Shane Hollander.

“I’m really sorry, that was too much,” Shane says. “Mom feels awful. I told her English is still hard for you, but—”

Ilya wrenches the door open, startling Shane back an inch or two. “Can you get my mother?” he says, barely above a whisper.

Shane nods quickly and then vanishes, apparently sprinting back to the dining room. Ilya leaves the door only slightly ajar, leaning back against the sink and putting his face in his hands.

“Moy lyubimyy,” Irina says, slipping into the bathroom and closing the door after herself. *“Little one, what happened?”*

“I do not know,” Ilya says, voice thick with unshed tears. *“They were all looking at me, and I do not have the vocabulary in English, and even if I did, what can I say? What can I tell them?”* he says. His hands are shaking. Irina takes hold of them, pressing kisses to both of his palms. *“They are going to think I am weak, like a scared little baby, like Papa—”*

“You stop that right now, Ilya,” Irina says sharply. “Those wonderful people are never going to think so lowly of you. Your father is a monster, Ilyusha, plain and simple. I am sorry I never made sure you knew that. Everything he ever said to you, about you, was wrong. You are not weak, you are brave, and you can do scary things. Right now, those people are only thinking that they have severely offended you, but they have welcomed you into their home, into their lives, into their son’s life, given you a chance to play on the hockey team– they want to know you, Ilyusha, and they deserve to.”

Ilya’s eyes flutter closed while Irina speaks. He wants to cry and sink into the floor and cease to exist, but she is right. Irina Rozanova is never wrong. Well, almost never.

“Okay,” Ilya whispers. “I am sorry, Mama. I have tarnished this night.”

“You have done no such thing, solnyshko,” Irina says. “Dry your eyes, little one. That little boy out there is very fond of you, and you had best not worry him too much, or I fear his sweet little heart may burst.”

Ilya manages a smile at that, and he pries his eyes open again. *“Okay,”* he says, breathing in deep and letting it out slowly. *“Okay, Mama. I am okay.”*

“You are perfect,” Irina says, pressing a kiss to his cheek. *“What are you going to say when you return?”*

“I am going to apologize,” Ilya says. *“I will tell them English is very difficult for me. I will tell them we left Russia for a new start, and that Papa and Alexei chose to stay out of noble loyalty to their homeland.”*

“Good,” Irina says, dusting off Ilya’s tattered sweater and fixing his curls just a bit. *“I am so proud of you, Ilyusha.”*

“Thank you, Mama,” Ilya says.

Ilya leads the way back to the dining room, where all three Hollanders are in the midst of a very serious looking huddle. Yuna looks devastated when Ilya enters the room, standing quickly.

“Ilya,” she says, shaking her head. *“I am so sorry–”*

“No, I am sorry,” Ilya says politely. *“English is– new,”* he says with a forced chuckle. *“I get, ah,”* he waves his hands about his head, looking at Shane.

“Overwhelmed,” Shane says. *“Too much to think about.”*

“Over...” Ilya tries.

“Overwhelmed,” Shane says slowly.

“Overwhelmed,” Ilya repeats. *“Overwhelmed. I am sorry, for, ah, overwhelmed.”*

“Don’t be,” Yuna says, rounding the table to give Ilya his second hug of the evening. “Oh, sweetheart. I can be a bit much,” Yuna says. “Very overwhelming. I’m sorry.”

Everyone settles back into their seats, and Ilya glances at Irina. She nods her encouragement.

“We left Russia for new start,” Ilya says. Yuna makes to wave him off, but Shane gently slaps her hand out of the air. “Was, ah, overwhelming,” Ilya says pointedly, cracking a smile. “Papa and Alexei, ah,” he looks to Shane again.

“Stayed behind?” Shane offers.

“Stayed behind,” Ilya says slowly. “Very, ah, very happy there.”

“Oh, well, okay,” Yuna says, looking around the table. “Good, that’s nice. Do you keep in touch with them?”

“Do you still talk to them?” Shane assists.

“No,” Ilya says simply. Irina said he didn’t have to give details, and he does not intend to.

“Right,” Yuna nods, sharing a prolonged look with David. “Do you like it here, in Ottawa?”

“Very much,” Ilya nods quickly. “Is very good. Nice people,” he smiles, nodding toward David.

“I’ll tell you, Irina, I am very impressed with Ilya’s hockey skills,” David says. Ilya appreciates the way he addresses Irina directly when speaking, even if she just has to turn helplessly to Ilya immediately after. Ilya knows how Shane must feel spending time with him.

Ilya translates, and Irina melts a little. “*You are very impressive, my perfect boy,*” she says, stroking a thumb over his cheek.

Ilya blushes, ducking his head. “She agrees,” Ilya says in David’s general direction.

“How long have you been playing, Ilya?” David asks.

Ilya looks at Irina, and asks for a more accurate answer than he could give. Irina laughs and rolls her eyes as she answers.

“She says I skate before I run,” Ilya says. “Crawl, walk, skate, run.”

“It shows,” David says, and then he stands, beginning to gather the dishes.

Irina jumps to her feet so quickly she startles all three Hollanders. She gestures to herself, quickly picking up as many dishes as she can manage, like someone is going to take them from her.

“Oh, you don’t have to,” David tries.

“Mama,” Ilya says, voice low. *“Sit.”*

“Nonsense,” Irina says, smiling cheerfully at Yuna and Shane while she takes their dishes and hurries off to the kitchen, David trailing after her.

Shane, who has been quiet most of the evening except to offer Ilya every much needed lifeline he could ask for, sighs and looks at his mother. “Well,” he says, gesturing to Ilya.

Yuna nods, glancing over Ilya’s shoulder to make sure Irina is busy in the kitchen before she locks eyes with Ilya. Ilya’s heart sinks to his toes.

“Ilya,” Yuna starts, folding her hands on the table in front of herself.

“I’m sorry,” Shane butts in, and he really looks it, when Ilya looks at him. “I couldn’t convince her not to do this.”

“Ilya,” Yuna says again, dragging his attention back. “There is no easy way to put this, so I’m just going to ask outright: are you safe?”

Ilya looks back and forth between Yuna and Shane several times; it is remarkable how many facial features they share, no wonder Shane is such a pretty boy. “Sorry?” he asks.

“Are you safe, at home?” Yuna asks again. “Does someone... hurt you? Ever?”

Ilya’s blood runs cold. He glances over his shoulder to make sure his mother is not listening, despite the fact that Yuna already checked, despite the fact that Irina would not understand her even if she was listening. “No,” he says firmly.

“You can tell me,” Yuna almost whispers. “Really.”

“No,” Ilya says again, quicker this time. “No, not—” he stops himself, shaking his head, but Yuna and Shane both look so concerned, so ready to whisk him away and save him, if he needs. He does not need. His mother already took care of it. “Not anymore,” he finishes, telling it to the table between them.

Yuna nods, looking at Shane. Ilya cannot bring himself to look at either of them, but in his periphery, Shane looks like he might be upset.

“You’re okay?” Shane asks.

“Yes,” Ilya says, finally meeting his eyes.

Someday, when Ilya has all the necessary language, he will sit Shane down and tell him everything. Maybe. Well, probably not. Probably this look on his face will go away by then, and Ilya will not be so tempted to reveal all of his secrets to him. Probably.

“Okay,” Shane says, and that is that, the smile is back on Shane’s face. “Um, do you wanna see my room?”

Irina and David are having a ball together in the kitchen, bickering playfully across the language barrier between them as if it is not there at all. Yuna busies herself with packaging up the leftovers from dinner, leaving Ilya and Shane to their own devices.

“Okay,” Ilya says.

Shane’s bedroom is, for all intents and purposes, a shrine to the Ottawa Centaurs. Ilya’s eyes widen as he takes it all in, the sea of red and white before him.

“You like Centaurs very much?” Ilya guesses.

“Yeah, a little,” Shane laughs, plopping down on the end of his bed. “I’m gonna play for them someday.”

“Ah,” Ilya says, eyebrows twitching up teasingly.

“I am!” Shane says, playfully indignant. “My mom is a Montreal fan, so I’d be happy there, too, but Ottawa is my top choice.”

“Yes,” Ilya says, gesturing to the wall next to Shane’s bed, which is constructed entirely of Centaurs posters. “I see.”

“What about you?” Shane asks. “Do you want to play professionally?”

“Pro-sheffon-ly” Ilya tries, shaking his head at himself. “Prosh- professionally.”

“Like, the NHL,” Shane says.

“Yes, I know,” Ilya winks at him. “I do not know, probably. I would like,” he shrugs.

“Oh, you’d like to,” Shane scoffs. “Cocky.”

“Sounds rude,” Ilya says.

“I’m just kidding,” Shane says. “You’re an incredible player, you could definitely go pro someday.”

“Ah, sure,” Ilya says, sitting down beside Shane on the bed. “Maybe I will play for Centaurs, too.”

“That would be *so* fun,” Shane says, grinning at him, totally unguarded. Ilya envies him in ways he cannot articulate, even in Russian. “Do you think we’ll still be friends, when we’re in the NHL?”

“We are friends now?” Ilya asks playfully.

“Fuck off,” Shane laughs, but he says the cuss word very, very quietly. “You’re stuck with me.”

“Yes,” Ilya says, watching Shane’s face closely. “I think so. I hope.”

“Cool,” Shane says, and then, after a beat, “me too.”

They are called back downstairs before long, and Irina is waiting by the door with the freshly washed salad bowl and two tupperware containers of leftovers, her coat and shoes already on. Ilya does not hesitate to follow suit, pulling on his sneakers and coat and relieving Irina of the things in her arms.

“*Spasibo*,” Irina tells Yuna and David, and then gives Shane a delicate squeeze. “*Spasibo, lapochka*,” she says, cupping his cheek with her hand for just a moment. Shane goes scarlet, grinning nervously.

“Thank you,” Ilya translates, and then says it again, for himself. “This was very kind.”

“We’re so glad you two could come,” Yuna says, and from what Ilya can tell, she really means it. “Let’s do this again sometime?”

“Yes,” Ilya agrees, before translating for Irina. Irina nods eagerly, rushing over to hug Yuna again before they say their goodbyes and shuffle out the door.

The walk back to the hotel from the Hollander residence is considerably colder than the walk there, but Ilya has warm tupperware in his hands and the whole of the sun in his chest, and Irina chatters happily about how wonderful David and Yuna are and how sweet and precocious Shane seems and how proud she is that Ilya has made such a wonderful friend with such a wonderful family, and before Ilya knows it, he is back in his bed in the hotel, happy and full and quite content, overall.

He drifts off to sleep thinking about the Centaurs, how sweet of a life it would be to stay here in Ottawa with Shane Hollander forever.

One week later

The turnout at the first optional Saturday practice since Ilya joined the team is record breaking; whether the other kids are intimidated by Ilya or inspired by him is unclear, but Shane is thrilled to see how many kids show up to practice Saturday morning, and spends most of the hour overcompensating for his intensity from Thursday night.

Out of a mixture of diplomacy, ethics, politics, and basic human decency, David has decided not to include Ilya on the starting line for his first game with the team Sunday afternoon. Shane is disappointed— Shane Hollander playing on a line with Ilya Rozanov would be devastating for the other team— but he understands the decision. They’re twelve, and this is youth hockey. They’ve got to at least give the other team the illusion of a chance.

Despite having the least intimidating mascot literally ever, the East Ottawa Middle School Owls have managed to strike fear into the hearts of every middle school hockey player in the city ever since Shane Hollander joined the team. They have no idea what's coming to them, though, now that Ilya is here too. God, this is going to be *so* fun.

It's a home game, so Shane arrives to the rink with plenty of time to spare before the game to get warmed up and spend some time on the ice alone. He is shocked to find Ilya already on the ice when he gets there, but he probably shouldn't be— if Shane didn't know better, he'd think that Ilya must sleep here.

Shane climbs into the bleachers for just a moment; Ilya hasn't spotted him yet, and Shane is happy to watch him practice his slap shots at the empty net for as long as he can manage to go unseen. Ilya is talking to himself in Russian, unguarded and unassuming, his voice so animated and bright. Shane wishes, not for the first time in the past two months, that he spoke Russian, so that Ilya could speak freely to him and Shane could have even just a little more of him.

Ilya is shouting something happily out on the ice, waving his stick in the air and cheering for himself. Shane's chest is tight, for some reason, and his smile threatens to cause irreparable damage to his cheeks. It's then that Ilya finally spots him, and he yelps in surprise, falling ass over teakettle on his skates and crashing down on the ice with a sharp exclamation.

Shane hops the boards and rushes out on the ice in his boots, but Ilya is already picking himself up, dusting himself off, and barking something in Russian at Shane as he approaches.

"What?" Shane asks, starting to laugh now that he's sure Ilya is alright.

"Like—" Ilya waves his hands in front of his face. "Dead thing."

"A ghost?" Shane laughs a little harder.

"Yes," Ilya hisses, but he's smiling now, too. He accuses Shane of something else in Russian, pushing lightly at his shoulder, but there is a brightness in his eyes that tells Shane it's nothing serious.

"I'm gonna go change," Shane says, pointing toward the locker room. "Then can I play with you?"

"Yes, captain," Ilya says playfully. "Now, I win cup," he says, gesturing to the empty net he just scored on and shamelessly returning to his fantasy.

Shane could sit and watch him for hours, probably, but he forces himself to go, snatching his bag on the way and disappearing into the locker room. He's the only one in here, but he changes as quickly as he always does, stuffing all of his things into his locker and heading back to the ice in no time at all. Ilya has just completed another cup winning goal, but his celebrations are quieter this time, and he catches Shane's eye with a smile when he turns to take his victory lap.

“Hey, let’s race,” Shane says, as he pushes onto the ice. “Goal to goal, c’mon.”

Ilya meets him at the first net, smirking under his helmet. “What do I get, for win?”

Shane scoffs. “You’re going to lose,” he says, “but *if* you win, I’ll buy you an ice cream after the game.”

Ilya’s eyes sparkle. “Is freezing outside.”

“There are indoor ice cream places,” Shane argues.

“Okay,” Ilya says easily. “If you win?”

“*When* I win,” Shane smiles, “uh... then you have to let me buy you ice cream after the game.”

“I get ice cream, no matter,” Ilya says happily. “Okay. *Davai!*”

He’s off like a shot. Shane, luckily, has good enough reflexes and reaction time that he’s right on Ilya’s heels almost immediately, and they reach the opposite goal at exactly the same time.

“Cheater,” Shane mutters, but Ilya looks so happy, so joyous, Shane can’t help but smile, too. “Again. Go!”

They end up racing, and then devolving to other playful challenges, until the rest of the team starts showing up. Shane has to drag Ilya off the ice to go to the locker room for the pre-game team meeting, which Ilya just sits through with a blank look on his face, except for when David looks directly at him and speaks very slowly and clearly for him to understand.

The game is terribly, painfully boring. The Owls win 7-1, in an almost cruel show of talent from the first and second lines. The win should be exciting, and it is, for the rest of the team, but Shane spends every moment he’s not on the ice watching Ilya stare into the bleachers, constantly looking for something amongst the faces.

Shane finds himself searching, too, but Irina never shows. Ilya looks completely devastated by the final moments of the game, scoring the last goal of the afternoon, and the third goal of his hat trick, and then turning to Shane with a forced smile. Shane struggles to keep his eyes ahead of him during the line up at the end of the game, but he catches up with Ilya as soon as they’re off the ice, following him into the locker room.

“Hey,” he says, clapping Ilya on the shoulder. Ilya goes rigid for half a second under Shane’s hand. “Great game, dude. You scored a hat trick!”

Ilya gives him a look, and then tips his helmet at him like a top hat.

“So, about that ice cream,” Shane says, while they change out of their uniforms. “There’s a place not far from here, but there’s also a place closer to my house, and we could hang out there, after, if you want, and my dad can drive you—“

“I should go home,” Ilya says, voice low. “Sorry. Another day?”

“Oh,” Shane says, disappointment washing over him like they didn’t just win a game.
“Okay.”

Ilya offers him a tired smile and begins stuffing his gear into his team-issue duffel, without any further explanation for the rain check. Shane decides not to push; he has a feeling Ilya’s downtrodden mood has everything to do with his mother’s absence from the bleachers.

Shane thinks about pestering him with distracting questions, asking if Shane can go home with him, instead, but after they have both showered and are ready to head out, he puts himself in Ilya’s line of vision.

“Are you okay?” Shane says, studying Ilya’s eyes.

Ilya smiles, but it’s a little sad. “Yes.”

“Is it because your mom didn’t come?” Shane asks.

Ilya looks down, shrugging on shoulder. “She said she try,” he says quietly. “Work. Probably very busy.”

“That sucks, dude,” Shane says, frowning.

“She does not suck,” Ilya says, looking up at Shane quickly.

“No, no, that’s not what I—“ Shane blanches. “Just, you know, that she couldn’t be here. It’s not her fault, but I’m sure she’s bummed, too.”

Ilya hesitates, and then nods. “She is— she works very hard, for me,” Ilya says.

“I know,” Shane says. “I mean, she must, she’s doing it all by herself. She seems really incredible.”

Ilya nods again. He doesn’t offer anything else, pushing out of the locker room door and marching straight for the exit of the rink. Shane decides to give him some space, but Yuna stops them both before Ilya can escape.

“Ilya!” Yuna gasps, dragging him into her arms. “Oh my *god*, what a game! Shane and David weren’t lying, you are really excellent!”

Ilya offers her a tired smile. “Thank you, Mrs. Hollander.”

“And Shane, amazing, as always,” Yuna says, pulling her own son into her arms next. Shane is only a little annoyed that his hug came second to Ilya’s, but Ilya probably needed it more.

“Thanks, Mom,” Shane says, trying to tell her telepathically to leave it there, but Yuna only operates in extremes.

“Ilya, come on,” Yuna says, linking her arm with Ilya’s and pulling him toward the exit. “A win like that calls for an ice cream and a celebration.”

“He has to get home,” Shane says, giving his mother a stern look when she turns around. “I already tried.”

“Sorry,” Ilya says, politely removing his arm from Yuna’s. “Mama will worry.”

“Oh,” Yuna says, dejected. “Okay. We’ll just give you a ride, then.”

“No,” Ilya says kindly, “thank you. I can walk.”

“Nonsense, it’s freezing outside,” Yuna says. “David is just bringing the car around.”

“Mom,” Shane says, tugging at her sleeve. *Stop*, he mouths when she looks at him. Yuna gives him a look so stern Shane almost feels scolded, and he knows that nothing he or Ilya can say will make this stop.

Ilya seems to know it, too. The sun is beginning to set as they walk out into the parking lot, darkness creeping in around the edges, and Ilya doesn’t really meet Shane’s eyes when the Volvo pulls up in front of them.

“There he is, our star player,” David says, once everyone has climbed into the car. “Where are we going, Maisie’s or The Ice Cream Factory?”

“Ilya has to get home,” Yuna says. “We’re going to drop him off.”

“Oh, rats,” David says, turning to look at Ilya over his shoulder. “Okay, next game, you’re coming with. It’s kind of a tradition around here,” he says.

“Okay,” Ilya says simply.

“Where do you live, Ilya?” Yuna asks.

Ilya gives a street name, but no number, and stares determinedly out the window while David drives. Shane watches him openly, but Ilya is tense and quiet in his seat.

“Which building?” David asks, as he turns onto the street Ilya named.

“Here is good,” Ilya says quietly.

“It’s so cold, Ilya, come on,” Yuna says. “We don’t mind. Is it further down?”

Ilya hesitates. “Yes.” David keeps driving, and after a moment, Ilya says, “here.”

David pulls the car over and parks, opening his door to get out and help Ilya with his things, but Ilya is out and on the sidewalk before David can even get his seatbelt off.

“Thank you, Mr. Hollander, Mrs. Hollander,” Ilya says, through the open door. “Bye, Shane.”

“Bye,” Shane calls, and then David pulls the door shut.

No one moves for a very long moment. When Ilya realizes that David is not going to drive away until he's safely inside, he turns around like he's walking to the electric chair, and disappears into the lobby of a hotel.

"He lives in a hotel?" Shane says, hunching down to look up at the building through the window. "That's cool."

David and Yuna share a knowing look, which Shane is not privy to. "She's a good mother," Yuna says quietly, as David finally pulls away from the curb. "We should have them over more often."

Chapter 4

April, 2003 – Ottawa, Ontario

By the spring, dinner with Ilya and Irina has become at least a weekly event, if not more often. Irina has really been working very hard on her English, but she still mostly communicates through hand gestures and Ilya, though she and David have become quite close; it took a few weeks for David to finally allow Irina to help him in the kitchen, but they have both raved to their respective sons in the time since about how much they have been able to learn from each other.

Yuna, for her part, struggled when Shane finally told her that Ilya told him that Irina does not drink alcohol. She threw herself into finding different beverages to offer Irina each week besides wine, and at this point, she has half a bottle of every soft drink the European mini market in the city center has to offer stored away in the wine fridge.

Irina has managed to make it to a few games throughout the latter half of the season, but not as many as Ilya would like, clearly. When she is present in the bleachers, even if it's only for the very last few minutes of the game, Ilya is ecstatic after, running to wrap her in his arms over the boards as soon as the final buzzer sounds. When she isn't able to make it, Ilya is quiet after, accepts a ride home which is never really a choice and disappears into the hotel with a small smile and a wave. It's always a quiet ride home for the Hollanders after dropping him off, each of them wondering what Ilya and Irina have been through together to make their bond so intrinsic and special, but none of them ever saying it out loud.

The warmer weather always takes a while to really settle into Ottawa, but Shane spends most of his time on the ice, anyway, usually with Ilya right alongside him. They have become rather inseparable since Ilya's arrival in Ottawa a few months ago, and when they aren't pushing each other to become better players on the ice, they're working on Ilya's English. Ilya has made so much progress since he's been in Ottawa, he only rarely relies on Shane now to fill in the blanks for him.

These after school sessions on the ice with Ilya have become an excuse for Shane to get a little closer to Ilya, to learn more about him; it's harder to maintain Ilya's attention at the dinners, when Ilya's attention is so divided between Shane and his mother. Ilya is never more relaxed and carefree than when he's on the ice, and Shane likes to take full advantage of that.

"Hey," Shane calls, his voice echoing around the rink. Ilya swooshes to a stop in front of him, spraying a little snow over Shane's skates.

"Okay?" Ilya says, eyes sweeping over Shane.

"Yeah, I'm good," Shane says. "If you could be any animal, what animal would you be?"

Ilya rolls his eyes. Shane loves to interrupt Ilya's groove when he finds one on the ice to ask him random, inane questions, partly to throw him off his game, and mostly so that Ilya will suck his teeth and smile at him like he's ridiculous.

"A bear," Ilya says, too quickly. "So I could maul you."

"Wow, maul," Shane says, impressed. "Where'd you learn that word?"

"Your mother," Ilya winks, poking the puck through Shane's legs and taking off. It's meant to be a cheap insult, but Shane wonders if Yuna really did teach him that word; she spends a lot of time talking to Ilya on dinner nights, usually ousting Shane to help in the kitchen while she does. Shane thinks she's still trying to get Ilya to warm up to her and admit to whatever he's been through, but whether or not Ilya has told her anything that he hasn't told Shane, Shane will probably never know.

It's fine. Shane's mother is much better equipped to deal with whatever Ilya tells her than Shane would be. Shane would probably just start to cry instantly if Ilya ever told him that someone had hurt him. Yuna would hunt the fucker down and make sure they never touched anyone ever again. Still, Shane wishes that he could be the one Ilya would feel safe enough to come to if he needed help, and he wishes that he could be strong enough to be the one to help him.

June, 2003

The Owls win nationals.

It's a big deal, a huge deal, for their little public school; it warrants headlines across Canada, photoshoots and interviews with the players for sports news and talkshows, like they're a real NHL team. The brunt of the publicity falls on Shane, as the team captain, but he handles it all with grace and charm. There are phone calls, video calls, the local news even comes to the school to interview him in person one afternoon. Shane is over the moon about every little bit of it, soaking up the attention and letting it fuel his dreams for the future, when this will be his normal day to day life.

The rest of the team is ecstatic, too. They finish the school year riding the high of being the best hockey team for their age group in the *whole country*, though every single one of them is well aware that exactly two people are to thank for the whole thing.

Ilya was thrilled when the title was won, went to the pizza and ice cream parties after, celebrated just like everyone else, but Shane didn't fail to notice the way he has been shying away from the cameras, even just the shitty phone cameras of some of the parents. He's been

dodging giving his name to the reporters when he's interviewed about scoring the winning goal of the game, keeping his face angled down when he does have to be on camera, giving even shorter, quippier answers than he did when he barely knew any English. His English has gotten rather excellent over the course of the last few months, but he plays up his accent for the cameras, pretends not to understand the reporters just to get out of having to answer their questions. It's confusing to Shane— he and Ilya have talked about going pro, about being rich and famous, about days just like this. Shane can't figure out why Ilya is so shy now that he's finally getting a taste of it.

Now that the season is over and there are no more scheduled practices, Shane and Ilya spend a lot more time alone together on the ice, but a lot of time alone together off the ice, too. Shane has still never been to where Ilya lives, beyond dropping him off at the door after games, but Ilya spends quite a bit of time at Shane's house, playing street hockey, soccer, basketball, or, more often than not, just lying in the grass and talking about life.

Irina also has become an integral part of the Hollander family, just as much as Ilya has. She and Ilya come for dinner three or four nights a week, at this point; Irina has learned to hold her own in English, but she has a much harder time picking it up than Ilya ever did. David and Yuna have learned to meet her halfway with key words and phrases in Russian, but she is determined to keep learning, and they have been very helpful with giving her new vocabulary during their frequent chats at dinner.

Shane, for his part, has taken a vow to learn as much Russian as possible this summer. Ilya isn't terribly keen to teach him; sometimes, Shane suspects that Ilya wants to distance himself as much as possible from his Russian background, and teaching Russian to Shane isn't exactly helping him toward that goal. He answers Shane's questions, when Shane asks about certain words or asks him to clarify when Ilya slips and tries to talk to him in the wrong language, but Ilya never offers it freely, and certainly has never expressed interest in Shane knowing any Russian at all.

The last day of sixth grade comes along the second week of June. Shane's parents are busy packing for their yearly summer trip to their cottage up in Lanaudière when Shane gets home from school. Irina was able to take a few days off of work so that she and Ilya could come visit the cottage, and the Hollanders are due to pick them up at the hotel in a little over an hour. Shane is sent immediately to his room upon his arrival home to finish packing the bag Yuna started for him, but it's only a few minutes before his bedroom door is thrown open so forcefully it hits the wall with a loud crash.

Shane whips around, finding a very nervous Ilya Rozanov in his doorway, a piece of paper clutched in his hand.

"Ilya?" Shane frowns.

"Look," Ilya grits out, thrusting the paper at Shane. It's a newspaper— Shane raises his eyebrows at Ilya, but Ilya whines and points frantically at it. "*Shane!*"

Shane looks down at the paper, finding his own face smiling back at him. He's posing with Ilya, both of them in their full Owls uniforms, on the ice after their nationals win. He recognizes the photo, remembers posing for it when the first of many reporters approached

them that day, and he can't quite figure out what the problem is. "Okay," he says, looking up at Ilya again.

"The headline," Ilya says, like he'd quite like Shane to drop dead in front of him.

Shane looks back down at the paper, reading the headline under the photo: *Meet Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov, Captain and MVP of the National Youth Hockey League's Winning Team of 2003.*

"My name," Ilya says, since Shane is still not really seeing the issue. "They used my full name, and my picture."

"Yeah," Shane says, handing the paper back. "They told us they were going to do a story about us," he says.

"I did not think they would use my whole fucking name!" Ilya shouts. He's panicking, but he needs to watch his mouth, because if Yuna hears him talking like that, they'll both be—"Shane, this is— I cannot—"

Shane crosses the room to close his bedroom door, and then puts both hands on Ilya's shoulders, pushing him across the floor until Ilya is forced to sit down on the bed. Ilya's breathing is ragged; Shane has never seen him this worked up before, and it's kind of scaring him.

"If—" Ilya cuts himself, seems to consider something, and then closes his eyes and shakes his head. "If my father sees..."

"Oh," Shane says, dread settling heavy in his stomach. This isn't how he thought this conversation would happen, not about hockey, not the same afternoon Shane is finally going to get to show Ilya the cottage, his favorite place on Earth.

"He cannot see this," Ilya says, pointing to the paper. "My name, the city where I live, is all in there, Shane. *Fuck.*"

"Fuck," Shane agrees. "What, um, what would happen, if, you know..."

"I do not want to find out," Ilya says quietly. "He is— not good man. When we left Moscow, it was— he did not know." Ilya looks like he's going to cry. Shane hates this so much. "He is not supposed to know. He cannot know."

"Okay, well, this is a local paper," Shane says, taking it from Ilya's hand again and glancing over it. "This only circulates in Ottawa, maybe a little outside the city limits, but it's not like this paper is going to make it to Moscow," he reasons.

"There are internet archives, no?" Ilya says. "Will it be public there?"

"Let's go find out," Shane says, jumping off the bed and flinging his bedroom door back open. He crosses the hall to his dad's office, Ilya on his heels, plopping down in the desk chair and turning on David's PC. It takes a while to load up, and Shane is clumsy with the

mouse and keyboard, but he navigates to the internet and then plugs *Ilya Rozanov* into the search engine.

There are no direct matches. Some other random hits come up in the results, sites about other people named Ilya or names similar to Rozanov, but as far as the internet is concerned, this Ilya Rozanov does not exist.

Ilya lets out a gust of air, all of the tension leaving his body at once. He collapses on top of Shane in the desk chair, draping himself over Shane's lap and hugging him around his neck. It's awkward; Ilya is a lot bigger than Shane is, and Shane is already dwarfed by David's desk chair, but he gets his arms around Ilya the best he can and holds him until Ilya's heart rate returns to normal.

"Thank you," Ilya says into Shane's hair. Shivers run the entire length of Shane's spine.

"Yeah," Shane says quietly. "You're welcome."

Ilya sits up and then gracefully removes himself from Shane's lap, using both hands to push his hair out of his face. His hair has gotten so long over the past few months; his curls are wild and usually hanging in his eyes, bouncy and absolutely beautiful. What?

"Crisis averted," Shane says, just to say something, anything. He picks up the paper from where he dropped it on the desk, examining the picture again. "This is a really nice picture of us."

Ilya takes the paper from Shane and looks closely at it, as if for the first time. "Yes," he says eventually, smiling at Shane over the top of it. "I think I will keep it."

"I want a copy, too," Shane says, finally standing up from the desk chair and leading the way back to his room.

Ilya gets awkward once they get there, standing in the doorway and tugging at one particularly troublesome curl in his face. "Um, what I said, before, about—"

"Don't worry about it," Shane says quickly. "It's not— I won't tell anyone. It's none of my business. Unless you want to talk about it! That's okay too!"

"No," Ilya says. He starts to smile, but it falls quickly, and then returns even brighter. "You are good friend, Hollander."

"You too, Rozanov," Shane grins. He really hopes he's not blushing. That would be weird.

Ilya's eyes stay stuck on him for a moment, and then fall to the suitcase on his bed. "I have to pack," he says, like he's just realizing.

"Uh, yeah," Shane says, checking his imaginary wrist watch. "Yuna Hollander runs a tight ship, and we're supposed to be on the road at four o'clock, sharp."

"I should go, then," Ilya says, backing toward the door. He doesn't turn around until he gets there, but as soon as he gets into the hallway, Shane calls after him.

“Ilya?”

Ilya pokes his head back through the door, eyebrows raised. Shane falters.

“Nevermind,” Shane says, busying himself with refolding a shirt that his mother already meticulously folded and packed. “See you later.”

“Later,” Ilya agrees, and then he’s gone.

Shane sits down hard on his bed, mind reeling with the past fifteen minute’s events. Ilya has never, ever spoken about his father before, not to Shane, anyway. This feels big, and Shane doesn’t really know how to process it. Ilya is completely terrified of his father, but that’s all Shane knows for sure. He has absolutely no way to relate to that; Shane has never even so much as had a scary coach, he can’t imagine being so afraid of his father, his *dad* being awful enough to drive him out of a whole country. What must that feel like, for Ilya? What must he think when he watches Shane interact with David? What must Ilya think when *he* interacts with David? David is a playful man, but Shane has noticed the way Ilya flinches sometimes when David moves too quickly, or comes too close. It breaks his heart to think of Ilya, so young and vulnerable, being hurt by the one man who is supposed to love and support him unconditionally. It makes Shane want to fly to Russia and find Ilya’s father himself. Maybe he’s got a little more of Yuna in him than he thought.

Yuna. Shane probably should tell her about this, for her never ending mental file of Ilya Rozanov and his level of safety and happiness in the world. Ilya was so freaked out, though, and clearly regretted even telling Shane at first, Shane can’t betray his trust like that, by running to his mommy with Ilya’s deepest, darkest secret.

It feels like much less than an hour until the car is packed and all three Hollanders are on their way to pick up Ilya and Irina, and Shane’s excitement about his four days at the cottage with Ilya has been slightly dampened by Ilya’s confession. They have this whole plan, the two of them, to beg for more time once they’re at the cottage, to beg Irina to let Ilya stay the full two weeks when it comes time for Irina to head back to Ottawa. Neither of them is sure how it will go, but there isn’t a lot that Irina wouldn’t do to make her son happy, so there’s a very good chance that it’ll work. Now, though, Shane thinks it might be for the best that Ilya leaves with his mother, so that Shane can get around to processing the new information he’s learned today.

He’s still distracted when the Volvo pulls up outside of the hotel. Ilya and Irina are waiting on the sidewalk, one battered suitcase between the two of them, and Ilya’s backpack slung over his shoulder. David hops out of the car to fit the suitcase into the trunk, and Ilya climbs into the middle seat in the back, next to Shane, so close their knees touch when Ilya shifts to put his backpack at his feet.

“Hi,” Ilya says, bumping Shane’s shoulder.

“Hi,” Shane says, nudging Ilya back. It’s probably fine that he doesn’t turn to look at Ilya, right? Ilya probably doesn’t even notice.

Irina fits perfectly into the seat beside Ilya; she's so tiny, so petite, takes up so little space as she does up her seat buckle and then folds herself against the door. Shane can't help but wonder if Ilya's dad hurt her, too, if he used her small stature against her, if he—

“Settle in, everyone,” David says, as he clicks his seat buckle ceremoniously into place. “It's two hours til the cottage. Any music requests?”

Shane doesn't say much for most of the trip, splitting his time between watching out the window and staring at Ilya's knee as it knocks against his own each and every time the car hits a bump. Ilya is his normal, smiley self, chatting lowly with Irina and then a bit louder to Shane's parents, smiling over at Shane every now and again as if to include him in the conversation. Shane smiles and nods along, even contributes when he's got the wherewithal to do so, but for the most part he's just biting his tongue, trying not to cry out that he knows about Ilya's upsetting secret and that someone needs to do something about it.

There's a little less than half an hour left in the trip when it finally comes out. Ilya is telling Yuna, upon request, about his experience with hockey back in Russia, all the records he was able to break in Moscow before he left. His English has gotten so much better recently, and despite their inexplicably rocky start at that first dinner back in February, he has gotten so much more comfortable with Yuna, and Yuna adores him almost as much as she adores her own son— well, sometimes even Shane questions that ranking, but Yuna insists.

“Was a much more difficult league, in Russia,” Ilya is saying; Shane tunes in just in time for Ilya to nudge his shoulder. “But no Shane Hollanders there, that is for sure. Could have used one or two like him.”

Shane offers him a smile, nudging him back.

“What made it so difficult?” Yuna asks from the front passenger seat.

“Was rougher,” Ilya says thoughtfully. “More, ah, violent. Kids were meaner. Coaches were meaner. Could have used a David Hollander, too,” he jokes.

“In more ways than one,” Shane says, without really meaning to. An awkward hush falls over the vehicle. Ilya looks over at Irina, but Shane can't see her around Ilya's frame to gauge her reaction.

“What do you mean by that, honey?” Yuna asks, because of course she does, because she already knows what he means, but thinks she's giving Shane an opportunity to backtrack, one that Shane, unfortunately, does not know how to use.

“Just, you know,” Shane says, his voice quiet, eyes wide as he stares determinedly out the window. “He's a good— uh, coach.”

Shane is not willing or available to see anyone's reaction, but the tension which fills the car tells him all he needs to know. Ilya pulls his legs tight against each other, and his knee very intentionally does not bump against Shane's for the next few potholes.

“Well, thanks, Shane,” David says, offering him a smile in the rearview mirror. It doesn’t quite meet his eyes.

Shane is an idiot. He’s a stupid little boy with a big stupid mouth and now he’s gone and ruined this whole trip before it even started, because now they’re all thinking about Ilya’s dad, and, sure, Shane’s parents don’t exactly know what to think about him, but Ilya and Irina do, and Shane’s sure they both try very hard not to do so whenever possible.

“Well, Ottawa is lucky to have you,” Yuna says, turning to offer Ilya a very warm smile over her shoulder. “You’ll be going pro someday, right? Like Shane?”

“I hope to, yes,” Ilya says.

“Where would you like to be drafted?” Yuna says. “If you could pick any city.”

“Ottawa,” Ilya says immediately. Finally, his knee touches Shane’s again. There wasn’t even a bump in the road.

“Of course,” Yuna rolls her eyes. “You know, Montreal is actually a much better team, one of the best in the world, and one of the original six...”

Shane tunes her out; he’s heard this spiel before, and he’s too busy relishing the wave of relief that comes over him that not only has he not ruined the trip, but Ilya doesn’t seem angry with him for his slip up. He wishes Ilya never said anything about his dad, but that’s not fair; Ilya needs someone he feels comfortable enough to confide in, someone who isn’t Yuna, someone who isn’t obsessed with knowing all of his problems so that they can be fixed as quickly and efficiently as possible. Despite Ilya’s slow growing popularity at school since joining the hockey team and improving his English, Shane is still his only true friend in Ottawa, and he needs to be cooler about learning sensitive information if he’s going to continue being Ilya’s closest friend.

Shane’s other friends, Joe and Henry and Matt, some of the other kids on the hockey team too— they are all exactly like Shane. They’ve all had the same upbringing, all have the same kind of house, the same kind of cars, the same education and the same opportunities. With the exception of Shane being half Japanese, he is a cookie cutter replica of every other kid at East Ottawa Middle School, and he’s never met someone who isn’t almost exactly like him. Ilya is so different, and it’s not just the Russian thing, or the mean dad thing— Ilya is like a space alien in all the ways that really matter, and despite the fact that Shane is endlessly fascinated and intrigued by him, he probably will never be able to fully understand him the way he does his other friends. Ilya’s life and past will always be something of a mystery to Shane, regardless of how much he learns about him, and that’s just something Shane is going to have to figure out how to wrap his mind around.

By the time they arrive at the cottage, Ilya has bumped Shane’s knee several more times, and even managed to break Shane out of his thought spiral eventually. Shane adores him, truly; despite his space alien tendencies, Ilya seems to get Shane, seems to understand him in ways Shane struggles to understand himself. It’s refreshing to have someone like that around besides his mother.

The Hollanders' summer cottage is amazing. It's every bit as homely as their actual home in Ottawa, cozy and warm and well decorated. There are pictures of Shane absolutely everywhere, from baby photos taken on the deck overlooking the lake, to pictures of Shane as a small child out on the water– the whole house is like a shrine to Shane Hollander's childhood, and Ilya can't get enough.

He spends so long admiring the photos with Irina, poking fun and cooing over the particularly silly ones, until Shane starts to get actually, genuinely annoyed, and Ilya vows to come back later to continue his tour of Shane's earliest memories. Ilya does not have anything like this; Irina managed to grab a few photos from his childhood before they left Russia, but Ilya is sure that whatever was left is long gone by now, burned up and forgotten.

Shane gives both Ilya and Irina the grand tour of the cottage. Ilya carries the suitcase they packed for the both of them to the guest room, where Irina will be staying, and then delivers his own backpack to Shane's room, where David is working on pulling out the trundle and making it up for Ilya to sleep in.

They see the back deck next, the one from the photos, and then Shane drags Ilya down to the water. Irina elects to stay behind on the deck, watching the two of them with her arms folded delicately over her chest, and Shane leads Ilya all the way to the dock, spreading his arms wide as if to present the lake.

"Wow," Ilya says, taking in the scenery. Before Ottawa, Ilya had never left Moscow in his life, and since arriving in Ottawa, Ilya has only ventured outside city limits for hockey games in other provinces. This is unlike anything Ilya has ever seen in person; it is like the movies, only better, because it smells like fresh, clean air, and Shane keeps touching him to drag him around the property.

"I know," Shane beams. He kicks his shoes off on the dock and lowers himself down to the edge, sitting with his feet dangling into the water. "C'mon," he says, looking up at Ilya.

Ilya toes his sneakers off and tucks his socks inside them, sitting down gingerly beside Shane with his feet tucked up on the dock. Shane nods toward the water, huffing indignantly when Ilya does not move to add his feet to the water.

"Put your toes in," Shane insists. "It feels good, promise. It's refreshing."

"Refreshing," Ilya says curiously. "There are fish?"

"No!" Shane says. "Well, I mean, yeah, but way further out. Well, there's minnows, and stuff, but--"

"No thank you," Ilya says.

“C’mon,” Shane whines. “What, you’re not gonna swim the whole time you’re here?”

“Are you?” Ilya asks.

“Yeah, of course,” Shane says. “I love to swim in the—”

The water is cool when it splashes up on Ilya’s legs, and he shies away from it a little even as he doubles over with laughter. Shane resurfaces in the water with nothing short of absolute betrayal written all over his face, most likely because Ilya just shoved him as hard as he could off of the dock and into the water.

“Ilya!” Irina’s voice shrieks from the deck at the house, and then a string of impassioned Russian, but Ilya can barely hear her from down here, and he pays her no mind.

“You fucking asshole,” Shane mutters, reaching for the dock and dragging himself up out of the water. “Come here.”

Ilya scrambles to his feet and bolts, laughing wildly as Shane chases him across the lawn. Shane is almost as fast off the ice as he is on the ice, but so is Ilya, and they spend a while chasing each other around before they’re called in for dinner. Shane is chastised for being wet, which sends Ilya off on another round of uncontrollable laughter, but Shane is smiling too, and, Ilya notes with an indescribable warmth in his heart, so is Irina.

After dinner and a fresh change of clothes for Shane, there is a campfire lit in the metal fire pit out on the deck, some awful sticky creation called a s’more that Shane insists Ilya participate in making, and a gorgeous sunset over the lake which Ilya finds himself paying much closer attention to than the marshmallow he’s charring to nothing on a stick held over the fire.

It is so beautiful here, it is no wonder why Shane loves it so much. Shane’s life is like a fairytale.

Chapter 5

June, 2003 – Lanaudière, Québec

Yuna has a few options here.

She could hound Shane, get him alone and needle her way into his brain until he inevitably breaks and tells her what he knows. Psychological torture isn't exactly in any of the parenting handbooks Yuna has read over the years, though, and despite what people may say, Yuna Hollander does live by a code of ethics.

She could go to Ilya, at some point, when both Shane and Irina are busy elsewhere. Ilya's trust has already been betrayed once today, though, by Shane's slip up in the car, and Yuna doesn't want to push him.

Her best and final option is Irina. She has never asked Irina outright about Russia, about her husband and her other son. It's a sensitive topic, clearly, and Irina's English still isn't strong enough for Yuna to feel comfortable asking anything extensive of her; she remembers all too well the way Ilya had reacted when Yuna had pushed him the first time, and she is not looking for a repeat performance with Irina.

Yuna finds herself back on the deck by the slowly dying fire after the boys have been put to bed in Shane's room; Yuna is sure that not very much sleeping will occur in that room tonight, it being Shane and Ilya's first sleepover together, but it's summer vacation and Yuna is almost excited to listen to her son giggle all night long through the wall. Shane has never had a friend he liked enough to invite here before, and Yuna is absolutely thrilled at his pick of the litter.

David emerges from the cottage with a glass of wine, which he hands wordlessly to Yuna, and then he wanders off, messing with something down under the deck despite the fact that it's pitch black outside and whatever he's doing could definitely wait until morning. He has been off since the car ride, ever since Shane said what he said about Ilya needing someone like David back in Russia. It can be hard to tell with David, sometimes, but Yuna knows that David has come to care as deeply for Ilya and Irina as Yuna has, and his heart is hurting, too, at the thought of what Russia must have been like for them.

Irina finds her way back out to the deck in a sweater with a soda in her hand; she had lingered upstairs after saying goodnight to the boys, probably for the same reason Yuna is looking forward to: she loves her son more than life itself, and finds her own joy in the sound of his laughter. She has seemed so happy today, so content to sit and watch Ilya play with Shane, laughing and running and being kids. Yuna can't help but wonder if Irina has a lot of experience in the field of watching Ilya be a kid. She suspects not.

It's only a moment after Irina sits down on the patio sofa with Yuna that Yuna realizes Irina is crying. She's quiet about it, wiping at her eyes discreetly with the sleeve of her sweater, but

once she's aware that Yuna has found her out, she hiccups openly.

"Irina," Yuna says, placing a hand on her knee. "Honey, what's wrong?"

Irina has a way of carrying herself, a demure maturity about her that often tends to obscure her actual age, but in moments like these, Yuna finds herself aware that she has a full ten years on Irina.

"You should know," Irina says, her accent thick. "In case."

"Know what?" Yuna says, heart leaping to her throat.

"Ilya's father," Irina says, and then pauses, searching for the words. "He is— mean."

Yuna places her wine glass down on the table beside the sofa, pulls her feet up under herself, and holds Irina's hand in her lap.

"He, ah," Irina squeezes Yuna's hand so, so gently. She's such a gentle, delicate person. "He hurt me, hurt Ilya. Long, long time."

"Oh, honey," Yuna says, her eyes already wet. "I'm sorry."

"Not always," Irina says quickly, meeting Yuna's eyes for the first time since she came outside. "But— often. He was angry man."

"You are so strong," Yuna says.

"No," Irina laughs sadly. "It was bad choice, mine. I should have waited longer, but he asked, I married him. I was young, I should have tried harder, but I was lazy, and stupid. Weak."

"Don't say that," Yuna says. "You are not weak, Irina."

"I wanted to die," Irina says. Yuna's world rocks on its axis. "I tried, sometimes. But Ilya—" Irina hiccups again, wipes at her face. "He is my heart. I could not."

"He is so special," Yuna whispers. "Thank you for staying for him."

Irina gives her another sad smile. "I did right thing, leaving," she says, nodding to herself. "I know. But it is so hard. I am so tired. Ilya, he is so happy, and I am happy, but I am so sad, too. Scared. Of world, of Grigory, of... me," she says, taking her hand from Yuna's and covering her mouth with it.

Yuna lunges forward and pulls Irina into her arms, rubbing soothing circles into her back while Irina hiccups and cries against her shoulder. Irina is so thin, there's almost nothing to her but skin and bones, but Yuna can feel her muscles flex in her back when she moves to sit up. She is strong, stronger than she knows. Yuna will find a way to make sure she knows.

Irina has gotten herself together by the time David comes back up to the fire, and the three of them sit in comfortable silence until there are only embers left in the bottom of the pit. It's

the unspoken, unofficial end of the night; there are quiet *goodnights* exchanged, and then Irina disappears into the guest room, while Yuna and David carry on down the hall.

As they pass Shane's door, there's muffled laughing, and then hurried shushing. The forced silence doesn't last long, and Yuna has to bite her lip to control the grin that takes over her face when Shane lets out a squeal of laughter much louder than he probably intended.

It's going to be a long four days. None of them would have it any other way.

Yuna, in true Yuna fashion, does not sleep a wink that night. It has nothing to do with Shane and Ilya giggling and laughing until the early hours of the morning in the next room, though that remains a very nice backdrop to her thoughts as she sits against the headboard, David sleeping soundly beside her.

There has seldom been a problem that Yuna Hollander has not been able to solve in a good night's brainstorm, and this problem has a solution, Yuna is sure of it. Irina needs to get out of that hotel, for one thing, and find something to do with her time that will not only support her and Ilya's life but that will make her happy, something she actually enjoys doing. Yuna spends the night unpacking every detail she has gleaned about Irina Rozanova in the past six months, and by the time the sun comes up, she's got Irina's five-year plan outlined in the notebook she keeps at her bedside.

After breakfast, which David and Irina take great joy in cooking together, David takes the boys out on the lake in a canoe. Yuna has never seen anyone as excited about a canoe as Ilya Rozanov. It's the cutest thing she's ever seen.

Irina sits on the dock long after the boys have paddled away, but Yuna does not leave her alone with her thoughts for long. She sits down beside Irina and hands over a mug of coffee, which Irina accepts gratefully.

"I wish I had cigarette," Irina says wistfully. "Had to quit when we left Russia. Too, ah, ex—"

"Expensive?" Yuna offers.

"Ex-pen-sive," Irina says, and then tuts at herself.

"I was thinking," Yuna says, drawing her knees into her chest and gazing out at the lake, the picture of casualness. Hopefully.

"About cigarettes?" Irina says playfully.

"About you."

Irina blinks. "Oh."

“You need to get out of that hotel,” Yuna says, looking sideways at Irina. “Like, now.”

Irina sighs. “Ah, is not so easy,” she says. “Hotel is job and home. I quit job, I lose home. I lose home, no job I can get. I do not make enough money to save. I am stuck,” she says simply.

“Pick up some odd jobs,” Yuna says. At Irina’s inquisitive glance, Yuna shrugs. “A couple of my friends have mentioned looking for housekeepers. It’s not hard work, once or twice a week, and they’ll pay you cash, under the table— privately. You can keep the hotel job and the housing, put away everything you earn outside of that, and in time, you’ll have enough to change your situation. It’ll take a while, I won’t lie, and it’ll be tiring, but you can do it, it’s only for a little while.”

“Huh,” Irina says, probably only to appease Yuna. Yuna is not appeased.

“Once you’ve saved up, you can get an apartment, leave the hotel for good,” Yuna continues. “You and Ilya can have your own spaces— he’s growing up, Irina, he can’t share a room with you forever.”

“Yes,” Irina says quietly. “I know this.”

“You’ll have more time, you’ll get more cleaning jobs, higher paying jobs, and you’ll keep saving, and eventually, you’ll be able to stop cleaning, if you want, and find a job that suits you better. Or keep cleaning, and go to school, or something, get a degree.”

“Wow,” Irina says, “you make it sound simple.”

“It’s not, and it won’t be,” Yuna says. “But David and I will be here for you, always, for anything you need. And for Ilya, too. Even if it’s just a shoulder to cry on,” she says, offering her shoulder playfully to Irina.

Irina smiles at her, quickly moving to rest her head on Yuna’s shoulder. “You are good friend,” Irina says, pecking a gentle kiss to the side of Yuna’s arm. “Thank you. For everything.”

“Thank *you*,” Yuna says, “for being here. You and Ilya are so important to us.”

Irina puts her coffee down to wrap Yuna in a gentle hug, and then resumes her reverent gazing out at the lake. “I would like to cook.”

“Oh,” Yuna says, “are you hungry still?”

“As job,” Irina clarifies. “At restaurant, maybe.”

Yuna grins. “That would be perfect for you,” she says softly.

Irina is quiet for another moment. “I am scared,” she says eventually, voice barely louder than the quiet rippling of the lake in the breeze.

“It’s okay to be scared,” Yuna says. “But it’s not an excuse to stay miserable forever.”

Irina doesn't look away from the lake, but she nods distractedly. "You are right."

It's almost noon when David and the boys come back on the canoe. Yuna and Irina have relocated to the deck and are halfway through a playfully heated game of Yahtzee, but they both turn to look out on the lake at the sound of bright laughter and joyful shouting as the three of them try to clamber out of the canoe without tipping it over.

Ilya takes off running as soon as his feet hit the dock; he bounds up the stairs and onto the deck, launching himself into Irina's side and hugging her around her waist. He is speaking a mile a minute, all in Russian, no doubt telling Irina every detail of their canoe trip.

The look on Irina's face as she watches Ilya speak would make a weaker woman than Yuna Hollander burst into tears, but even as strong as she is, Yuna finds herself swallowing a lump in her throat. Irina has this gentle smile of complete, unadulterated adoration, her eyes sweeping back and forth over Ilya's face while he talks and laughs. She strokes his hair, his back, fingers brushing over his cheekbones every now and again like she just can't help it, can't believe that Ilya is even real. What a feeling it must be for her, Yuna thinks, to see her boy this happy and to know that she saved him from such a horrible situation and gave him the world.

Shane is standing off to the edge of the deck, life vests still in hand, distracted from his apparent task of stowing the vests back in the deck box where they are kept. He's watching Ilya, too, and the look on his face damn near rivals Irina's. He doesn't know what Ilya is saying, but he's just so delighted to hear his voice, to watch him laugh and smile, even if it's not directed at him. Yuna has never seen this look on her son's face before, has never seen him love anything so fiercely— not his parents, not hockey, nothing.

Yuna gets a moment to watch him before Shane's eyes flicker over to her and his face goes scarlet, realizing he's been caught. He springs into action, hurrying to the deck box and throwing the life vests in like they're burning him. He doesn't look back when he's finished, running back down to the dock to help David get the canoe up out of the water and back on the rack near the boat shed.

Ilya makes his way back down to the water eventually, after he's checked in on his mother and made sure she is enjoying herself, too. Their bond is so special, Yuna thinks, beyond anything she has ever shared with Shane, and she and Shane are pretty close, as far as she is concerned. It goes beyond the bond of a mother and son, like Irina and Ilya are truly best friends, closer than that, something altogether different than Yuna can define.

The game carries on lackadaisically from that point on, both of them distracted by the boys and all the fun they're having down by the water. David comes up to the deck once the canoe is all stowed away for the day, stopping inside only briefly to return to the deck with a beer.

“How did that go?” Yuna asks, while Irina takes her turn. “Everyone had fun?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone so excited to be on a canoe,” David says. “You’d think that kid never left the house before, Irina.”

Irina hums, smiles, but doesn’t meet his eye. “He is very happy to be here,” she says simply.

“And we’re happy to have him, he’s an awesome kid,” David says.

“Yes,” Irina says, her smile a little more genuine this time. “He is.”

Irina is a pretty awesome mother, too, Yuna thinks, but she chooses not to embarrass Irina by saying it out loud. The boys shriek and laugh down by the water, and finally Irina abandons the game altogether, turning her chair toward the water so she can watch them play.

Yuna packs up the game without a word, happy to give Irina her chance to watch her son be happy and free for a little while, if this is a relatively new experience for her. Yuna is thrilled to be able to contribute.

Chapter 6

August, 2005 – Ottawa, Ontario

This is Ilya's third summer in Ottawa, and still he is not used to having to spend so much time without Shane Hollander. It has become tradition now for Ilya and Irina to accompany the Hollander family up to Lanaudière for the first two weeks of the summer, and though Ilya is welcome to stay beyond that, he always chooses to go home with his mother at the end of her trip, cannot bear to think of her working as hard as she does in Ottawa just to come home to an empty apartment at the end of the day.

The apartment is a relatively new development in Ilya and Irina's story. With Yuna's help to find some extra work on top of working in the hotel, Irina has been able to save quite a bit over the past two years and they found an apartment closer to the school just this past spring. It is a little further from the rink, and a little further from the Hollanders' house, but Ilya has his very own bedroom for the first time in his life, and Irina has more life in her than ever, even if she is bone tired and thoroughly overworked each and every time she comes home.

The Hollanders helped them move in, of course, because the Hollanders help them with just about everything. Ilya and Irina would be completely lost without them. They even inherited some furniture from their sweet friends when it came time to fill up the apartment; some unused dishware that has been sitting in the attic since Yuna and David's wedding, an old dresser from Yuna and David's first apartment, a pull-out sofa from David's mother's basement which Irina sleeps on.

It is a one bedroom apartment, but Irina insisted that Ilya have the bedroom. Growing boys need privacy and comfort, she had said, an echo of what she had said when insisting that Ilya take the bed in their little hotel accommodations when they first arrived in Ottawa. The living room is sort of an L shape, anyway, and Irina has sectioned off part of the L with curtains and a bookshelf to create a makeshift bedroom for herself.

The apartment is small, but it feels like a castle compared to the hotel. Irina has made it quite possibly the coziest place on Earth, all of her various lamps and knick knacks filling the space quite nicely, all warm tones and soft edges. Ilya's bedroom is quite sparse, but Shane generously parted with a few of his Centaurs posters and other bits of his shrine when they moved in here, and Ilya has found other interests to fill his time and his walls, too. There are posters of bands he likes, carefully cut out of magazines, trophies from his hockey successes over the years, the photographs from Moscow of Ilya as an infant, and of his very first best friend, Svetlana, on the dresser. The newspaper photo of himself and Shane from their first nationals win is framed on the wall, a place of honor, along with several other photographs and memories of himself and Shane from over the years.

One of the things Ilya really dislikes about Ottawa— and really, there are very few things he dislikes about Ottawa— is the summer, when Shane is away in Lanaudière most of the time

and Ilya has nothing to do, no hockey to play nor anyone to play it with, no boring classes to attend at school, and no Irina to sit and dream about the future with. Ilya has made other friends at school by now, of course; he hangs around with Joe and Henry and Matt, but they are more Shane's friends than his own, and they are painfully boring when Shane is not there, too.

This summer, Ilya has found ways to entertain himself that not only have not been available to him before, but that Shane would never approve of or participate in: girls.

Ilya has taken up a new hobby of hanging around the shops in the city center, smoking cigarettes he buys with the money he makes mowing lawns and other odd jobs, and allowing the girls to come to him, entertaining and impressing him like they are all birds, or something. It is fun, spending time with these girls, getting to know a pretty girl for an afternoon and then kissing her for an evening, and then starting over with someone new the next day. It is shallow, and Ilya has no interest in getting to know any of them beyond that particular timeframe, but it is easy when he does not have to lie about not having a phone and when he gets to kick the girls out of the apartment at the end of the evening because his mother will be home soon.

School will be interesting when it starts up again next week; it will be their first year of high school, their first year of hockey actually maybe starting to mean something for their futures. Hockey and Shane have been completely intertwined in Ilya's mind; there is no hockey without Shane, and without hockey, Ilya is not quite sure Shane would stick around, either.

Shane is the best friend Ilya has ever had. Ilya loves him more than he thought he could love another person— besides his mother, of course, but Shane even gives Irina a run for her money. Without Shane, and without the Hollanders in general, Ilya and Irina never would have made it after leaving Russia, and they certainly would not be here now, in a real apartment, with brand new clothes for the new school year, new sneakers, food on the table every single night. Without Shane, Ilya probably would have grown to hate Ottawa in a month's time. Without Shane, Ilya probably never would have learned to smile and laugh the way he does so frequently these days.

Well, not *these* days. *These* days Shane is still in Bumfuck, Québec, and despite the fact that Shane got a cell phone for his last birthday, Ilya still does not have one, and would never ask for one, even if he wanted one. He has not talked to Shane since late July, when the Hollanders came home to Ottawa for a few days for an event at David's work. Shane had slept over the apartment that night, for the first time. It feels like a dirty secret between the two of them, for some reason, that Ilya invited Shane to sleep in his bed with him that night, instead of on the floor in the sleeping bag he brought. Shane had slept with his head down by Ilya's feet, sure, but they had shared a blanket, shared the warmth of each other, and the next day after Shane had left to go back to Lanaudière, Ilya brought a girl home from the movie theater and kissed her for an hour in exactly the spot Shane had woken up that morning.

It is not that weird.

The heat of the late August sun is cooking the back of Ilya's neck, but he is trying to ignore it, doing his damndest to perfect his sexy smirk around the cigarette in his mouth while he leans against the corner of an alley in the city center, towering provocatively over a girl he

just met about fifteen minutes ago. He is tall for his age, still a head taller than any other fourteen year old he knows, and he is still kind of learning how to use his limbs, but he is doing an okay job of it, if the way this girl is blushing and giggling at him in the shade of the alley is any indication.

“Oh my god, Ilya,” the girl is laughing; Ilya is not totally sure what is funny, he was busy studying the freckles on her cheeks, the way her long dark hair frames her round face. She is beautiful. Ilya cannot think of her name.

“Ilya!” shouts a familiar voice from somewhere out on the street. Ilya gives his nameless girl a well timed wink and shifts to lean back against the corner of the alley, squinting against the sun to glance down the block. It almost sounded like—

“Ilya!” Shane shouts again, and then Ilya has an armful of him as Shane slams into him, knocking the cigarette out of his hand. “Hi! I’m back! Wh- are you smoking? Oh, hi Sarah.”

Sarah has taken a rather large step back. “Hey, Shane,” she says, voice cooler than it was a moment ago.

Sarah. They know her from school. Next week is going to be awkward.

“Uh, well, see you later, Ilya,” Sarah says, glancing down at the way Ilya is still loosely holding Shane around his waist and flicking her eyebrows up as she slips around them out of the alley and disappears. Ilya drops his arms quickly.

“I didn’t know you were friends with Sarah,” Shane says, looking down at the cigarette burning between their feet. “Or that you smoke.”

“I am not, and I only smoke sometimes,” Ilya says, stepping on his cigarette to put it out and then reaching down to collect it off the ground. “You are back early?”

“Yeah, the weather in Québec looks like shit the rest of the week so my parents decided to just come home early,” Shane says, but he is not looking at Ilya, his eyes tracking Sarah as she moves down the street. “Why were you talking to Sarah?”

“She is cute,” Ilya says easily. Shane looks like he has been slapped.

“Oh,” Shane says, shuffling back an inch. “Um. Sorry to interrupt, then.”

“No problem,” Ilya shrugs. “There are other girls.”

Shane looks shocked to hear that; Ilya tries to play it off as no big deal, and he must pull it off, because Shane nods and shrugs, too. “Right, of course,” he says.

If he is being honest, Ilya has been nervous about Shane finding out about his new hobby, and apparently for good reason. Shane is so prim and proper, so innocent and respectful, Ilya had expected him to be completely horrified by the idea of Ilya touring the girls of Ottawa like this. It almost makes him feel bad, the look on Shane’s face, but just because Shane does not like girls does not mean that Ilya is not allowed to.

“So Sarah’s not, like, your girlfriend, right?” Shane says, as Ilya finally pushes away from the wall and starts back to the sidewalk.

“No,” Ilya scoffs. “I just met her today. Well, spoke to her for the first time, I guess.”

“Do you want her to be?” Shane asks.

“Be?”

“Your girlfriend.”

Ilya laughs again. “No, probably not. Just having fun,” he says pointedly.

“Fun,” Shane echoes. “With... Sarah Graham?”

“Not just her,” Ilya rolls his eyes. “I have been hanging out with lots of girls lately. They are fun. Is very boring around here without you, Hollander,” he says lightly.

“Am I fun?” Shane asks.

“No,” Ilya says immediately. “You are very boring.”

“But it’s funner in Ottawa when I’m here?”

“More fun,” Ilya corrects him, in lieu of answering.

“Oh, my bad, Mr. English Professor,” Shane says. His eyes are sparkling when Ilya looks over at him. Thank goodness; Ilya much prefers sparkly eyes Shane to anxious interrogation Shane.

“So, what do you want to do?” Shane asks, after they have been walking in silence for a moment too long. “Uh, wanna go to the rink?”

Ilya glances across the street; a small group of girls is sitting outside of an ice cream shop, all of them with their eyes on him.

“Sure.”

It’s fine. It’s fine that Ilya hangs out with girls now. It’s fine that Ilya is fourteen but already looks like he’s twenty-two and that he hangs out with girls and smokes cigarettes and has sex, apparently, oh god—

Shane is on the floor of Ilya’s bedroom; there’s no desk in here, and Ilya is taking up the whole bed, so Shane is on the floor with his biology textbook, trying and failing to read about plant and animal cells. He’s on his stomach, his textbook open on the floor in front of him,

and just beyond that, there is a pair of white cotton panties that Shane is almost entirely sure do not belong to Ilya.

He can't stop making eye contact with them, as hard as he tries. If Ilya knows they're there, he doesn't let on, humming quietly to himself while he copies Shane's notes from history class, because their new teacher talks way too fast and Ilya's English has gotten pretty good, but he still has trouble keeping up with fast talkers sometimes. Eventually, Shane clears his throat, sitting up on his knees and looking over the edge of the bed at Ilya.

"Dude."

Ilya quirks an eyebrow at him. "Dude?"

"Why the fuck do you have panties under your bed?"

Ilya's face goes white. "What?"

"There's a pair of girl's underwear under your bed," Shane says. "At least I hope they're a girl's, or else I have several follow up questions."

Cool. He's being cool about this. Which is good, because so is Ilya.

"Oh, shit," Ilya laughs, swinging himself around to his stomach and lowering his head over the side of the bed. He reaches under and emerges with the underwear pinched between his fingers. "Huh."

"Dude," Shane says again, recoiling when Ilya moves the underwear near him as he moves to sit up.

"Sorry," Ilya says, and he's laughing, but he does sound truly sorry. Maybe he's not being as cool about this as Shane thought. He's embarrassed, Shane can tell, flinging the underwear in the direction of his waste basket.

"Are you, like," Shane gestures vaguely, not sure what he's even really supposed to be gesturing about. "Having... sex? With girls?"

"No," Ilya says quickly, too quickly. The tops of his cheeks are pink. Shane relaxes a little. "No, no, not— not that," he laughs awkwardly. "I, ah— I had a girl here the other day. She took them off, and I think probably she left them on purpose, but we did not do anything. We just kissed."

Shane could vomit right on the floor, if he had a little less dignity. "Oh," he says, settling back against the wall with his textbook. "Uh, cool."

What the fuck? Ilya had a girl over and she *took her underwear off* in his bedroom while he was kissing her, and Ilya didn't tell him about it? He didn't want to, like, brag about it, or whatever? Shane wouldn't have been happy to hear about it, and maybe Ilya knew that and didn't tell him so as to not make him uncomfortable, but that might be even more embarrassing than Ilya just not caring enough to tell him. Shane isn't a *prude*, he can handle

it if his best friend is having sex, or just, like, bottomless makeout sessions, or whatever the fuck that was. God, Shane is so ill equipped for this.

“Do you like them?” Ilya asks, after an uncomfortable amount of time. Shane looks up at him.

“Panties?”

“Girls.”

“Oh, uh, yeah,” Shane says, shrugging, and then wishing he didn’t. It’s not that Shane doesn’t like girls, he just... doesn’t *like* them, not like that, not yet. He will, someday, when he’s older, probably, he’s pretty sure, but it’s— he’s fourteen, like, it’s normal that he isn’t there yet. Ilya is just an early bloomer.

“You never talk to me about girls,” Ilya says. Shane would slice him in half, if his eyes were lasers.

“Well, clearly you don’t tell me about them, either,” Shane says, gesturing to the underwear which are now crumpled on the floor beside Ilya’s waste basket.

“Ah, touche,” Ilya says, smirking at Shane over the top of Shane’s own history notebook.

That’s the end of the conversation, apparently, because Shane can’t bring himself to say anything else, burying himself back in his biology textbook and blocking out Ilya’s resumed humming. Ugh, biology is gross.

Ilya quickly earns a reputation at school as a ladies’ man. It’s nothing outrageous, no devastating rumors or wild accusations, but the guys at school nod knowingly at him in the hallways, and the girls flock around him all day long like seagulls to a turkey sandwich.

Shane finds it endlessly annoying. At first, he thought he was jealous of the attention Ilya is getting now, but maybe that isn’t the whole problem. He keeps finding more stuff in Ilya’s room— long dark hairs on the floor near his bed, a tube of lipgloss on his dresser— though thankfully no more panties. Shane doesn’t actually know where Ilya finds the time, as they’ve been back on the ice just as often as they used to be to prepare for the upcoming hockey season, but clearly he’s spending every minute he’s not with Shane hooking up with random girls in his mother’s apartment.

Shane wonders if Irina knows anything about this, but he would never be the one to ask. He also can’t exactly tell his own mother what his problem is when he slams a cabinet door in the kitchen a little too hard after coming home from Ilya’s apartment where his great treasures of the day included a small pile of phone numbers written on gum wrappers and receipt paper at the bottom of Ilya’s pencil case and a sweet little pink ribbon tied into a bow

around a hairclip on Ilya's bedside table. All he can do is laugh and say he doesn't know his own strength, and then stalk off to his room to do as many pull ups as it takes to forget about all of this.

There are not enough pull ups in the world.

The worst part of all of it is that Ilya tells him about it now. They still meet every day before school starts for breakfast in the cafeteria, and Ilya tells Shane all about the girl he hooked up with the night before, or the date he went on after they finished practicing together at the rink, or the thing a certain girl did with her tongue that totally rocked his world. Shane sits quietly and listens to every single story, tries to smile and nod and laugh at the right times, but it kills him, inexplicably so. He hates the thought of Ilya spending time with girls, or, really, with anyone who isn't Shane, and maybe that's all this boils down to.

Shane has a bunch of friends, sure, but none that he spends time with one on one, none like Ilya. His other friends hang out in herds, most of the time, and Shane can't always be bothered to be part of all that. He cherishes his time with Ilya, he cherishes *Ilya*, and he can't stand the thought of these random girls parading in and out of Ilya's bedroom, getting parts of Ilya that Shane doesn't get, will never get.

It's not like *Shane* wants to kiss Ilya. He doesn't. Really. He just doesn't really want Ilya kissing anyone else.

"She had her whole hand down the back of my pants— Hollander, are you listening?"

"What?" Shane says. "Yeah. She touched your ass."

The lunch room is not the place for this. The other guys are enthralled, though, hanging on Ilya's every word. None of them have had nearly as much success in the field of girls as Ilya has, and Ilya's conquests have become sort of the focal point of their lunchtime conversations lately, much to Shane's chagrin.

"Like, underwear, too? Or just in your pants?" Henry asks. Ilya just winks at him.

"And what'd you do?" Matt chimes in. "You touched her ass, too, right?"

Ilya looks at Matt like he's stupid. "Of course I did."

"Fuck yeah, bro," Henry says.

"Fucking legend," Matt adds.

Joe doesn't seem terribly interested in the conversation, either, but he's two people away from Shane right now, and yelling over the others to talk to him about hockey would be rude, so Shane just picks at his sandwich and tries to stop imagining Ilya with some girl's hand down his pants.

"Are you guys excited for hockey to start?" Shane asks the moment there is a lull in conversation.

“Do you think about anything other than hockey, Hollander?” Matt scoffs.

“No, he doesn’t,” Henry says.

“I am excited,” Ilya says through the last bite of his bagel pizza. “Do you think it will be different?”

“Of course it will,” Shane says. “It’s high school, it’s, like, serious now. And my dad isn’t the coach anymore, so that’ll be weird.”

“Maybe the rest of us will get some time on the ice during games now,” Henry mutters.

“You won’t,” Shane says, at the same time as Ilya says, “Yeah, right.”

“Hey!” Henry says. “I’m not that bad at hockey!”

“You’re not bad,” Shane says, at the same time as Ilya says, “Yes, you are, Fowler.”

“Fuck you guys,” Henry says, even though Shane was nice.

“I was nice!”

“No you weren’t,” Henry says, at the same time as Ilya says, “You are always nice, Hollander.”

The bell rings to end lunch, and the conversation ends with a flurry of lunches being packed away and backpacks being zipped up. Shane’s next class is on the other side of the building, so he says goodbye and gets going quickly, but Ilya catches up to him and walks with him, despite his class being in the other direction.

“You okay, Hollander?” Ilya asks casually. There’s nothing actually casual about it, though. Ilya has knocked shoulders with three different people already, because he’s watching Shane’s face instead of where he’s going.

“I’m good,” Shane says.

“Sure?” Ilya presses.

“Yeah?” Shane says. “Do I not seem good?”

Ilya doesn’t answer for a moment. “Want to come over after school? Rink is booked for a private event this afternoon, I checked yesterday.”

“I have a lot of homework,” Shane says noncommittally.

“So do I, we do it together,” Ilya says easily.

“Uh, yeah, I mean—”

Ilya grabs his wrist, pressing him back against the wall of the hallway to remove him from the steady flow of students heading to class. He’s not pinning Shane back, or anything,

there's almost an arm's length of space between them, but Shane feels like he's suffocating.

"Come on, Hollander," Ilya says, voice low. "What is wrong?"

"Nothing," Shane says, pulling his wrist free from Ilya's hand.

Ilya sniffs; there's something about the blue of his eyes that makes Shane feel like Ilya can see inside of him, sometimes. "Liar."

"I am not a liar," Shane says, unimpressed.

"That was a lie."

"Was not!"

"Was too."

"Ilya!"

"Shane!"

"Ugh!" Shane pushes at Ilya's chest. "I'm gonna be late to class."

"Fine," Ilya says, stepping back and putting his hands up in surrender. "Whatever, Hollander."

"Fuck off, Rozanov," Shane mutters, turning on his heel and marching away.

He gets three steps down the hallway before Ilya drags him into the boy's bathroom. "No," Ilya says.

"No what?" Shane asks, flustered.

"No, I will not fuck off," Ilya says. "I was going to, but then you told me to, and now I will not."

"God, you are so annoying," Shane says. "Can I please just—"

"Can you just—" Ilya says loudly, voice too harsh. He takes a breath, lets it out slow, and that knowing look in his eyes turns into something a little more unsure. "Can you just talk to me, please?"

"Ilya, I don't know what you're talking about," Shane says. He wants to cry. "Can I go to class, please?"

Ilya raises his hands in surrender again, and this time he doesn't come after him when Shane bolts. This is such a stupid thing to have almost turned into a fight; Shane can't tell Ilya what's wrong because Ilya will think he's a fucking baby who just doesn't want Ilya to have any fun, but clearly, he's not doing a very good job at pretending like that's not exactly the case. He doesn't even know what he wants from Ilya. He doesn't want Ilya to stop dating

girls– or hooking up with them, whatever– he just wants to go back to the way things were before this summer, when he and Ilya were living in each other’s pockets all the time and, even when Shane was gone to Québec for the summer, Ilya was always right there waiting for him when he came back, like nothing had changed. It’s not fair for Shane to want Ilya to just sit around and go to sleep like an electronic device when Shane isn’t actively receiving his attention. Ilya deserves to have fun, to kiss girls, to have his ass squeezed, and to tell his friends about all of it. Shane wishes he could be okay with it, but he just *isn’t*, and that’s *his* problem, not Ilya’s.

Except that now Ilya thinks Shane is mad at him, and he has no idea why Shane would be mad at him, and Shane knows Ilya well enough to know that it’s probably driving him insane. Shane doesn’t want Ilya to be confused, or hurt, or angry, or however he’s feeling right now, even if every word out of Ilya’s mouth lately feels like a slap across the face for Shane.

He dwells on it the rest of the day, thinks of a hundred different ways to tell Ilya how he’s feeling, but he can’t settle on any of the options. It feels too vulnerable, too dramatic, to sit Ilya down and tell him that Shane just misses him and the way they used to be. Nothing has even changed between them, honestly– they still see each other just as much as they did last year, it’s just that now, Shane has to spend all of his time with Ilya listening to all the ways Ilya is growing up and becoming a man while Shane is just stuck being a little boy.

Whatever. Ilya can make it one night wondering what’s wrong with Shane. Shane will talk to him tomorrow.

He chooses to use the in-school weight room at the end of his classes for the day, because he doesn’t feel like going home yet, and Ilya said the rink is closed today. He dips into the locker room to change into his gym clothes after the last bell, and when he slips back out of the locker room into the hallway, he wants to turn back on his heel and stick his head between the locker room door and the door frame and let it close.

Ilya is pressed up against the wall, not right outside the locker room door, but close enough that when Shane turns to walk toward the weight room, there he is. There’s a girl in front of him, both hands on his chest, pushing him back while she stands up on her toes and attempts to put her entire tongue in Ilya’s throat. Ilya is loving it, by the looks of it, one hand holding the back of the girl’s head, the other making its way down to the curve of her behind.

Shane freezes, staring. Oh god, he’s staring. Oh god, he can’t stop staring. He can’t move, he can only watch, mouth going dry, time moving in slow motion.

He knew Ilya was kissing girls, probably doing more than he’s ever admitted to Shane, but seeing it happen in front of him is a very different thing. Seeing it, Shane doesn’t have to imagine it anymore, and at least when he was imagining it, he could kind of only imagine Ilya, and he didn’t really have to pay attention to the girl in the scenario. Here, though, with a real, live, solid girl attached to Ilya’s face, Shane has absolutely no option but to stand here and take it in.

They break apart slowly, like they’ve not a care in the world that someone is watching them. The girl– Shane thinks she’s a sophomore, what a *skank*– looks startled to see Shane standing

there, but Ilya just looks through him, his hand finishing its descent down the girl's back, watching Shane's eyes track the movement.

Shane blinks, and then bolts. He turns around and marches straight through the doors that lead out to the football field, through the gate, and all the way off campus. He's in his gym clothes, he doesn't even have his backpack, but he kinda feels like he's going into cardiac arrest, and all he can think to do is run.

His feet hit the pavement hard, legs burning before long, as he sprints with every ounce of energy in his body. He's home before he knows it, before he's ready to be, crashing down hard on the front steps of his house with his head in his hands. Fuck.

He doesn't last long before the need to go retrieve his backpack and regular clothes from the school overwhelms his need to lay down and melt into the Earth. Ilya would call him a good shoe boy for this, being worried about not getting his homework done on time, and Shane would tell him that the phrase is goody two shoes, and then Ilya would call him boring and Shane would call Ilya an asshole and they'd laugh and walk all the way back to school. Shane walks like he's walking to his death.

He feels bad for calling that girl a skank in his head. She's probably really cool, if Ilya likes her, which he clearly does. Or maybe Ilya doesn't actually care about her at all, maybe he just suspects that it's his extracurricular activities that Shane has a problem with, and he recruited the first girl he could find to help him test his theory. Maybe Shane is flattering himself a bit too much with that one.

When he gets back to the school, Ilya and the girl are gone from the hallway.

Ilya moves his hands to Katie's waist, pushing her back gently and offering her a tight smile. She looks confused, but that is okay; she earned herself a spot on Ilya Rozanov's roster, and Ilya is sure that this is all she really cares about. Katie shrugs, picking up her back from the floor beside Ilya's feet and slinging it over her shoulder. "Later," she says, walking away down the hallway like nothing happened at all.

Ilya stays rooted to the spot for a moment, mind racing. His experiment, if needlessly cruel, was a success: Shane is upset with him for liking girls. In retrospect, Ilya knew that, and this conclusive finding does not give him any clue as to why Shane is so upset by this, but at least Ilya knows he did not accidentally do something else to piss Shane off so badly.

He feels quite terrible about what he has just done, but if Shane had just *talked* to him about it when he asked— no, that is not fair. Shane probably does not understand the feeling himself, and how can he communicate to Ilya what he cannot communicate to himself?

Ilya should not have done what he just did, he knows this now, but to be fair, he did not expect Shane to quite literally take off running. He is not sure what exactly he did expect, maybe an argument, maybe some kind of resolution, but not this, not Shane being so hurt that he could not bear to even be on the same campus as Ilya anymore. Ilya feels disgusting, pushing into the locker room just for a moment to himself.

Shane left his backpack behind, and the clothes he was wearing today, neatly folded on the bench in front of his locker. He will be wanting those, Ilya is sure, but Ilya is not sure how extensive Shane's grief is at the moment, if he will care enough to come back for them today. Ilya walks over to the bench with the intention of picking up Shane's clothes and backpack; he can bring them by Shane's house, leave them on the step and ring the bell, in case Shane does not want to see him. Ilya collapses onto the bench beside Shane's clothes, instead, just for a moment, just to stare at the ugly plaid button-down Shane was wearing today and try to sort through his own mind.

He could be annoyed with Shane. He probably should be; Shane is acting like a baby, like Ilya is gross and wrong for maturing and participating in completely age appropriate fun with the opposite sex. Ilya also could be bone crushingly sad that Shane is apparently so disgusted by him. Funnily enough, Ilya feels both of those things, mixed with something else, something deeper, something he cannot quite put his finger on. It is a deep kind of sadness, something hollow and dull, buried somewhere within his soul that he cannot access. He has felt it before, but not quite like this, not with the knowledge that there is nothing he can really do to fill that hollow void.

He is not sure how long he sits there, staring at Shane's shirt. It is quite a while, apparently.

The locker room door pushes open, and Ilya looks up from Shane's clothes belatedly, finding Shane himself standing in the doorway. He is flushed and sweating, like he has been running, but his breathing is deep and even, his face carefully void of expression. Ilya nods towards Shane's things, and Shane does not meet his eye as he steps forward to collect them.

"Can I come over?" Ilya asks quietly, desperately, shocking even himself.

"No," Shane says immediately. He stuffs his clothes into his backpack and turns on his heel, and then he's gone, and Ilya is alone once more.

October, 2005

Ilya is on the sofa in the living room, the real sofa, not the one Irina sleeps on, when Irina comes home from work. There is a pot of borscht on the stove which Ilya heated up for her, and she drops a kiss to the top of his head in gratitude on her way to her makeshift bedroom

to change out of her dirty work clothes. Ilya ate earlier, out of sheer boredom, but Irina ladles two bowls of soup when she returns in her house clothes, and Ilya does not have the heart to tell her that he ate without her, so he accepts the bowl she hands him and eats again.

"How was practice today, Ilyusha?" Irina asks, a hopeful smile on her face.

Ilya stares at his soup, and shakes his head slightly.

"Still?" Irina asks.

It was the first practice of the season today, the first practice of their high school careers. Shane did not say a word to him. Shane has barely said anything to him in the past month. If Ilya had known what his little experiment was going to do to the very best friendship he has ever had, he probably would have vowed on the spot to never kiss another girl for the rest of his life.

"There must be something else going on," Irina says. *"I will talk to Yuna—"*

"Please, do not," Ilya says tiredly. *"He will come around."* That is what Irina keeps telling him, anyway, and Ilya is really trying to believe it, but with each passing day, it feels less and less likely.

Shane is perfectly cordial to him when he and Irina go to the Hollander residence for their usual dinners, still sits with him at lunch and even participates in the conversation, sometimes, when Ilya is chatting with the other guys. Ilya has not been alone together with Shane in over a month, they have not had any time alone together at the rink between practices, and even at practice today, Shane was nearly as cold as the ice.

All of this because Ilya kissed a girl in front of him. Shane can go fuck himself, as far as Ilya is concerned; he has had quite a bit of time to sit with his own thoughts and emotions in recent weeks, and that is where he has landed, at least for today. Shane is a fucking prude, the most boring person alive, and a total snob. Ilya does not need Shane to be okay with Ilya's choices, only Ilya needs to be okay with Ilya's choices— but his resolve on even that is lessening by the hour.

"Are you okay, solnyshko?" Irina asks, stroking a hand over Ilya's hair.

"I miss him, Mama," Ilya admits.

"He will come around," Irina says, and even she sounds like she is having trouble believing it.

Practice today was awful. Ilya tried to get Shane's attention three different times, and if Shane was not looking through Ilya like he was not even there, then he just was not looking at all. The only thing Shane said to him during practice today was to chirp at him, which got him spoken to by the assistant coach, which made him even moodier. Shane is usually never happier than he is on the ice, but today it felt like he could not wait for it to be over, just so he could get away from Ilya.

The dull sadness and disappointment festers throughout the evening. Irina goes to bed early, like she always does, because she has to work early, like she always does, and then Ilya is alone again, like he has been so often as of late. He has not spoken to a girl outside of school since the whole thing with that girl— Ilya thinks her name was Katie— and Shane in the gym hallway, and the only kisses he has received as of late are chaste ones at his locker from girls he has just handed a fake phone number to. Ilya does not even have a phone, but even if he did, he would still be handing out fake numbers right about now. He cannot find it in himself to care much about anything lately, besides going to school, going to hockey, and coming home to make sure his mother is not too worried about him on top of all the other things she has to be worried about.

By the time Ilya goes to bed that night, the loneliness in his gut has twisted into abject terror, his mind replaying every interaction with Shane from throughout the day. The idea of Shane hating him, of Shane never speaking to him again, of things never going back to the way they were— it is haunting to think about. Shane and his parents are Ilya's family, at this point; Irina has become so incredibly close with David and Yuna, and Shane is like another son to her. It would break everyone's hearts if Shane and Ilya could not reconcile their friendship, but it would break Ilya's heart most of all, and he is not sure he would ever recover from the loss.

Ilya wants to throw up when he thinks about the way Shane looked at him during practice today, like he was nothing, less than nothing. He just cannot understand why Shane is acting like this; surely Irina is right, there is something else going on that Ilya has not figured out yet, but Ilya cannot begin to fathom what it could be. Is Shane jealous of him? Shane is the best hockey player in their class, if not the entire team, even as a freshman. He could have just about any girl he wanted, probably, but he does not seem to want to, so what is there to be jealous of?

The girls?

No, there is no chance that Shane is jealous of the girls Ilya hangs out with. Shane does not want to kiss him. That is crazy. Shane is just being a prude, an immature little baby. All he cares about is hockey, and he cannot stand that Ilya cares about things besides hockey now. That has to be it. Right?

Would Shane kiss him?

Ilya's mind seems to be stuck on that one particular flash of a thought. Without meaning to, he imagines it, what it would be like if he kissed Shane. How would it feel? Would Shane like it? Would *Ilya* like it? Is this... something he wants?

Shane would probably be just okay at kissing. He would be eager, like he is with everything else, a quick learner, trying so hard to be perfect, trying just hard enough. How would he react if Ilya trapped him against a wall, held his waist and the back of his head, and kissed him the way all these girls seem to love? What if Ilya was the one against the wall? Shane would have to get up on his toes to kiss him, probably, would have to hold on to Ilya to keep himself up. What would Shane think of Ilya pushing him down on his bed, climbing up on top of him, licking into his mouth? Shane would probably try to flip them over, be the one in control.

By the time the sun has come up, Ilya is sure of two things: one, he definitely, absolutely wants to kiss Shane Hollander, and two, he is never going to be able to look at him the same way ever again.

The high school hockey team practices three times a week, with an additional, optional practice on Sunday afternoons. It's a much more intense practice schedule than Shane is used to, but he loves it so far, loves connecting with the team, earning the respect of the coaches and upperclassmen, being challenged for the first time by players other than Ilya Rozanov. If he's honest, there's still not really anyone who compares to Ilya in terms of matching his skill level, but it seems good for team morale when Shane is not trying to be the overeager freshman skating circles around the older kids.

Ilya has become a goddamn thorn in his side these days. Shane didn't mean for this to go so far, he really didn't, and he feels incredibly guilty about the whole thing, but he doesn't know how to backtrack now. It terrifies him, how terrified he is of losing Ilya. That's the main reason he's being so distant; he can't bear the thought of losing Ilya, so he is pushing him away bit by bit in an attempt to soften the blow.

Ilya must absolutely hate him by now. Shane is so mean to him at practice and at school, and he can't even help it, he just can't let himself slip back into the version of himself that needed Ilya like he needed oxygen. This is good for them, Shane thinks, a little distance. Maybe it's a little too much distance. Maybe Shane should swallow his pride a little and apologize, ask Ilya to hang out sometime. No, Ilya probably has a date that night. Doesn't matter which night, Ilya probably has a date every night. God, Shane can't even think about him without tasting bile in his mouth.

It's Sunday afternoon, and the optional practice starts in fifteen minutes. Shane is getting some stretches in on the ice while a few players filter in; there are only two other people here so far, which is disappointing. Shane thought for sure that the high school team would be more dedicated than this.

Only one more person joins the sad little group of players on the ice in time for practice to start. Shane doesn't have to look to know who it is. He can tell just by the way he carries himself, the way he skates right over to Shane's side and stops short to spray some snow at him, knocking his stick obnoxiously loud against the ice.

"Hollander," Ilya greets him.

Shane rolls his eyes, but only because Ilya can't see his face at this angle. "Rozanov," he mutters.

"What a turn out, eh?" Ilya says, of the disappointing group gathered at center ice.

Shane doesn't know what to say, caught between something sincere or something snarky. Ilya will probably laugh at him and make fun of him either way, so Shane stays silent. God, he hates this. He wants his best friend back.

"How are you liking it?" Ilya asks.

"The team?" Shane asks.

"No, the stick up your ass," Ilya says, and skates away.

Shane wants to skate after him and lay him out. He wants to skate after him and drop his knees at Ilya's feet and beg his forgiveness, beg for things to be normal between them again. He skates after him, but stops on the other side of the circle formed at center ice, around their bored looking coach.

The practice is, well, boring. Shane hates that he's reached a point where hockey could ever be boring, even a dumb optional Sunday afternoon practice. Hockey was more fun when he and Ilya were playfully competitive, and not miserably competitive. Ilya checks him a few times throughout practice, and Shane checks him back a few times, and they both get yelled at for it, but it doesn't matter. No amount of public shaming could make Shane feel worse than he already does about all of this.

Ilya does not see himself attending many more optional Sunday practices, but he knew Shane would be here today, and that was enough to get him out the door. He came here with the intention of trying to start putting things back together with Shane, trying to be friendly and banter with him, but Shane shut him down right out of the gate at the beginning of practice, and Ilya has spent the remainder of practice taking out his frustration on him.

He should apologize. He should chase Shane down the street after this, fall to his knees at Shane's feet, and beg for things to be normal between them again. He does not get the chance to do either.

He has just finished showering and changed back into his hoodie and sweatpants when Shane slams Ilya's locker closed, looking as shocked as Ilya feels when he looks up at him.

"Sorry," Shane says quickly. "I didn't actually mean to do that."

"You are not here to beat me up for my lunch money?" Ilya jokes, leaning easily against his, now closed, locker door. His heart is going to beat out of his fucking chest, it is a wonder it is not echoing against the empty metal locker through his back.

"No," Shane says, a hint of a smile forming on his lips. "I, um. Look—"

"I miss you," Ilya blurts out, before Shane can say whatever he is about to say.

“Oh,” Shane says, taken aback. “I... really?”

“Yes, Hollander,” Ilya says quietly.

“I— wow, this is so much easier than I thought it was gonna be,” Shane says, his smile taking over his face. “I kinda thought you might hit me when I told you I really, *really* miss you.”

“Really, *really*?” Ilya quirks an eyebrow playfully. “Well, when you put it like that...”

“Fuck off, Rozanov,” Shane laughs.

“No,” Ilya says, pushing away from the locker and into Shane’s space, just a little. There is no one else in the locker room at this point; Ilya intentionally took forever in the shower, and Shane clearly waited for him, so long that everyone else has already gone home for the day.

Shane just keeps smiling at him, but it turns shy when Ilya gets closer. Pushing his luck, Ilya ducks his head minutely toward Shane, and Shane swallows and looks down.

“Um, do you wanna play after school tomorrow?” Shane asks, taking half a step back. “This practice sucked.”

“Totally sucked,” Ilya agrees. His heart is at his toes. Shane does not want to kiss him. “I would love to play tomorrow.”

“Okay, cool,” Shane says, smiling at his feet. “Um, Ilya—”

“Shane.”

“I’m sorry,” Shane says, wincing a little when he looks up at Ilya. “For the way I’ve been— well, you know. I don’t, um, I don’t really know what’s wrong with me.”

God, Ilya wants to kiss him. If they were younger, Ilya would reach out and hug him, squeeze him until Shane laughed and squirmed away. They are both nearly fifteen now, and considering the thoughts Ilya cannot stop having at night sometimes, hugging Shane is probably not his best option.

“I am sorry, too,” Ilya says. “For— you know.”

Shane nods, like he does know. God, what Shane does not know.

“Thank god,” Shane laughs a little, sagging against the locker beside him. “I was so scared that— I don’t wanna lose you, like, as my friend. Best friend,” he says.

“Me too,” Ilya says. “We are okay?”

“We’re okay,” Shane says. “My mom is gonna be so happy. She was offering to pay me to be nice to you tomorrow night at dinner.”

“My mother has grown very tired of all my crying,” Ilya says, with the cadence of a joke, but Shane’s face falls immediately.

“You cried?” Shane asks, voice breaking.

Ilya could play it off, could insist that it was a joke, but Shane knows him better than anyone, can see right through him even when he is lying his absolute hardest. “I miss you,” he says instead, shrugging a little.

“I did, too,” Shane admits. “So you know. I’ve cried, like, every time my mom asks about you.”

Ilya cannot handle the sincerity of this conversation. “You should take the money,” he says.

“What money?” Shane frowns.

“The money your mother offered to be nice to me,” Ilya says. He smiles and winks, noting the pink of Shane’s freckled cheeks. “We can split it.”

Shane laughs, but it is tight, almost uncomfortable. Maybe this will not be so easy.

“Okay, well, see you at school tomorrow,” Shane says, pushing off the lockers and backing away.

“See you, Hollander,” Ilya says, watching him go.

“Bye,” Shane says. He walks into the door as soon as he turns around. Ilya bursts out laughing, and Shane flips him off as he recovers and leaves.

Oh, they will be just fine.

December, 2005

It’s easier than Shane thought it would be to put everything behind them. They don’t talk about it, ever—Ilya does a pretty terrible job of hiding what he does behind closed doors, and Shane does a pretty terrible job of pretending like he doesn’t know, doesn’t smell the girly perfume on Ilya when they’re sitting together on the sofa, doesn’t see the way his lips are swollen and wet before practice sometimes, doesn’t get grossed out by the long, dark hairs he finds sticking to him when he sits on Ilya’s bed, sometimes.

It’s fine. It’s more than fine.

Ilya has been more attentive to Shane than ever these last few weeks. He’s thrown himself back into hockey in a way that Shane didn’t really notice he had stopped; Shane and Ilya have, by the middle of the season, become quite obnoxious to the rest of their team. They are

both heads and shoulders above the rest of the team in terms of talent and natural ability, and Yuna told Shane last week that the coach told her he has never seen anything like their combined intelligence and apparent telepathy when it comes to playing the game.

So, yeah. Things are good.

Things are good, until they aren't. Until they're sitting at the dinner table eating a meal that David and Irina cooked together, and Yuna has to go and shatter the whole damn thing over the rim of her wine glass.

"I propose a toast," Yuna says, holding the glass up. She's just finished boasting about the hockey game Shane and Ilya collaboratively won in a clean sweep for their team earlier in the day. "Here's to our boys, their bright futures, and their hard work and dedication to their passion."

There's some clinking of glasses, and Shane takes a sip of his ginger ale with his eyes locked on Ilya, who winks at him over the top of his Coke.

"I mean, really," Yuna says, "you two are such good kids. Other kids your age are getting into so much mischief these days, it's insane. Do you know, one of my friends has a daughter a few years older than you, and the other day, she came home to find a *boy* sneaking out of her bedroom window!"

Ilya chokes on his soda, pushing away from the table a bit while he splutters and coughs. He looks mortified, and not just about the disruption.

Shane feels his blood begin to boil. It's not news, obviously, that Ilya hangs out in bedrooms that belong to girls. It is not something Shane enjoys thinking about, though, even still, and he can feel his face heating while he watches Ilya recover and smile sheepishly at him. Shane's eyes flicker to Irina, who looks about as annoyed as Shane feels. Ilya flinches and yelps quietly, probably a result of the kick Irina has delivered under the table. *Good*, Shane thinks. Irina mutters something in Russian, and Ilya answers bashfully, not really meeting her eyes.

Shane becomes aware of the silence that has fallen over the table, glancing over at Yuna and David. Irina's icy eyes have fallen back to her plate, but Yuna and David are watching Shane closely, and Shane feels his face heat even more.

He's never been very good at controlling his face. He's been glaring at Ilya, he realizes, nostrils flared and eyebrows pinched. He schools his face back into a neutral expression, and pokes at his dinner. "Dad, Irina, this meal is great," he says, a little too chipper. He fools no one.

"Thank you, *lapochka*," Irina says, overly sweet. She reaches across the table to pinch Shane's cheek, and then gives Ilya a pointed look.

Shane avoids Ilya for the rest of the evening. Ilya doesn't bother trying; Shane is quite clear that he has nothing to say to Ilya, and Ilya has quite learned his lesson about pushing Shane when he's already annoyed.

He goes to bed almost as soon as Ilya and Irina leave that night, if only to avoid the questions Yuna doubtlessly has for him. Shane doesn't really have answers to most of them, and the ones he does have answers to, he doesn't really feel like admitting. Ilya hangs out with girls, probably has copious amounts of sex and will be a fifteen year old father of fifty, at the rate he's going. Shane can't stop him from flushing his life down the toilet for a bit of fun, but he can protect his own peace and his own future, and at the end of the day, that's all he's really responsible for.

"You must be joking," Irina says, as the apartment door falls closed behind them. *"Ilya, what on Earth are you thinking—"*

"Nothing happened," Ilya groans. *"We were just hanging out, Mama, I promise. I did not even kiss her."*

"You will not throw this life away, Ilya," Irina says sharply. *"I did not leave Russia for you to become some kind of Western slag."*

"Mama!" Ilya gasps. *"I am telling the truth!"*

Irina does not look appeased, but she does not look like she doubts him, either. She has known about the girls for a while now; she has come home and caught him before, several times, or come home before him and interrogated him until he broke and told her what he had been doing. *"There will be no more girls,"* she says, after a moment. *"Not here, not anywhere else."*

"Okay, Mama." Fat chance.

"Ilya," Irina threatens.

"Yes, Mama."

Irina sits down heavily on the sofa, dragging one hand over her forehead and down to her cheek. Ilya sits down beside her, staring at his own feet.

"You and Shane are fighting again?" she asks after a moment.

"I do not know," Ilya says. *"Probably, yes."*

"Why?" Irina asks.

"He is an annoying little baby," Ilya mutters.

"Ilya," Irina hisses. *"What has gotten into you?"*

Ilya slumps back against the sofa. *"I— I do not know, Mama."*

"Ilyusha," Irina says, softer this time. Ilya wants to cry, which will not be helpful.

"Mama," he says.

"Is it about the girl?" Irina asks. *"Oh, Ilya did you—?"*

"No, Mama," Ilya says quickly. *"Not— it is not that. Not like that."*

"Then what?" Irina pushes.

"Can you just— can we not talk about this, please?" Ilya says tiredly.

Irina watches the side of his face intently for much too long. *"Okay, solnyshko,"* she says eventually. *"You know you can talk to me? Confide in me, vent to me, whatever you need, Ilyusha, I can try to help. David and Yuna are my best friends, yes, but you are my most important friend. You are my top priority, always."*

"Okay," Ilya whispers. *"I am going to bed."*

"Okay," Irina says. *"Goodnight, Ilyusha."*

Ilya barely makes it past his bedroom door before he starts to cry. He turns on his heel and marches back to the sofa, collapsing into his mother's lap.

"Ilyusha," Irina says, alarmed.

"I think I love him, Mama."

Irina is stunned into silence. *"What?"*

"Shane," Ilya snuffles. *"I love him."*

"Well, of course you do," Irina says. *"I should hope you do."*

"No, not— Mama, I love him."

Irina buries a hand in his hair, and he sobs into her lap. *"Oh, muy lyubimyy,"* she breathes. *"Oh, Ilyusha."*

"I have known for months," Ilya says miserably. *"He is so mad at me, about the girls."*

"Why is he mad, solnyshko?"

"I do not know," Ilya says, with a fresh wave of tears. *"He is so mean to me about it, Mama. But I am so lonely. When I am not at school or at hockey, when Shane is not with me and you are at work, I am so lonely, and so bored. I am not close with the other players on the team, not like Shane. He is so good, so nice, everyone likes him right away. It is not the same with me. But girls like me, and I like to be around them. They are fun, and they pay attention to me, but when they leave all I want is Shane, Mama, he is all I think about."*

"Oh, moy lyubimyy," Irina coos. "He loves you so much."

"No," Ilya says. "Not like I do."

"You do not know it yet, and neither does he, I think," Irina says. "But, Ilyusha, that little boy looks at you like you hung the moon. Even when you are fighting, even when you do not speak, Ilya, he adores you. He will figure it out, and he will come around, come back to you. Just give him time."

"That is what I am trying to do," Ilya says. "Give him time. But it is so hard, Mama."

"I know, little darling," Irina says softly. "But you are so young, you have your whole lives."

"Do you think so?" Ilya says, picking his head up to look at Irina's face. "You think we could?"

"I think you can do anything, solnyshko," Irina says, petting over his hair and down the bridge of his nose. "And if there is anything you cannot do, Shane Hollander probably can."

It startles a laugh out of Ilya, which makes Irina smile.

"But..." Ilya says, sitting up and mopping at his face. "Mama, we are both boys, and we both play hockey, and the NHL..."

"The world is changing, moy lyubimyy," Irina says. "And if it does not change fast enough for you, you will change it yourself."

"Really?" Ilya asks.

"I always knew you would save the world someday," Irina smiles, cupping Ilya's cheek and wiping away the moisture left under his eye.

"I cannot save the world, Mama," Ilya says quietly.

Irina leans forward, pressing a kiss to Ilya's forehead. *"You saved my world, Ilyusha,"* she whispers against his skin.

Ilya blinks, pulling back to meet his mother's eyes. She smiles, but does not elaborate. *"Go to sleep, moy lyubimyy,"* she says. *"The world can wait until tomorrow."*

The world can wait until tomorrow, Ilya is sure of that. Ilya is not sure if *he* can wait until tomorrow.

March, 2006

Ilya spends more time and energy than he would like to admit trying to get under Shane Hollander's skin. They have recovered, as they always do, from their latest bout of animosity and awkwardness, but Ilya cannot help but feel as though every crack in the ice between them is driving them further apart.

He makes an attempt each and every time he and Shane are alone together, whether it be a suggestive comment, a flirty glance, a fleeting touch. Shane gets all flustered and red almost every time, except for the times when he just seems to fail to notice at all. He never gives Ilya an inch, never relaxes enough to allow Ilya to make another step. Ilya is starting to lose hope, by the tail end of the season, that Shane is ever going to actually come around to him, the way Irina keeps promising he will. Ilya wants him so, so badly, but he does not want to make Shane uncomfortable, does not want to drive him away. Sometimes, though, Ilya will catch his eye when they are not doing anything, not even speaking, and he could swear Shane looks as if he is getting ready to jump Ilya's bones. It is always so fleeting, though, gone before Ilya can capitalize on it, and then Ilya goes home frustrated and empty to whine to his mother, who is becoming increasingly tired of listening to him cry about Shane Hollander.

They are at the apartment today after school, stretched out on opposite ends of the sofa with Shane's Xbox controllers in their hands. Shane had brought the Xbox here months ago, and never taken it back; the only time he really uses it is with Ilya, and Ilya would never tell, but he often logs into Shane's account to play games even when Shane is not here. Shane probably would not care, even if he knew.

Shane is losing quite spectacularly to Ilya in the EA NHL 2004 at the moment. He gets so competitive, even when all that is at stake is a pointless video game victory, but Ilya thinks it is quite fun to watch his ears go red as he gets mad, the tight little purse of his mouth when he turns to glare at Ilya when the game is over.

"Fuck you," Shane says, tossing the controller onto the table.

Ilya waggles his eyebrows. Shane goes a shade redder.

He lets that hang in the air for a moment, while Shane pulls his phone out of his pocket and pretends to check for any notifications. "So," Ilya says, leaning back against the arm of the sofa and gazing at Shane through half-lidded eyes. "Do you like anyone at school?"

Shane swallows hard, and tries to glare at Ilya. "Why, so you can make sure you don't hook up with her?"

"No," Ilya says quickly. "So I can make sure that I *do*."

"Fuck off," Shane mutters.

"I am joking, Hollander," Ilya says easily. "Try it sometime."

"Whatever."

“I would not do that to you.”

“I know you wouldn’t,” Shane says quietly. There is a beat, and Ilya thinks the conversation has, once again, fallen flat, but then Shane sits up and braces his elbows on his knees, eyes on the floor. “There is someone, maybe.”

Ilya only lives on the second floor of this building, but he wonders how much damage he could do if he jumped out the fucking window. “Who?”

Shane flinches a little, like he was not the one who chose to volunteer that information. “Um. Just a— girl. From my, uh, my computer class.”

“Who is she?” Ilya asks again, resisting the urge to sit up and shake Shane until he confesses every detail.

“She’s older,” Shane says weakly.

“Well, what does she look like?” Ilya presses, kicking at Shane’s leg. Shane sways with the movement. “Is she into you? Have you talked to her?”

Shane keeps his eyes resolutely on the floor, but his cheeks are pinking, hands clasped anxiously between his knees. “She’s beautiful,” is all he offers. Ilya could be sick. “And I think h— she might be into me,” he stutters, “but she’s, like, way too cool and experienced for me, and, just... I don’t know, it doesn’t make sense, because she would never actually be into me,” he says.

Ilya holds his breath for one, two, three. “You are much cooler than you think you are, Hollander.” Shane scoffs. “No, really, I mean it,” Ilya says. “You could have anyone you want.”

Shane finally, *finally* looks up at him. “Anyone?” he asks. His voice is low, defeated, so soft Ilya could curl up in it and fall asleep. Ilya cannot look at him, now that Shane is meeting his eye, so he looks down at Shane’s chest, instead.

“Yes, I mean, probably,” he says. He has never sounded so weak to his own ears.

“Yeah,” Shane scoffs again. “I don’t know.”

“I think you should go for it,” Ilya says, breaking his own heart.

“Yeah, we’ll see,” Shane mutters. “Um. Wanna play again?”

There’s a jingle of keys in the door halfway through the next game, and then Irina appears, apparently dead on her feet. She kisses Ilya’s head on the way past the sofa and offers Shane a sweet smile, and then disappears behind the curtain where she sleeps. Ilya immediately loses interest in the game, and Shane must be able to tell, because he does not even boast about winning.

“Well, I should go home, I guess,” Shane says, pulling his phone out again to check the time. Ilya nods, and then Shane leaves, and then Ilya peels himself off the sofa and makes his way

behind Irina's curtain.

"Give him time, solnyshko," Irina says, as Ilya curls wordlessly into her side on the pullout sofa.

"Mama," Ilya says, his voice wrecked like he has already been crying for hours. He has not. Yet. *"He likes a girl."*

"Oh, moy lyubimyy." Irina holds him tight. *"Darling, I am sorry."*

Ilya presses his tears into her neck, and cries himself to sleep there.

Chapter 7

April, 2006 – Ottawa, Ontario

In an unprecedented landslide victory, the East Ottawa High School Otters win nationals. This is a much bigger deal than it had been with the Owls, and the media coverage reaches a much wider scope, but the majority of the press is devoted to the incredible freshman who scored the game-winning goal: Shane Hollander.

The goal was scored with an assist from Ilya, for the record, but he is happy to sit back and let Shane have his moment. Ilya is careful not to give his last name to any reporters this time around, makes sure the only photos taken of him are taken with his helmet on, and very politely pretends not to speak English when the broadcast journalists come around.

There is a party at some fancy hotel in the city center to celebrate the win; all of the players and their families are invited, along with many of their classmates from school. It is a very formal event, and Shane looks so handsome in his suit and tie, and Ilya accepted some spiked punch from the seniors on the team a little while ago, and Irina has not noticed yet, and neither has Shane, who was not even offered any punch because he has a reputation for being a bit of a wet blanket when it comes to having a little rule-bending fun.

Yuna has not been seen since shortly after they all arrived. She is off talking to every man in a suit that she does not recognize, to be sure, in case any of them are scouts or recruiters. If there is a person in this room who can make anything happen for Shane (and Ilya, by association) Yuna Hollander is going to be the one to find them. David, on the other hand, seems to know exactly what Ilya has gotten into, but he graciously does not say anything, offering Ilya a wink every now and again from the next table over and keeping a close eye on him.

Ilya appreciates that, he really does, but he is not in the mood for being watched, at the moment. He is in the mood for watching, for watching Shane, to be more specific, as he talks and laughs and charms the upperclassmen at their table with his shy, awkward allure. God, Ilya wants him so bad. This is not the time, nor the place.

The dinner portion of the evening has just wrapped up when one of the upperclassmen at their table, Martin, comes running in from somewhere and slams himself down in his seat. “Gentlemen,” he says seriously, gaining the attention of the entire table. “Rose *fucking* Landry is in the lobby.”

Shane goes scarlet, locking eyes with Ilya. Who the fuck is Rose Landry?

“Who the fuck is Rose Landry?” he asks.

“She’s, like, the biggest actress of our generation right now,” Martin hisses. “She was in that movie– uh, what’s it called? When she gets kidnapped by Bill Paxton?”

Ilya rolls his eyes, slumping back in his seat and looking over at Shane again. Shane looks far too interested, and Ilya sits up a little bit again, watching his face.

“She’s in the lobby?” Shane says. “Like, of this hotel? Right now?”

“Yes, dude!” Martin says. “She was having dinner at that little bar area out there by the entrance!”

“Oh my god,” Shane breathes, looking over at Ilya. “Holy shit.”

“Who gives a fuck about Rose Landry?” Ilya wonders aloud. “Is there more of this punch?”

“Think you need to lay off the punch, dude,” Jeff, their captain, says. “Maybe you and Hollander should go take a walk.”

“What? Really?” Shane says.

“She’s a little young for any of us,” Jeff says, shooting Martin a look when he groans. “She’s your age, bro, go introduce yourself.”

“Don’t ask her for an autograph,” Samir pipes up. “Be cool.”

“Okay, okay,” Shane says. “Fuck. What do I say?”

“Tell her she looks familiar, then tell her she looks like the girl of your dreams,” Samir says.

“That is not fucking cool, Sammy,” Martin laughs.

“Just tell her you think she’s cute,” Jeff says. “Hopefully she’s into the, like, baby kitten type.”

“Baby kitten is an oxymoron,” Samir says.

“You’re a moron!” Jeff says, offended.

“That’s not what I– Hollander, go.”

“Okay,” Shane breathes, standing up quickly. He looks down at Ilya, like he expects Ilya to follow him. Ilya does not need to see this happen.

“Good luck,” Ilya mutters, draining the last of his drink.

“Wait, you’re not coming?” Shane asks.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Hollander,” Jeff says, “but you don’t need the competition.”

“Fuck off,” Shane says quickly, and then flushes. “I mean–”

“Did Shane Hollander just tell me to fuck off?” Jeff grins. “Boys, our little baby kitten is growing up!”

“Just a kitten,” Samir says under his breath.

“Hollander!” Martin says. “Go!”

“Okay,” Shane says, straightening out his suit jacket. “If my parents ask, I’m in the bathroom.” He all but sprints out of the reception hall, pushing through the door to the lobby and disappearing. God fucking damnit. Ilya wants to go home.

It isn’t long before Yuna slides into Shane’s empty chair. “Where is Shane?” she asks Ilya. What is Ilya, Shane’s keeper?

“Hooking up with Rose Landry in the lobby,” Ilya mutters, chewing the edge of his plastic cup. God, he wants more punch.

“He’s in the bathroom,” Jeff says helpfully.

Yuna frowns, looking from Jeff back to Ilya.

“Bathroom,” Ilya shrugs.

“Oh, okay,” Yuna says, but the frown does not leave her face. “Alright. Well, when he comes back, tell him I want to talk to him, okay? I just talked to some really interesting people.”

Ilya sinks a little lower in his chair. This night sucks.

Shane takes a few minutes to orient himself in the lobby, wandering around like he’s looking for something. He decides to just loiter to the side of the lobby bar, pulling his Blackberry out of his pocket and pretending to read something on it while he scans the tables around the bar. He doesn’t have to keep the act up long when someone taps his shoulder, and he turns to find the most beautiful girl he has ever seen looking at him expectantly.

“Hi,” she says, smiling politely. “You have, like, spinach or something on your ass.”

“Shut up,” Shane says, immediately reaching for his ass. He comes away with, yup, a lump of cooked spinach from dinner. “Oh my god.”

“Thought you should know,” Rose Landry shrugs.

“Thank you,” Shane says quickly. “Sorry for telling you to shut up, I didn’t mean that.”

“It’s okay,” Rose Landry shrugs again. “Aren’t you gonna ask why I was looking at your ass?”

Shane flushes down to his fucking *toes*, he’s pretty sure. “Uh—”

“Sorry, too forward?” Rose Landry grins. She extends a hand. “Hi, I’m Rose. You’re cute.”

Rose. Rose Landry just told him that her name is *Rose*. Holy fucking *shit*. “Shane,” Shane says, shaking her hand. “But I also answer to cute.”

Rose – *Rose Landry!* – laughs brightly, nodding toward Shane’s phone. “Is that for me?”

Shane hands it over dumbly, staring at Rose’s face while she types her number – *holy fucking shit!* – into his phone.

“Where are you from?” Rose asks, as she hands Shane his phone back.

“Uh, here,” Shane says, gesturing behind him. “Well, not this hotel, specifically. I don’t live here. I live in Ottawa, though, where we... are...”

“Is that where we are?” Rose teases. “Huh. I’m from Michigan.”

“What are you doing in Ottawa?” Shane asks, leaning against the wall, hoping he looks cool and confident and not like he’s trying not to pass out.

“Filming,” Rose says, and then gives him a curious look. “A movie.”

“Yeah, I know who you are,” Shane admits. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Rose says. “Oh my god, you’re so cute.”

“My, uh, hockey team just won nationals,” Shane says.

“Wow,” Rose says. “Congratulations.”

“I think I’m gonna win MVP tonight.”

“Holy shit,” Rose says. “Wait, how old are you?”

“Fifteen,” Shane says, straightening up a little.

“Fifteen? So you’re, what, a freshman?” She looks doubtful. “And you’re gonna win MVP?”

“I scored the winning goal,” Shane says. “And, uh, two of the other goals. And two assists. We won 6-1.”

“Wow,” Rose says. “That’s— actually really impressive. Congrats on the hat trick.”

Shane grins. “You like hockey?”

“My brothers play,” Rose says. “Well, I have to get to my room, I have a stupidly early shoot tomorrow. But maybe I could call you after?”

“Yeah, definitely,” Shane says quickly. “Definitely call me after.”

“Okay,” Rose smiles. “I will definitely call you after.”

“Okay,” Shane says. “Nice to meet you, Rose Landry. I mean— Rose.”

Rose grins like he’s the cutest thing she’s ever seen. Shane might actually pass out. “Nice to meet you, too, Shane...”

“Hollander,” Shane says quickly. “Shane Hollander.”

“Shane Hollander,” Rose muses. “That’s a good name.”

“Thanks,” Shane says. “My parents thought so.”

Rose laughs again, the sound of it bouncing around the lobby. “Stop it, you’re so cute,” she says, leaning in and up to press a kiss to his cheek. Shane’s head swims a little. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow, Shane Hollander,” she says, winking as she starts to back away.

“Tomorrow, Rose Landry,” Shane calls after her.

Rose grins at him one more time before skipping to the elevator, and then she’s gone, and Shane slides down the wall until he’s sitting on the floor. He still has a lump of spinach in his hand.

June, 2006 – Lanaudière, Québec

If Shane does not stop staring at his phone, Ilya is going to throw it into the lake. Ilya does not even want to be here, had begged Irina to let him stay home this year from the annual trip to the Hollanders’ cottage, but Irina is hell-bent on making sure he and Shane stay close, despite the fact that the only thing Shane fucking cares about is his stupid new girlfriend.

His rich, famous, incredibly gorgeous girlfriend, who is currently in LA filming some kind of new kidnapping movie, which Ilya is pretty sure she has already done a few times before. Maybe she just is not that talented of an actress. Maybe Ilya is a little bitter.

Shane and Rose have been dating a little over a month, but they have only hung out in person one time, the day after nationals back in April. Ilya swears he has heard every single detail of that day at least five times, if not more. For someone who damn near excommunicated his best friend for kissing girls, he sure wants to talk about his stupid fucking girlfriend a lot.

Ilya is miserable. Ilya is completely, thoroughly miserable, and he is not hiding it well. He has been staring at the back of Shane’s phone for the entire morning, so far; it is only day two of fourteen of this trip, but if Shane carries on like this, Ilya might be forced to drown him.

It would not be so bad if Shane would just stop acting like he is the king of the fucking world, or something. He seems so *happy*, so light and carefree, in a way that Ilya has never known Shane Hollander to be. Regrettably, this girl seems like she might be really good for him. It really is too bad that Ilya is going to have to fly to LA and hunt her for sport.

“Hollander,” Ilya says loudly, scaring a few birds out of a shrub near the rocky beach next to the dock. “You are being *so boring*.”

Shane does not seem to hear him. He is too busy smiling at his fucking stupid little phone.

“Hollander!”

“Okay, okay,” Shane says, still laughing to himself as he puts his phone down. “Sorry. Rose was just saying—”

“I want to go swimming,” Ilya interrupts, pulling his shirt off over his head. Ilya has always been strong and lean, but he has really filled out since last summer, his chest and arms taut with muscles. He arches a little as he takes his shirt off, flexing his biceps as he flings it further up the dock, but when he looks down to see if Shane is looking, he finds the back of Shane’s *fucking* phone again.

Ilya jumps as high as he can, tucking his knees into his chest and coming down into the water hard. He does not get the privilege of watching his splash cascade over Shane, but he does get to see the aftermath, emerging from the water to find Shane, now standing, drenched in water and frantically tapping at his phone.

“Ilya!” Shane growls. “You just got my phone all wet!”

“Oops,” Ilya says, and then ducks back under the water. He stays under for as long as he can, eyes open, watching through the ripples of the surface as Shane turns on his heel and runs from the dock.

Ilya waits until his lungs are burning, and then finally emerges from under the water and takes a breath. He floats on his back, watching the sky for a while, until a shadow falls over his face, and he rights himself and begins to tread water.

Irina is standing on the end of the dock, watching him with so much sorrow in her eyes that it makes Ilya feel even worse than he already does.

“*Is his phone broken?*” Ilya asks.

“*It is being buried in rice,*” Irina says. Ilya frowns, and Irina shrugs. “*I do not know, but they are confident it will fix it.*”

“*Are you here to punish me?*” Ilya says, bored.

“No,” Irina says.

“*I am begging you,*” Ilya says. “*Send me to my room for the rest of the day. Better yet, cut the whole trip short, send me back to Ottawa to think about what I have done.*”

“Oh, Ilyusha,” Irina sighs. *“I know that you are—”*

“Mama, respectfully,” Ilya says, *“I cannot bear it.”*

“I know,” Irina says, so softly that Ilya has to duck under the water until his lungs are burning again just to give the pain in his heart a physical sensation to attach to. When he surfaces, Irina is sitting, knees pulled up to her chest with her chin atop them.

“You have to apologize, solnyshko,” Irina says. *“Even if it is a lie.”*

Ilya rolls his eyes. Irina tuts at him for it.

“I will apologize,” Ilya says, as he tips back again to float. *“Later.”*

“Ilya,” Irina says, more firmly now. Ilya wants to duck under the water again, but he could never be so disrespectful to his sweet mother.

“Fine,” he groans, turning over on his stomach and swimming to the shore, instead of climbing back up on the dock. Irina meets him on the rocky beach, and then follows him up to the cottage like a prison guard.

Shane is sitting at the kitchen table in front of a bowl of rice, staring at it like it is going to do a trick. Ilya wants to chirp at him so, so badly, but Shane looks so mad already, and Ilya still has to share a room with him for twelve more nights.

Ilya stops in the doorway from the deck to avoid dripping all over the floor. “Sorry, Hollander.”

Shane looks up at him, but his eyes get stuck somewhere around Ilya’s chest. Ilya feels a droplet of water run from his neck down between his pecs, and then down his stomach, dripping to the floor somewhere around his belly button. Shane’s eyes track the entire movement.

“Whatever,” Shane says, voice weak. “It was an accident,” he says. “Right?”

“Right,” Ilya says, turning on his heel and marching away. God, he hopes Shane is watching him go.

Irina gives him a tight smile on his way past her, but Ilya only nods in response. He goes back down to the lake, spends much too long in the water, until his fingers are pruny and he is shivering, and then even a little longer after that. He feels safe down here, with the fish, who do not have feelings. Maybe they could teach him how to do that.

He probably will never get over this. Knowing Shane, this girl will end up being the love of his life. Shane Hollander does not do anything halfway; he met Ilya exactly once, back in the sixth grade, and instantly claimed him as his best friend forever. He has played one season of high school level hockey, and took it all the way to nationals almost single-handedly. Shane is not the kind of guy to date a girl for a couple of weeks and then decide he is not into it. Shane is the kind of guy to find a girl he likes at fifteen and devote himself to her for the rest of his life. They are going to get married, probably, and have lots of very beautiful babies, with

emerald green eyes and freckles, the perfect mix of their perfect parents. Ilya is going to die alone, because he will never, ever love anybody the way he loves Shane Hollander.

Shane is in the yard when Ilya emerges from the water. He looks lost, kicking a rock through the grass with the toe of his boat shoe.

“One hour without your phone and you have reverted back to stone age?” Ilya calls to him.

Shane just looks at him, determinedly holding his eye contact this time. He manages to keep it until Ilya gets close enough to see the freckles dotting his cheeks, more plentiful in the sunshine, and then Shane looks over his shoulder. “I’m sorry,” Shane says to the lake. “For ignoring you.”

“Is okay,” Ilya says. His accent gets heavier when he is annoyed, apparently. “Hot new girlfriend, I get it.”

Shane scoffs. “Yeah, I know you do.”

“I do not, actually,” Ilya says. “I have never had girlfriend.”

“Oh,” Shane says, frowning at the ground between them. “Right.”

“Is fun?” Ilya asks, for some reason. He does not actually want to know.

“Yeah, really fun,” Shane says. “She’s, like, so cool, and so funny, and smart, and just good at, like, being a person,” he says. “I can’t believe she likes me.”

Ilya sniffs, nodding distantly. “She is lucky to have you.”

Shane meets his eyes again, finally. “Yeah?”

“Lucky to be on the front of your phone, unlike me, stuck to the back,” Ilya says pointedly.

“I’m sorry,” Shane says again. He really sounds it. He is not nearly sorry enough. “C’mon, then. What do you wanna do? Wanna go swimming?”

Ilya holds up his wrinkled fingers. “My body has had enough,” he says.

Shane’s eyes sweep over Ilya’s bare chest again at the mention of his body. Interesting.

“Okay, uh, there’s a soccer ball under the deck, want me to go grab it?”

“Okay,” Ilya says, heading back down to the beach to put his shirt back on while Shane retrieves the ball; Shane does not get to look at Ilya’s chest if he has a girlfriend. It is against the rules, Ilya thinks.

They kick the ball around for a while, and while they are at it, Ilya can almost put the girlfriend thing out of his head. Almost. Shane laughs and shoves him and shouts and presses himself against Ilya to block him from getting the ball and it almost feels like they are back to normal, back to *them*. Almost.

Later that night, when Shane's phone is up and running again, the feeling slips away. When Shane is sleeping, Ilya pulls the phone off of the charger, leaving it to die in the night before the sun comes back up.

Shane loves Ilya and Irina, really, he does, but if they don't get the fuck out of the cottage in the next five minutes, Shane is going to go insane. David is driving them back to Ottawa alone, leaving Yuna and Shane at the cottage for the day, and Yuna and Irina have been saying their goodbyes for the past twenty minutes in the driveway.

Ilya has been a fucking bitch for the past two weeks; Shane isn't usually one to use that word, but it's the only word that fits. He's been an absolute brat, hiding Shane's phone all the time just to mess with him, just because Shane has been able to actually form a meaningful relationship with a girl and Ilya hasn't. Ilya can kick rocks, as far as Shane is concerned. Shane is so excited to have his room back to himself, to be able to Skype with Rose whenever he wants, not just when Ilya is in the shower or moping around in Irina's room.

It takes another ten minutes before the Volvo finally pulls out of the driveway, tires crunching over the gravel. Shane stands on the front step a little longer than he means to; Ilya didn't even look at him today, beyond saying goodbye before he got into the car to wait thirty minutes to leave. He's got his head down as the Volvo pulls away, eyebrows pinched together, and Shane almost has it in him to feel bad for him.

Shane doesn't feel bad for him, though, is the thing. Ilya could be supportive, could be happy that Shane is happy, could be trying to form a friendship with Rose, too. Instead he's been mean, petty, just all around miserable to be in a room with. And, like, Shane gets it. He'd be beside himself if Ilya had a hot movie star girlfriend all of a sudden. He'd be completely devastated, actually. Huh... maybe he should have been a little nicer to Ilya...

No matter. Rose has been asking all day when he'll be free to Skype, so he takes off running back into the cottage and up to his room. The trundle is still pulled out. Shane forces it back under his bed before he plops down with his laptop and calls Rose.

"Hey, sexy," Rose answers, her pixelated face popping up on the screen. "How are you?"

"Hi," Shane smiles at her. "I'm good. Ilya and his mom just left."

"Must be quiet there now, huh?" Rose asks.

"Yeah," Shane says. "It's usually kinda boring when Ilya leaves for the summer, when it's just me and my parents, but he was super annoying these past two weeks, honestly."

"Really?" Rose says. "You've only talked about him, like, every single day."

"What?" Shane blanches.

“You do realize you’ve barely said anything to me in the past two weeks that wasn’t about Ilya, right?” Rose says.

“Well, he was here, in my house, for two weeks straight,” Shane says, defensive. “What else would I have to talk about?”

“M’kay,” Rose says. “So, what’s new?”

Shane shrugs. “Well, Ilya and I—”

“Shane!”

“I’m sorry!” Shane says. “He’s my best friend! I don’t know what else to talk about!”

“Should I be jealous of him, or something?” Rose teases.

If Shane was defensive before, he nearly goes through the screen at her, now. “No,” he says desperately. “I like you so much, Rose, I’m sorry. I’ll stop talking about Ilya.”

“I was joking, Shane,” Rose says, like he’s an idiot. He might be. “I don’t think you’re into Ilya.”

Shane blinks. “Oh. Okay.”

“Unless you are into Ilya,” Rose frowns suspiciously.

“No,” Shane says, heart sinking. This cannot be happening, she cannot know—

“Oh my god, I can’t believe I didn’t see this coming,” Rose says. “I thought I was safe when I stopped dating guys from theater school, I never thought that my *hockey player* boyfriend would also turn out to be gay.”

Shane’s world is crumbling. *Gay*. It’s a word he’s never let himself consider, but there it is, and— it doesn’t even feel wrong, not exactly.

“I am not gay,” he says anyway, trying like hell to keep the tremble out of his voice and mostly succeeding.

“Shane,” Rose says. She’s still smiling, god, Shane feels like he could explode. “I like you so much, you’re so cool and so funny, but you are definitely into Ilya.”

Shane could argue, he really could, but, *fuck*, she’s right. She’s completely right, and Shane is so fucked. It’s not even that he’s never been able to admit it to himself, but that he never even saw this coming. He’s completely blindsided, but it all makes perfect sense; his irrational anger and jealousy about Ilya hanging out with girls, the intense, inordinate fear of losing Ilya, it all comes back to one thing. Shane is fucking in love with him.

Rose is just looking at him, waiting for something, anything, and Shane feels tears well in his eyes. “I’m trying really hard, Rose.”

Rose blinks, and then gets closer to her camera. “Wait, what? Are you– are you crying? Holy shit, Shane, I’m so sorry, I thought we were just joking around!”

The emotional roller coaster hits a sick twist. Shane fights the urge to vomit over the side of his bed. “I am not crying,” he says. The tears haven’t fallen yet, it doesn't count.

“Are you actually–” Rose lowers her voice, “into him?”

Well. Too late to turn back, now.

“I think,” Shane whispers. “Maybe.”

“Holy fuck,” Rose groans, leaning back in her hotel desk chair. “Oh, god, my gaydar is really slipping.”

“Can you–” Shane is panicking now, frantically blinking back tears. “Please don’t tell anyone, Rose, I–”

“Hey,” Rose says, shaking her head. “I would never tell anyone, I promise. I’m really happy you told me, for the record.”

“Okay,” Shane says, forcing himself to breathe in deep.

“Have you, like, kissed him or anything yet?” Rose asks.

“No,” Shane says miserably.

“Well, do you think he’s into you, too?” she asks.

“No,” Shane scoffs. “He’s, like, obsessed with girls.”

Rose shrugs on his laptop screen. “He could be bi,” she suggests.

“He’s not,” Shane says decisively.

“Well, I think you should tell him,” Rose says. “Maybe just about the gay thing, for now, and see how he reacts?”

“I cannot fucking do that, Rose,” Shane says.

“If he’s your best friend, then he’ll support you no matter what,” Rose says. “And if he doesn’t support you, then he’s not really your friend. And, also, I will fucking murder him,” she says.

Shane huffs a laugh, rubbing at his eyes. Ilya really *is* his friend, and that's kinda the problem; they’re way too close as friends to lose each other over this stupid crush that Shane's only just realized he’s been harboring.

“I guess we’re broken up, now, huh?” Shane says.

“Yeah,” Rose says. “But, like, can you still be my gay best friend? I really like you, Shane Hollander.”

Shane smiles at his screen, and nods. “I really like you too, Rose Landry.”

“Thank god,” Rose says. “Okay, well, I have to go. I have a meeting with a director in, like, twenty minutes.”

“Okay,” Shane says. “Uh, Rose?”

“Uh, Shane?” Rose says playfully.

“Thank you,” he says. “I think— I really needed someone to talk to about this.”

“More like someone to spell it out for you,” Rose says. “Sorry for making you cry.”

“You didn’t,” Shane says. “And I didn’t cry, bye!”

He hangs up on her while she’s still arguing her case, and then receives a text message thirty seconds later.

Rose Landry: >:(

Shane: <3

Rose Landry: <3

August, 2006 – Ottawa, Ontario

Shane Hollander is at Ilya’s door. He looks nervous, which tracks, but he also looks oddly confident, and he is dressed like an expensive house-husband, in a button-down linen shirt that fits him very well, and a pair of tailored chino shorts. His hair has gotten quite long, and he has it kind of parted around his forehead, and he looks so incredibly gorgeous, sunkissed and fit and healthy, Ilya cannot help but stare.

“Hi,” Shane says, as soon as Ilya opens the door. Ilya is dumbfounded, blinking slowly at him. “Um, can I come in?”

Ilya moves aside. Shane strides in like he owns the place, sitting down hard on the sofa.

“Um, how was the rest of your summer?” Shane asks.

“Why are you here?” Ilya asks, in lieu of answering.

Shane's smile falls, and he looks down at Ilya's bare feet. "I, uh, I wanted to apologize."

Ilya leans back against the door, crossing his arms over his chest. He raises his eyebrows when Shane just looks at him, gesturing for him to get on with it.

"I'm sorry," Shane says, slowly and carefully, the way he used to talk when Ilya could barely understand him. God, Ilya has missed him. "I was— kinda awful to you at the cottage. I didn't mean to be, really, but I kinda didn't realize til you left, and then it was too late to say anything. I'm really sorry, Ilya, honestly. I was such a dick."

"You were more than a dick," Ilya says, pushing away from the door and walking to the kitchen. He pours himself a glass of water at the sink and drinks it all in one go, just to have something to do with himself.

"You're right," Shane says, following after him. "I, um," he hesitates, waiting for Ilya to glance over at him. "Are you mad at me?"

Yes. "No," Ilya says. "You look nice."

Shane looks affronted. "Oh, thanks," he says.

"New clothes?"

"Uh, yeah," Shane says, looking down at himself. "I, uh, wanted to try something new."

"Tired of looking like shit?" Ilya says.

"I didn't look like shit," Shane says. "I just wore, like, athletic stuff."

"I know what you wore," Ilya says. "So that is all? Just came to apologize?"

"Are you sure you're not mad?" Shane asks.

"Do I seem mad?" Ilya says.

Shane hesitates. "Kinda?" he answers sheepishly.

Ilya breathes in deep. "What do you want, Hollander?"

"I want to talk to you," Shane says. "I want you to not be mad at me. I want to do whatever you want me to do so you won't be mad at me."

Oh, what Ilya would have him do. "Get on your knees," he says.

Shane flushes immediately, taking a step back. "*What?*"

"On your knees," Ilya says again. "Beg forgiveness."

"Fuck off, Rozanov," Shane says.

"Eh, then, still mad," Ilya shrugs, turning around to refill his glass.

“C’mon,” Shane says. “Want to go to the rink? The park? The ice cream shop? Want to play video games?”

Ilya shakes his head. Shane starts to deflate.

“Is there anything?” Shane asks, voice getting tight. “Please?”

Ilya looks him up and down. Having a rich, famous girlfriend looks *so* good on him.

“Ilya,” Shane says desperately.

“How is Rose Landry?” Ilya asks.

Shane starts to fidget, clearly uncomfortable. He cannot meet Ilya’s eyes all of a sudden, but Ilya’s eyes stay locked on him, suddenly very interested in whatever is happening.

“We, uh,” Shane swallows hard. “We broke up.”

Ilya could sing. He could dance. He could *fly*, probably, if he jumped high enough. “Oh?”

“Yeah,” Shane says. “She’s really great, and we’re still friends, but we just, um. We weren’t, y’know... compatible.”

“When?” Ilya asks, too intense, but Shane does not seem to notice.

“Weeks ago,” Shane says, and then, when Ilya is not appeased. “Um. The day you left the cottage, actually.”

Ilya feels the urge to put his fist through a wall. All this time, this whole summer, Ilya was sitting in this apartment, depressed and miserable, thinking Shane was falling ever more deeply in love with his hot movie star girlfriend, and that was not true for even a *moment*. Ilya wants to scream, but instead he just puts his glass down and grips the edge of the counter. “Why?”

Shane fidgets again. “Um, it’s kinda a long story, I guess.”

“I have time,” Ilya says.

“We– talked,” Shane says. “About– stuff. And it just, kinda, became clear that we are, uh... not quite... aligned, in some ways.”

“In what ways?”

“I’d kinda prefer not to talk about it,” Shane says quietly.

“Then go,” Ilya says. He is being cruel, and Shane’s eyes are wet all of a sudden, but Ilya is so angry with him he cannot bring himself to care.

“Ilya,” Shane says.

“All of that– the whole two weeks, you are glued to your phone, you hardly say a word to me, you ignore me and treat me like shit, and then you break up the day I leave, and you cannot tell me why? Fuck that, Hollander,” Ilya spits.

“I am so sorry, Ilya,” Shane says, tears spilling over. Ilya is surprised; Shane could have gotten defensive, could have gotten mad, could have given in and crossed his own boundary because Ilya forced him to. Instead, he cries, not bothering to wipe his tears away. “I’m sorry, I know, I was the fucking worst and I get it– I get it if you hate me. But I miss you so much and I want to fix it so bad but I just don’t know how to.”

“I do not hate you,” Ilya says, his heart breaking in his chest. Shane looks so young, standing here crying in Ilya’s kitchen. He looks like he did in the sixth grade, when he was all baby fat and round cheeks, and he is so sorry that he is *crying* about it, and Ilya’s resolve crumbles before his eyes. “Hey, Hollander.”

Shane hangs his head, hiccuping a little as he tries to get himself together. “I’m sorry, Ilya.”

“Shane,” Ilya says, stepping into Shane’s space. He hooks a finger under Shane’s chin, tipping his head up, and Shane locks eyes with him through his tears.

I love you, Ilya thinks. God, fuck, I love you.

“Ilya?”

Ilya startles, drops his hand. Shane steps back half a foot, wiping frantically at his face.

“I forgive you,” Ilya says quietly.

“Really?” Shane asks, looking up at him with red-rimmed eyes and so, so much hope.

“Yes,” Ilya says. “And I have a favor to ask.”

“Anything,” Shane says immediately.

“Can I have Rose Landry’s number?”

“Oh, fuck you,” Shane says, but he smiles after, and then laughs. He laughs so hard he makes himself cry again, and Ilya laughs along with him, until they both have to gasp to catch their breath. When the laughter subsides, Ilya steps back into Shane’s space, hugging him tight to his chest without worrying about whether it is weird or not. Shane goes easily, melting into Ilya’s chest.

“I need a cigarette,” Ilya says, when they break apart.

“Smoking is bad for you,” Shane says immediately.

“Ah, really?” Ilya says, as he crosses into his bedroom and emerges with a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. “And, tell me, Hollander, is the sky blue?”

“Fuck off,” Shane says, but he is smiling at Ilya so softly, it sort of negates the sentiment.

“Come on,” Ilya says, nodding toward the door. “We are going outside. I want ice cream after.”

“Fine,” Shane says, still smiling, following where Ilya leads.

October, 2006

Sophomore year is a lot like freshman year, so far, except that all of the new freshmen on the team are so, so bad at hockey. Ilya and Shane are still the very best, by a very large margin, but they are as close again now as they were in middle school, which means that hockey practice is very fun again, whether it sucks or not.

The universe seems more balanced when Ilya and Shane are on good terms. There are still things Shane refuses to talk to him about, still things that Shane clearly resents about Ilya, and things Ilya resents about Shane, too, but they are good, they are so good, and it feels like there is no obstacle their friendship cannot overcome, at this point. Shane can continue being cagey about whatever the fuck happened with Rose Landry, that is fine, Ilya will continue secretly kissing every dark haired girl with freckles in Ottawa, and they will never talk about any of it.

Playful Rose Landry slander has kind of become Ilya’s favorite hobby, ever since she stepped down from being his biggest opponent. Shane does not love it, obviously, but he takes it, even laughs sometimes when Ilya is particularly quick with it. Ilya thinks it is a good thing; Rose Landry could have very well ended their entire friendship, but instead, she became merely a funny anecdote. Yes, Shane is still friends with her, but Ilya chooses to ignore that part of the narrative, and Shane usually chooses to let him.

Except today. Shane has been getting increasingly more annoyed with Ilya throughout practice, which has made Ilya increasingly more annoying, and rinse, and repeat. It never reaches the level that Ilya knows very well it can reach, but Shane is huffy with him as they leave the rink together, walking a solid three paces ahead of Ilya on the sidewalk.

“Hollander,” Ilya calls obnoxiously. “Slow down.” They are supposed to be heading back to Ilya’s for a while, at least until Irina gets home, if she is not already home, as has become customary so far this season after each practice. Irina’s hours have increased by almost double since she started taking classes at a local culinary school in addition to cleaning houses, and Ilya still gets lonely in the apartment by himself.

“You walk faster,” Shane says, but he slows down minutely, allowing Ilya to catch up with him.

“You are so tense,” Ilya says. “What is wrong with you?”

“Nothing,” Shane huffs.

“At least when you had a girlfriend you had a real excuse to ignore me,” Ilya says. “What is your excuse now? Or is Rose Landry back in the picture?”

“Oh, will you stop with that?” Shane bites. “It wasn’t even that big of a deal!”

“Yes it was, Shane,” Ilya says seriously. “You made out with the hottest actress of our generation. It was definitely a big deal.”

“I never even kissed her!” Shane admits, and then looks horribly embarrassed. Ilya stops in his tracks. Shane stops too, stumbling a little as he turns around to face Ilya.

“You never kissed her?” he asks.

“No!” Shane grumbles.

“Why?” Ilya pushes.

“We only hung out in person that one time,” Shane says. “And I was nervous, and I didn’t want to rush it, and, I don’t know, I kinda– didn’t... want to, looking back now.”

Ilya might fall over.

“You didn’t want to,” Ilya repeats.

“I don’t know,” Shane mutters. “I guess not?”

“You were on a date with *Rose Landry* and you did not want to kiss her?” Ilya says, dumbfounded.

“Yes, Ilya, fuck!”

“Have you ever wanted to kiss someone else?” Ilya asks, too quickly. He and Shane are standing so close together, he notices suddenly, Shane’s back only inches away from the wall of the darkened rowhouse behind him.

Shane flushes, eyes darting to Ilya’s mouth. Ilya’s stomach dips. “I don’t know,” Shane says, swallowing hard. “Maybe.”

“Who?” Ilya says, swaying almost imperceptively closer.

Shane hesitates. His back touches the wall behind him. Ilya is so close to him, looming over him. “I don’t know,” Shane says again, his voice the smallest Ilya has ever heard it.

“Who, Shane,” Ilya says, but he is not really asking. He is staring at Shane’s lips– this is it, he knows this is it, he just needs the go ahead, just needs this to not fall flat like every other fucking time–

“You.”

Ilya slams into him, his hand coming to cradle the back of Shane’s head so that he doesn’t hit the brick wall behind him as Ilya crushes their mouths together, kissing Shane like he has never wanted anything so badly in his life. He truly, honestly, has never wanted anything so bad in his life.

Shane is exactly as eager as Ilya expected him to be. After the initial shock passes, Shane gets his hands on Ilya’s cheeks, down his neck, his shoulders, his chest, and then his waist, as if trying to touch every part of him at once, like he has been waiting his entire life to be allowed to do this. Ilya understands the feeling. He uses the hand that is not protecting Shane’s precious skull to grip his hip, sliding all the way up his side, up over his chest, and then to cup the side of Shane’s jaw, tilting Shane’s head so that Ilya can kiss him harder. Shane melts against him, lets Ilya do whatever he wants, and when Ilya pulls away, Shane looks drunk.

I love you, Ilya thinks, but that is way too much too soon, if the way Shane’s eyes are already widening is anything to go by.

“You,” Shane says, touching his lips. “You just—”

“Shane,” Ilya says lowly. *Please, please do not let this turn bad—*

“You kissed me,” Shane says. It is not an accusation, just merely an observation.

“Yes,” Ilya says. His heart is hammering.

“Wow,” Shane says, shaking his head a little. “Can you, uh— will you do it again?”

Ilya grins, answering him with another, albeit softer kiss. He cradles Shane’s head again, but he brings Shane to him this time, Shane’s arms coming to rest low around his waist.

“Oh my god,” Shane says, when they break apart. “We kissed.”

“Twice,” Ilya points out.

“Twice,” Shane agrees.

“Three times?” Ilya offers.

Shane laughs brightly, throwing his arms around Ilya’s neck and kissing him like Ilya has never been kissed before, and Ilya has been kissed many, many times.

Shane touches his lips when they break apart again, eyes sparkling in the street lights as he gazes up at Ilya. Ilya wants to kiss him again, so he does, because he can, because Shane likes it, Shane likes it exactly as much as Ilya hoped he would.

“I don’t ever want you to kiss anyone else,” Ilya says, stroking this thumb over Shane’s freckles.

“I don’t ever want you to kiss anyone else, either,” Shane breathes.

“Okay,” Ilya smiles easily.

Shane blinks. “Okay?” he asks.

“I have kissed everyone at this school except the one person I wanted to kiss all along,” Ilya says, watching Shane’s eyes as he melts. “And now I have done it, and I think I will keep doing it.”

“Okay,” Shane says, dazed and grinning.

“Okay,” Ilya echoes.

“I have to go home,” Shane says suddenly, but he makes no move to leave Ilya’s arms. The street they are on is dark and quiet, no one around but the two of them.

“I thought we were going back to mine?” Ilya frowns.

Shane leans up and kisses him chastely, and then does it again. “Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” Ilya says. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Shane grins. “I’m okay. Are you?”

“I am perfect,” Ilya says, kissing him sweetly once more. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow,” Shane says, and then he takes off running, and Ilya laughs as he watches him go. Oh, Ilya is so in love with him, but that is okay, because Shane might actually feel the same way.

Irina, by some miracle, is in the kitchen when Ilya arrives home. He bursts in so suddenly and so loudly with a bright, “*Mama!*” that Irina drops the baking tray of food in her hands and screams.

“*Ilya!*” she says sharply. “*What has gotten into you?*”

“*I did it, Mama!*” Ilya says, his grin overtaking his face. He steps around the massacred pelmeni on the floor, wrapping his arms around his mother and squeezing.

“*You did what?*” Irina cries, trying to push him away to rescue her pelmeni.

“*I kissed him!*” Ilya all but shrieks, pulling away to see his mother’s face. “*I kissed Shane! And he liked it!*”

Irina blinks, and then her jaw drops open. “*Ilyusha!*” she grins.

“*It was so perfect, Mama,*” Ilya gushes. “*He was so happy, he kissed me back and he was so smiley and it was so good, Mama.*”

“*Oh, solnyshko, I am so happy for you,*” Irina coos, wrapping him in her arms. “*I told you, moy lyubimyy, that boy adores you.*”

"You were right, Mama," Ilya says into her hair. "I am so happy."

"So am I, my darling," Irina says. Her eyes are wet when she pulls away.

"I am sorry about the pelmeni," Ilya says, glancing down at the mess on the floor.

"No bother," Irina says, waving him off. "Come on, I got paid today, and we are going out for pizza."

Shane sprints all the way home, grinning all the while. It isn't until he gets to his own front door that his smile drops, and his nerves take over. Oh, god, what has he done? He can't be normal about this, can't go inside and pretend that didn't just happen. He's going to have to tell his parents; he'd have to tell them even if he could keep a secret, because he's almost willing to bet that Ilya has already told Irina.

He holds his breath and bursts through the door, marching into the living room. David and Yuna both look up at him from the sofa, startled by his entrance.

"Shane?" Yuna says. "I thought you were going to Ilya's, we were supposed to—"

"I kissed Ilya," Shane announces, much too loud.

His parents are silent. Yuna leans forward to grab the remote, switching the TV off. "What?"

"I kissed Ilya," Shane says again, more in the cadence of a question this time. "Just now. After practice. I kissed him. I like him. He likes me. We kissed."

No one says a word for a very long, tense minute. And then David laughs. "Oh, thank god."

Yuna gets up and hugs him, squeezing him almost tighter than he can bear. "Oh, honey," she says, voice thick with emotion. "We thought you'd never do it."

"What?" Shane sputters, pulling away.

"Seriously, Shane?" David asks, still laughing. "We have all been waiting for this for *years*. We kinda assumed it was already happening."

"Oh my god," Shane says. He is mortified, but mostly he is just overwhelmed with relief, not only that Ilya likes him back, but that his parents are so readily accepting of it that they assumed it was already happening and never said a word about it.

"We love you, honey," Yuna says, petting briefly at his hair. "And we love Ilya. We could not be happier for you."

Shane goes to bed that night feeling like he's already dreaming.

Chapter 8

December, 2006 – Ottawa, Ontario

“–fucking unbelievable, man,” Henry is laughing, nudging Shane as he sits down beside him at the lunch table. “Hollander, you hear about this shit?”

“What shit?” Shane says.

“Your boy, Rozanov,” Henry says. Shane flushes, hopefully imperceptively, and pretends that the zipper on his lunchbox is stuck. “It’s all over school.”

“What?” Shane asks again, solving his imaginary problem and pulling out his sandwich.

“He got caught–” Henry cuts off when Matt elbows him, and lowers his voice, “fucking some senior girl in the art room closet.”

Shane clenches his jaw, fingers dimpling the bread on his sandwich beyond repair. “Wow,” he says flatly.

“He’s insane, dude,” Henry says. “Fucking legend.”

“It’s just a rumor,” Shane says. “Could be totally fake, you know.”

“How would you know? You only just learned about it now,” Henry says.

“He’s Rozanov’s best friend, jackass,” Matt says.

“Still, Rozanov moves in mysterious ways,” Henry says. “I’d bet anything it’s true.”

Shane bites into his sandwich like he’s mad at it. The conversation shifts to something else, some other scandal of the week at East Ottawa High School, but Shane has long tuned out, staring at the seat across from him where Ilya should be. After a few minutes, when Ilya still has not arrived, Shane starts to get worried, glancing around the cafeteria.

“Hey, has anyone seen Ilya?” Shane asks, glancing sideways at his friends.

“Probably busy fucking some girl in some other closet,” Henry quips. “Probably not the art closet, if you’re gonna go looking. That one’s busted.”

Shane rolls his eyes and packs up his lunch, slinging his backpack over his shoulder and heading for the exit to the hallway. The art closet, come on. Ilya probably doesn’t even know where the art room is.

He crosses through the front lobby of the school to get to the stairwell, heading to Ilya’s last class before lunch to see if he can trace his footsteps, but he doesn’t even make it out of the

lobby before the front office door swings open. Shane glances up reflexively and finds, with a sinking feeling in his stomach, Ilya.

"Hey," Shane says, glancing at the door Ilya has just emerged from. He winces. "Headmaster's office?"

"Shane," Ilya says, marching over to him with wide eyes. "I promise, I did not—"

"I know," Shane says, reaching for Ilya's hand, and bumping it with his own when he thinks better of latching on.

"I would never—"

"I *know*, Ilya," Shane says. "It's okay."

"It is not okay," Ilya hisses, glancing around quickly and then pulling Shane into the boy's bathroom across the lobby. Shane watches him check under every stall, and then he turns around, marching back to Shane again. "They are talking about— they might have me kicked off the team."

If Shane's stomach sank before, it falls now like an anvil. "*What!?*"

"I will kill the person who started this rumor," Ilya growls. "I will—"

"Okay, before we jump straight to jail," Shane says, reaching for Ilya's hips. Ilya softens, letting himself be pulled toward Shane, letting Shane peck his lips. "Walk me through this, baby."

"I did nothing," Ilya says simply. "Somebody says I did. I get called to office, headmaster yells a lot, threatens to call my mother, threatens to have me kicked off team, removed from school. I tell him I did nothing, I say it over and over, he does not believe me, I say there is no proof, he says he will find proof. I am fucked," he shrugs.

"Fuck," Shane says. "Okay, well, there is no proof to find, because you didn't do it."

"I promise I did not, *moy lyubimyy*," Ilya whispers.

"Ilya, I *know*," Shane can't help but smile. "Hey, we're gonna figure this out."

Ilya drops his forehead to Shane's shoulder. "How?"

Shane kisses the side of his head, moving his hands from Ilya's hips to wrap around his lower back. "I'll call my mom."

Within the hour, Yuna Hollander has turned nearly the whole school upside down. She not only has demanded to see the video footage from the cameras in the hallways, which prove Ilya did not, nor has he ever, stepped foot into the art room, but she has also threatened to take legal action on Ilya's behalf for slander and irresponsible use of authority by the headmaster. Ilya's name is cleared by the end of the day, as far as administration is concerned, but the student body is a different story. Ilya spends the rest of the day receiving high fives from the other boys, flirty smiles from half of the girls, and disgusted looks from the other half. Ilya cannot be bothered with any of them; the only person who matters to him believes that he is innocent, and that is all he needs.

Shane is waiting on the lawn in front of the school after the final bell, Ilya can see him the moment he leaves the front doors. He is on his phone, a sitting duck, standing with his hip popped so that all of his weight is on his left leg. Ilya loves him more than oxygen, more than sunlight, but, fuck, he *needs* to deadleg him. He starts across the pavement and over to the lawn, but the headmaster stops him before he can get to Shane.

"I just wanted to offer an apology," the headmaster says. He really does look quite sheepish, but also quite like he still does not trust Ilya. "Rumors are the nastiest form of bullying there is. Please, Ilya, let me know if there's anything that the administration and I can do to help you through this time."

Ilya blinks, and then blows a raspberry. While the headmaster is still stunned, Ilya turns on his heel and resumes his beeline for Shane, nudging his toe into the back of Shane's knee to make his leg buckle.

Shane yelps, whirling around to defend himself against his attacker, but relaxes when he finds Ilya there. Ilya smiles at him like he has not seen him in days; it has been about an hour and half.

"Hey," Shane says, stuffing his phone into his pocket.

"Start walking," Ilya says, linking his arm with Shane's and all but dragging him across the lawn.

"Wh— wait, why?" Shane says, glancing behind himself as Ilya pulls him along.

"Headmaster apologized for earlier," Ilya says.

"Oh, well, that's nice, I guess," Shane says. "What'd you say?"

Ilya looks sideways at him, and then walks a little faster.

"Ilya?"

"I said thank you very much, Mr. Headmaster, you are noble and gracious man and also very handsome."

"Ilya."

"Fine," Ilya huffs. "I said—" he blows a raspberry at Shane, and Shane's jaw drops.

“Ilya!”

Ilya cannot help but laugh, shrugging one shoulder.

“You are a menace to society,” Shane says, pulling Ilya into an alleyway as soon as they get out onto the main street.

“Good thing I have Yuna Hollander on my side,” Ilya says, walking Shane back against the wall and crowding into his space.

“Let’s not talk about my mom right now,” Shane mutters, getting a hand in the back of Ilya’s hair and tugging him down for a kiss.

Ilya hums against his lips, and Shane chases him when he pulls away. Ilya lingers, just to watch the way Shane cranes his neck toward him for more. “We will be late for practice.”

“You’re probably off the team anyway, for *spitting at the headmaster*,” Shane says.

“Ah, good, then,” Ilya grins, leaning in to ghost his lips over Shane’s quickly. “We have time.”

Shane melts back against the wall, and Ilya follows him, hands on his hips as he kisses him.

“Okay, okay,” Shane says after a moment, but he is flustered as he pulls away. “Now we really are going to be late to practice.”

“Race you,” Ilya says, and then takes off running back to the street.

“Hey!” Shane shouts distantly; Ilya already has a devastating lead, but Shane is fast, too, only a few paces behind Ilya before long. Ilya doubles his efforts, ignoring Shane’s frustrated groaning behind him, and turns around just before they both reach the entrance to the rink so that Shane slams into him. They both grunt upon impact, but Ilya is still grinning, leaning in to kiss Shane again without thinking.

“Hey,” Shane says quietly, jerking his head back and glancing around. “Not here.”

“Sorry,” Ilya says, forcing himself to back away from Shane.

“It’s okay,” Shane says, eyes sparkling. “*Ya tebya lyublyu.*”

They have taken to using Russian when in public; Ilya has begrudgingly taught Shane a few useful phrases, and a few less useful ones, but he must admit, it makes his heart skip a beat to hear Shane tell him that he loves him in Ilya’s mother tongue.

“*Ya tebya lyublyu,*” Ilya whispers. He reaches behind himself to open the door to the rink, holding it open for Shane and then following him inside, a dog to a bone, the tides to the moon, a boy to the best thing that ever happened to him.

February, 2007

“Now, the duo everyone is talking about. Ontario’s own Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov—”

“You sure he’s Canadian, Tim?”

“A transplant, for sure. Regardless, these kids are doing big things for the hockey world right now. They are projected to be the top draft picks for the OHL draft coming up in April, and can I just say, Jim, look these kids up, if you haven’t already. Really, really incredible stuff.”

Shane squeezes Ilya’s thigh, grinning at him sideways so as not to disturb the wired earbuds connecting their heads. They are being talked about on sports radio, holy *fuck*, this is really starting to get *real*.

“Amazing, right?” Yuna says, eyes flickering between the two of them as they listen. “I heard it on the way home from work, I thought I was dreaming. I had to come straight home and look up the recorded version of the show online.”

“This is so cool!” Shane says, pulling the earbud from his ear as soon as the topic of conversation in the sports talk show shifts back to the NHL.

“Yes,” Ilya says, smiling to cover the nerves erupting in his chest. *Ontario’s Ilya Rozanov*. On a national sports radio show. It is a little overwhelming.

“Okay, phones away,” Irina says, placing a casserole dish in the center of the Hollanders’ dinner table and then waving her hand at Shane and Ilya. “Dinnertime.”

Yuna pays her no mind, accepting her phone back from Shane and tapping away on it for a moment. “I mean, boys, this is big. I’ll keep an eye out— surely this isn’t the only place you’re being talked about, I mean, Christ, you’ve been scouted by the OHL as sixteen-year-olds! This is huge!”

“Yuna,” David says, placing a few more bowls on the table. “Phone.”

“Oh, this is important,” Yuna says, waving David off. “Let me just see—”

“Yuna,” David and Irina both say, almost in perfect unison. Yuna sighs like a teenager and puts her phone down on the table.

“I can’t believe this is really happening,” Shane says.

“I can,” Ilya shrugs. All eyes turn to him. “What? We are very good at hockey,” he says simply.

“We’re, like, some of the best in the *world*,” Shane says, “do you realize that’s what this means?”

“Yes,” Ilya says. “We have known this all along, no?”

“So humble, Ilyusha,” Irina sighs.

“We are the best,” Ilya insists. “We always will be.”

“We’re going to break so many records, they’ll have to create a new record for how many records we’ve broken,” Shane grins. There is a moment of confused silence while everyone at the table digests that sentence, and then a quiet murmur of agreement.

Ilya bumps Shane’s leg under the table with his own, and Shane smiles at him, bumping him back. The conversation shifts away from hockey, but not very far, and Ilya chooses to become very focused on his dinner.

Hockey has always been the most important thing in Ilya’s life; maybe less so in the past few months, as other things have become significantly more important and exciting, but this has always been his dream, to play hockey forever, to make a life out of it. It is nerve racking to think about, now that it is happening. He feels exposed, on display, being talked about on sports radio, his name and photo being broadcast everywhere that hockey means anything. Ilya has no idea if his father is looking for him, has ever looked for him, if he has ever even cared if Ilya is alive or dead, but it would be all too easy to track him down now.

Irina looks similarly interested in the plate in front of her, though she has not eaten very much of it. She and David cooked it together, one of their favorite traditions of these now semi-weekly dinners. There is a tilt to her mouth that Ilya recognizes as anxiety, probably the same which is welling up in him now. It is dangerous, probably reckless, for Ilya to become a celebrity in the hockey world. Irina would never ask him to quit, though, and even if she did, Ilya is not sure he would be able to obey her. This is a dream come true, as scary as it is, and Ilya will have to do whatever he needs to do in order to protect his mother while he lives it. She sacrificed so much, left so many things behind, all so that Ilya could be here, now. Ilya will not let that be forgotten.

Shane drags Ilya up to David’s home office to use the desktop computer when dinner is over, plugging their names into the search engine and scrolling through various reports about the two of them having been scouted by the OHL, chattering excitedly all the while. Ilya stares at the computer screen and tries to be as excited as Shane is, tries to be happy and proud and animated, but it falls flat.

Shane notices, because Shane can feel Ilya’s emotions even before Ilya feels them, sometimes. He gives up on trying to get Ilya excited and closes the article on the screen, turning in David’s desk chair to look at him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong,” Ilya says, too quickly.

Shane reaches for his hand. “You think that—”

“Stop,” Ilya says quietly. Shane obeys, but he does not look like he is going to move on. “It is just— a lot.”

“I know,” Shane says. He could not possibly. “Ilya, if you ever want to talk about—”

“Can we go to your room?” Ilya asks.

“Yeah,” Shane says, and then he drags Ilya across the hall by his hand. They leave the door open, as has recently become a household rule, but Shane closes it just enough to give them a bit of privacy.

“Things will change,” Ilya says, standing beside Shane’s bed like a statue. Shane sits on the bed, makes room for Ilya to sit with him, but Ilya does not move. “Everything will change.”

“Yeah,” Shane says, shrugging one shoulder. “Things’ll probably get a lot more intense, a lot busier, harder practices and higher stakes in the games and—”

“I do not mean just hockey,” Ilya says quietly.

“Hey,” Shane says, reaching for Ilya’s hand again. Ilya lets him take it, lets Shane pull him down, and reciprocates when Shane hugs him. “Not us. Nothing’s gonna change between us.”

Yes it will. “What if it does?”

“Then we adjust,” Shane says. “Figure it out. Hey, we’re gonna be fine. I love you, Ilya, that’s never gonna change, okay?”

“Okay,” Ilya breathes. *We will see.*

“This isn’t—” Shane hesitates, keeping himself tucked into Ilya’s chest probably so that he does not have to look at Ilya’s face. “That’s not all that’s going on, right?”

Ilya rolls his eyes, thankful that Shane is not looking at him. Always so perceptive, his boy. “Right.”

“You know you can talk to me?” Shane says.

Ilya considers. *I love you*, he’d said, *that’s never gonna change*. “When I was twelve, my father tried to kill my mother.”

Shane’s entire body goes rigid. He does not move a muscle, except to tighten his arms around Ilya’s waist. Ilya rests his chin atop Shane’s head and stares at the goofy Centaur mascot poster tacked up on the wall.

“He was drunk, she had done something— probably nothing, but everything she did was always wrong, to him. He was so hard on her. She was so brave, she tried so hard, but it was never enough. He just hated her, I think. He beat her.”

“Ilya,” Shane whispers.

“He hated me, too,” Ilya says. “Because I am like her. Alexei is like Papa, mean and cruel. They thought Mama and I were weak, and that they could beat us into being strong and mean, like them. Or maybe they just wanted to beat us. I do not know, probably it does not matter.”

“That’s awful,” Shane says. He sounds upset. Ilya’s father would hate him. Ilya holds him a little tighter.

“We left in the middle of the night. Papa had been on a rampage, Mama was bleeding, I was bleeding. Mama woke me up, she had already packed a bag, and we just ran. She had enough. I had enough. We ended up in Ottawa because we thought he would never look for us here.”

“And now your name and face and home city are being broadcast around the world,” Shane finishes astutely. “Jesus, Ilya.”

“Yes,” Ilya says. “I am stronger now, and bigger, and tougher, but I—”

“You’re still scared,” Shane says. “And that’s okay. Ilya, it’s okay to be scared. It doesn’t make you weak.”

Ilya wants to cry. He blinks up at Shane’s bedroom ceiling. “It does.”

“It does *not*,” Shane says, finally sitting up to look at him. “It would be more concerning if you weren’t scared. You and your mom have worked so hard to build this life, and you’ve earned it, it’s okay to be scared of it being taken away.”

“He will kill her,” Ilya says, voice tight.

“No, he fucking won’t,” Shane says firmly. “We won’t let that happen, Ilya.”

Shane is so cute, his determined little eyebrows, all pinched together like he will take Ilya’s father out himself. It probably would not be such a tall task anymore; Grigory is getting on in age, at this point, and he was never very healthy to begin with. Ilya smiles and brushes a finger over the freckles on Shane’s cheek. “Okay, *moy lyubimyy*.”

“I love you,” Shane says, pressing his face into Ilya’s hand so that Ilya will keep touching him. “You are the most lovable person I have ever met in my life. Anyone who doesn’t love you, just— they don’t know what love is.”

“Ah, I see,” Ilya says. “I think it is just you, *moy pomidor*.”

Shane’s brain tries to overlook the Russian term to argue against Ilya’s self-deprecation, Ilya can see it happening, but his eyebrows pull together again. “What does that mean?”

“Tomato,” Ilya says. “New word for you.”

Shane cannot help but smile, losing the tension which has been in his shoulders since Ilya sat down. He leans in to kiss Ilya chastely, pulling back to shake his head. “You are so random,”

he says.

“And you are so cute,” Ilya says, chasing Shane for another kiss. Shane allows it, hands finding Ilya’s face while Ilya’s hands find Shane’s thighs. It goes a tad too far considering the door is open and Yuna, David, and Irina are all just downstairs, and Shane pulls back again eventually.

“You can’t always get out of hard conversations by talking sweet and kissing me,” Shane says. Ilya would like to test that theory.

“Hm?” he hums, eyes on Shane’s lips. Shane inhales sharply and kisses him again, much too fervently this time, and Ilya pulls back this time before Shane crawls on top of him, or something. “You were saying?”

“Fuck off, Rozanov,” Shane says, but his smile betrays him. “*Ya tebya lyublyu.*”

“I love you,” Ilya says. “Should we go back downstairs?”

“Are you okay?” Shane says, stroking Ilya’s cheek. “I feel like I didn’t therapize you enough.”

Ilya grins. “I am okay, *moya lozhka.*”

Shane narrows his eyes at him. “What?”

“Spoon,” Ilya hums.

“Weirdo,” Shane grins, pushing at Ilya’s shoulders gently.

Ilya leads the way down the stairs, rejoining their parents in the living room. Irina smiles up at him, beckoning him over. “*Are you ready to go, solnyshko?*” she says privately in Russian.

Ilya nods, but he sinks down next to her on the sofa, leaning his head on her shoulder. “*I told Shane about Papa, what he was like. I told him about the night we left,*” he says, also in Russian, but still quietly enough so only Irina can hear.

Irina looks down at him, raising her eyebrows. “*You had not told him before?*”

“*Not everything,*” Ilya says.

“*Why?*” Irina asks.

Ilya hesitates. “*Because, it is—*”

“*You do not have to feel ashamed of it, Ilyusha,*” she says. “*Not with him. He would never think less of you.*”

“*I know, Mama,*” Ilya says. “*It was— nevermind. Are you ready to go home?*”

Irina looks sad, watching Ilya sit up. She follows suit, though, says her goodbyes and goes to put her shoes on. Ilya politely says goodbye to Yuna and David, but Shane follows him to the door, standing a little too close while Ilya puts his shoes on.

“Call me later?” Shane says, when Ilya stands up.

“I will try,” Ilya says. He still does not have his own cell phone, but Irina has one thanks to her new restaurant job— nothing fancy, but she enjoys it, and it helps pay the bills. She lets Ilya call Shane on her phone sometimes, and sometimes she falls asleep early enough that Ilya can borrow it without asking.

“Okay,” Shane says. “I love you.”

“I love you, Shane,” Ilya says, pressing a firm kiss to Shane’s mouth.

Shane swoons a little, and it makes Ilya smile. “Bye, Ilya.”

“Bye, Shane,” Ilya smiles, and then he meets Irina on the front step. She still looks distantly sad, like it emanates from somewhere deep within her. “*Okay, Mama?*”

“*Yes, moy lyubimyy,*” Irina says, linking her arm with his. “*Let’s go home.*”

Shane lies awake most of the night, replaying everything Ilya told him about his father and trying to wrap his mind around it. Shane Hollander is not a violent person, but the idea of anyone laying a finger on Ilya, hurting him, making him bleed, making him cry— Shane could do truly unspeakable things in retaliation. He’d like a moment alone with Ilya’s father, just a moment, and maybe a brick, or a baseball bat, ooh, a very dull knife...

In the moments when he’s not seethingly angry about Ilya having ever been hurt, he is bone-crushingly sad. To think of Ilya, so small and defenseless, spending the first twelve years of his life in a home like that, it makes Shane so sad he could be sick. While Shane was happy and well-loved, spending his summers at the cottage on the lake and his winters playing hockey and being loved unconditionally all the while, Ilya was being hurt, belittled, and traumatized in ways he probably will never fully recover from. Shane feels guilty, almost, for how good his childhood was, comparatively.

He wasn’t lying when he said that Ilya is the most lovable person he has ever known. He is so special, so charming, so kind and funny and smart, Shane will never run out of new ways to adore and admire Ilya. He can’t ever imagine hating him, can’t imagine anyone ever being able to hate him, especially not someone who is meant to love him no matter what, the way a parent should. Ilya is not weak, he is not soft, not in the ways that matter. Ilya’s father was so, so wrong about those things, and Shane hates that his mistake has caused so much pain for Ilya.

It becomes Shane's personal mission, over the course of his sleepless night, to make sure that Ilya is safe. Ilya deserves to be in the NHL more than anyone Shane has ever known, maybe even more than Shane himself, though he'd probably never be able to admit that out loud. Fuck his father, if Ilya wants to be in the NHL, he should be, and he shouldn't have to live in fear because of it. He should have anything and everything he wants in the whole world forever and ever, and his father should rot in hell.

Ilya never called after he and Irina left, which isn't totally unusual, but Shane worries that Ilya is regretting having told Shane everything that he told him. Shane has never been good with stuff like this; what if he said something wrong? What if he made Ilya feel like he shouldn't have told him? What if he made Ilya feel embarrassed about it, like Shane thinks less of him because of it? Fuck, is Ilya okay? Does he feel like Shane is someone he can trust? *Is* Shane someone he can trust? Shane doesn't know what to do with all this. He doesn't know how to fix it, how to protect Ilya from it, or whether he even should try. Maybe Ilya just needs to see that this changes nothing between them. Shane loves him no matter where he comes from or how complicated his past is. Shane cares about him, cares about his future, cares about his happiness and making his dreams come true.

It all, as most things do, comes back to hockey.

Shane will make sure that Ilya gets everything he's ever dreamed of. He will make sure that Ilya trains hard, practices hard, performs well, and makes it through the OHL. He will make sure that Ilya takes this seriously, that he doesn't throw it all away because he's scared of being found out. He will make sure that Ilya can stand on top of the world with a smile, and that no one will ever be able to touch him again, not his dad, not his brother, not *anyone*.

First, he needs to make sure that Ilya knows that he is safe with Shane, that his heart is safe in Shane's own. Shane will never talk about Ilya's father again unless Ilya brings it up first, and he will never make Ilya share more than he is comfortable with. He will make sure they both focus on hockey, that they both give this their all and come out like kings. They will *be* kings.

It is very late when Shane's phone lights up on his bedside table. He rolls over to snatch it quickly, accepting the call.

"Ilya?"

"Hi," Ilya says. "I was not sure if you would still be awake."

"I can't sleep," Shane says, rolling back onto his back. "Why are you up?"

"Same, cannot sleep," Ilya says. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, it's really cold in my room and I can't get comfortable," Shane says. Good, very good lie. Very believable. Much better than *I'm up plotting your father's murder*.

"Ah," Ilya says.

"Are you okay?"

“Yes,” Ilya says. “Mama and I had a, ah, heart-for-heart.”

“Heart-*to*-heart,” Shane says. “About what?”

“About Papa,” Ilya says. Oh. Okay, that didn’t last long.

“Oh.”

“Mama is upset with herself that she did not think to run away with me sooner,” Ilya says. “She thinks my childhood was ruined.”

Shane flounders a little. He’s *so* glad Ilya can’t see him. “Well that’s— uh—”

“My childhood was not awful,” Ilya says, like he can tell Shane is struggling. “I had fun. I had a mean father, yes, and most of my good memories are not at home, but I was not a miserable child. I had friends, and hockey, and Mama. Have I ever told you about Sveta?”

“Sveta?” Shane asks. Shane has heard her name before, seen her picture in Ilya’s room, but he has never been brave enough to ask.

“Svetlana,” Ilya says. “She was my best friend from, I do not know, forever. Everyone thought we would get married someday. I thought that.”

Shane’s stomach drops like he’s on a rollercoaster. “Oh.”

“She was the best,” Ilya says wistfully. “She was so fun, she always knew what to say or what to do when I was not, you know, happy, or, ah, okay,” Ilya says. “I never got to say goodbye to her. I wish I could tell her I am okay all the time now. I wish I could tell her about you.”

About me, Shane thinks, *the guy who doesn’t have a fucking clue what to do when you’re not happy or okay*. “She sounds cool.”

“Do not be jealous, *moy lyubimyy*,” Ilya says.

“I’m not,” Shane says. “Was she, like, beautiful, too? And super rich?”

“Yes, and yes,” Ilya says. Shane can hear him smiling. “Her father was very famous Russian goalie, Sergei Vitrov. She was very knowledgeable about hockey.”

“Oh, awesome,” Shane says. “She rescues babies and puppies from burning buildings, too?”

“She does not have very pretty freckles and soft brown eyes,” Ilya says. “At least, not last time I saw her, when we were *twelve*.”

“Right, so she’s a total troll, then,” Shane grumbles.

“Shane,” Ilya laughs softly. The sound sends chills down Shane’s back. Ilya sounds so tired, his voice rough and low. “*Ya tebya lyublyu*. I love you, *moi vodorosli*.”

Shane sighs. "What does that mean?"

"Seaweed."

"Fuck you."

"Tell me you love me," Ilya whines.

"No," Shane says. He can't wipe the smile off his face.

"Shane," Ilya whines again. "Tell me you love me, or I will cry."

"I love you," Shane says immediately. "I love you, *ya tebya lyublyu, je t'aime, te amo*, I love you, I love you."

Ilya murmurs something else in Russian, but so quietly that Shane thinks it was not meant for him. "Go to sleep now, *moy lyubimyy*. I will see you tomorrow."

"You too, get some rest," Shane says. "Wanna get to the rink early? Get an hour in, just you and me, before practice starts?"

"No," Ilya says. "But I will."

"Okay," Shane smiles. "Goodnight, Ilya."

"Goodnight, Shane."

March, 2007

"C'mon, Ilya," Shane groans, pushing Ilya away from him and rolling his eyes. "You should've had that one."

"Yes, but, you promised me kisses for every pass, and I have not had any kisses," Ilya says, drifting toward him again on his skates. "I am here to collect what I am owed."

"You missed the last three passes," Shane says, pushing Ilya away again. Ilya drifts backwards, pouting.

"But I returned the eleven before that," Ilya argues. "That is eleven kisses, Shane."

"Later, okay?" Shane says, blushing under his visor. "C'mon, we only have a few more minutes 'til practice starts."

“We have been practicing for two hours,” Ilya groans. “And now we have another two hour practice. I love you, and I love hockey, but I want to *sit down*.”

“You can sit down later,” Shane says, firing another pass his way while he thinks Ilya is unprepared. Ilya catches it easily, returns it effortlessly. Shane does it again, and then a third time, and Ilya purposefully lets the puck rocket between his skates and into the boards. “Ilya!”

“Shane!” Ilya mocks him, rolling his eyes as he turns on the ice and heads for the boards. “I am going to bathroom. Thirteen kisses, do not forget.”

“Fuck off, Rozanov,” Shane mutters, but Ilya is already off the ice, stomping on his skates to the locker room.

Shane has been killing him the past few weeks. Every spare moment is spent on the ice, or in the gym, or, in rare moments of physical rest, talking about hockey. Shane has barely looked at him lately without there being a puck between them, and Ilya is growing very sick of it. He is dying, actually, being refused Shane’s affection so frequently and so suddenly. He knows Shane is stressed and excited about the OHL draft next month, but he and Ilya have already been named two of the best players in the world for their age group, and Ilya is not sure how much better Shane thinks he can get in a month, anyway. Unless Shane intends to train like this consistently for the rest of his career, in which case Ilya should just quit now and find a new passion.

He should talk to Shane, probably. Something is clearly bothering him. Ilya has tried talking to him, though, to no avail; Shane quite literally only talks about hockey these days, and cannot focus on any other topic long enough for Ilya to get anything substantial out of him. When Ilya returns from the locker room, Shane is still just standing on center ice, staring down at the puck Ilya left by the boards.

Something is definitely wrong.

Ilya does not get a chance to check in before practice starts. The rest of the team filters in a few at a time, and the coaching staff, and the rink is alive with the buzzing of a full team practice. These optional Sunday afternoon sessions have become a lot more lively since Shane and Ilya were scouted for the OHL; their classmates are collecting the stories they will tell for the rest of their lives about the time they got to spend on the ice with Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov.

It is nice, in a way, to have so much positive attention from his peers, but Ilya cannot forget the way many of these boys have treated him since he arrived in Ottawa four years ago. They were cruel to him, when they were younger, especially when they thought he did not know or understand their cruelty. Ilya is fluent in cruelty, knows it like a brother, even when it is disguised in a language he does not fully understand. Now, these boys pat him on the back and invite him to parties, when not long ago they would check him on the ice or sneer at him in the lunch room. It will be good to get away from all of this once they are in the OHL, Ilya thinks, all of these fake smiles and faux-friendly gestures.

Practice is not outright boring, but it is not exciting. Ilya is tired, he has been on the ice for four hours by the time practice ends, and all he can think about is crashing on the sofa and collecting his thirteen kisses from Shane. He almost thinks he will get his wish, the way Shane looks at him in the locker room after practice, but his beautiful eyes do not stay soft and loving for very long.

“We should hit the gym, I think,” Shane says, tossing his shirt over his head and taking a moment to find his way out of it.

“You must be joking,” Ilya says.

“Weights,” Shane says. “No cardio, promise. Just some weights and strength training.”

“No,” Ilya says, slipping his shoes on and standing up abruptly. “I am going home.”

Shane looks shocked. “Ilya, c’mon—”

“No,” Ilya says again. “I am tired. I am sore. I am done.”

“Done?” Shane says incredulously. “You think the coaches in the OHL are gonna—”

“Goodbye, Shane,” Ilya grumbles, hooking his bag over his shoulder and dragging himself to the exit.

He makes it out to the street before Shane catches up to him. “Wait, Ilya, stop,” Shane says, a little bit breathless. Ilya walks faster. “Ilya!”

“What?” Ilya sighs.

“Just— fuck, stop for a second!” Shane huffs.

Ilya stops dead in the middle of the sidewalk, and Shane nearly trips over himself as he finally catches up and puts himself in front of Ilya.

“Are you okay?” Shane asks.

“No,” Ilya says. “I am tired. I want to go home.”

“Okay,” Shane says placatingly. “Can I come?”

“Are you going to talk about anything other than hockey?” Ilya asks.

Shane furrows his eyebrows, eyes sweeping over Ilya’s face a few times. “Are you mad at me?” he asks, voice small.

It makes Ilya’s heart hurt a little bit, which is infuriating. “No,” he says quickly. And then, “Maybe.”

“Oh,” Shane says, looking down. “I— I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Ilya says.

“For—” Shane hesitates. “Making you mad at me?”

Ilya rolls his eyes. “I am not mad at you. I am annoyed, and I am *tired*.”

“Okay, let’s go home, then,” Shane says. “Are you hungry?”

Ilya considers for a moment. “Yes.”

“Okay, what do you want to eat?”

Ilya narrows his eyes, deciding to test the boundaries of Shane's sudden leniency.
“McDonald’s.”

Shane looks unimpressed. “Ilya, that’s so bad for—”

“Go home, then,” Ilya says, stepping around him and continuing on his way.

“Okay, fine! We’ll get McDonald’s!” Shane says, hurrying again to catch up. “Look, I know it’s been intense lately but this is what it’s gonna be like when we—”

“Shane, please,” Ilya says. “For one afternoon. Please.”

Shane falls silent, and does not speak again for the rest of the way back to Ilya’s apartment. They stop at McDonald’s, Shane does not order anything, but pays for Ilya’s food, and by the time they get up to the apartment, Ilya feels so guilty he can hardly eat. Shane is just trying to help him, trying to make sure he is ready for what the OHL is going to be like. Ilya understands this, appreciates it, even, but he just needs a break.

“You are not hungry?” Ilya says, as they settle down on the sofa.

Shane shakes his head.

“Okay.”

They are quiet. Ilya bites into his McChicken.

“You want TV?”

Shane shakes his head again.

“Okay.”

They are quiet.

“Shane,” Ilya says softly.

“I’m sorry,” Shane says, even more softly. “I don’t want you to be annoyed with me. I just thought— I don’t know. Sorry. You don’t wanna talk about hockey.”

Ilya breathes in deep, puts his sandwich down, and sighs all the breath out of his lungs as he collapses back against the sofa. He holds one arm out to Shane, who looks at him wearily,

and then curls into his side. Ilya presses a kiss to his head, and Shane relaxes against him.

“I love you,” Ilya says.

“I love you, too,” Shane says.

“You owe me some kisses,” Ilya says.

“You’re gonna have to brush your teeth first,” Shane says, nodding toward the McChicken on the coffee table. Ilya reaches over him for it and then waves it in Shane’s face, grinning when Shane squeaks and squirms away.

Ilya does brush his teeth after he eats, and Shane does grant him his thirteen kisses, and then a few more, and a few more still after that. Ilya has almost forgotten about his annoyance from earlier when Shane breaks away from him, hovering over him with kiss-swollen lips and a nervous smile.

“Want to meet me at the gym before school tomorrow?”

“You did not just stop kissing me to ask me to work out,” Ilya says, pushing Shane back on the sofa and climbing on top of him.

“That’s not a no,” Shane says, giggling when Ilya drills his fingers into his sides. “Ilya!”

Ilya kisses him, just enough to make Shane melt into the sofa, and then pulls away. “You owe me a kiss for every pound I bench.”

“You bench like 250!” Shane cries.

“Better get to work, then,” Ilya hums, and leans back in.

Shane prepays his debt in full by the end of the afternoon.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

i fear this is when my tragic lack of knowledge about hockey is really going to show but we're all gonna pretend that this is how it works :) thanks in advance

April, 2007 – Ottawa, Ontario

Shane Hollander is the number one OHL draft pick for 2007.

It is unsurprising, expected, even, and Ilya is thrilled for him. Shane has worked so hard, has given his all and then some, and, Ilya must remind himself, is actually from Ontario.

Ilya is not mad. Really, he is not. It is only that ever since the draft the other night, Shane has barely looked at him. Like, truly, Shane has said a total of four words to Ilya in the past three days, and those words were, "Can you spot me?" when they were at the gym two mornings ago.

They were drafted to the same team, at least, and Ilya is satisfied with that. He is more than satisfied, he is overjoyed, he is so happy and so relieved and so validated and so *sad*, because Shane has been glued to his phone for the entire run he made Ilya go on with him before school today, and Ilya should really start saying no to more of Shane's insane workout plans.

"Post," Ilya warns, and Shane looks up just in time to dodge a lamppost on the sidewalk. Shane does not say anything, just goes back to his phone, and Ilya stops running. It takes Shane almost a block and a half to realize that Ilya is not next to him anymore.

"Hey," Shane says, jogging back to him. "Are you okay? Did you get hurt?"

"Who are you talking to?" Ilya says.

Shane looks confused. "You?"

"No," Ilya rolls his eyes, and gestures to Shane's phone. "You are fucking addicted."

"Oh, sorry," Shane says, shoving the phone in his pocket. "It's just Rose."

Ilya's stomach drops. *Just Rose.*

"C'mon, Ilya, don't be like that," Shane groans. "We're friends!"

“I did not say anything,” Ilya says.

“Yeah, but you get this, like, look on your face,” Shane waves generally about Ilya’s upper half, “every time Rose comes up.”

“I do no such thing,” Ilya says, indignant.

“Okay, well, whatever,” Shane says. “C’mon, we have two kilometers left and we’re running out of time.”

“I am done,” Ilya says. “I will see you at school.”

“Ilya,” Shane says in warning.

Ilya turns and jogs in the other direction, makes it almost two blocks before Shane catches up. His phone is nowhere to be seen. They run in silence for a few blocks, until they are almost back to the school, when Shane apparently cannot hold his tongue any longer.

“It’s not like you didn’t hook up with a thousand girls before we got together,” Shane says lowly.

“That is different.”

“How?”

“Because!” Ilya huffs. “I did not date any of them, I never had a *girlfriend*, and I do not ignore you to text incessantly with any of them.”

“I never even kissed her, Ilya.”

“It does not matter!” Ilya says.

“Stop,” Shane says, halting his footsteps and grabbing Ilya’s wrist to stop him, too. Ilya nearly wipes out, stumbling into Shane. It is early, the streets are mostly empty, but Shane pulls him into an alley anyway. “What’s really wrong?”

Ilya blinks. “What?”

“You’re not mad at me about Rose,” Shane says. “So, what? Are you mad that I’m trying to get you to train harder? Are you mad that I’m trying to make you a better rounded athlete so you can be better at hockey? What exactly are you so pissed off about?”

“You think I am not good at hockey?” Ilya says. “You think because you are number one in the draft that you are *so* much better than me?”

Shane rolls his eyes. “You know I don’t think that.”

“No, I do not know,” Ilya says. “Because that is how you act. You are number one draft pick, you are in charge of all training outside of team practice, you decide what we do and how we

do it and whether you will speak to me or not while I do whatever the fuck you want me to do,” he bites. “So, tell me, what do you think?”

Shane’s eyes are wide, but his jaw is clenched. “Ilya,” he says.

“Tell me,” Ilya challenges. “Tell me what you think.”

“I think you’re an asshole,” Shane says. “Sorry for trying to help you be the best version of yourself. *Fuck*.”

“The best version of myself!” Ilya laughs. “Is that what this is? Is this the best version of *you*?”

“Fuck you,” Shane says. “Never fucking mind. See you at school.”

Ilya does not leave the alley for a while. Shane jogs away, perfect form except for the way his head is bent to look at his fucking phone. Ilya sits down against the concrete wall behind him and watches Ottawa slowly come to life, giving Shane plenty of time to get to school, shower, change, and be gone before Ilya gets there.

He is late to his first class, but he does not care. He does not care much about anything. Shane thinks he is not good enough. Shane thinks he does not try hard enough. Shane thinks himself better than Ilya, and he is right. Ilya will never make it in the NHL; he probably will not even make it through the OHL. He is too lazy for this life, too soft; his father was right all along.

Shane: Help.

Rose: ???

Shane: Ilya is mad at me.

Rose: What did you do?

Shane: I went too far.

Rose: Is the cryptic shit fun for you or...?

Shane: I’ve been pushing him really hard ever since we got scouted for the OHL because I think he’s the best player in the world and I want him to live up to his full potential and rule the world and I’m doing it because I love him and because I think he really has what it takes to be one of the best players of all time but he’s mad at me because he thinks that I think that he’s not good enough and that I’m pushing him so hard because I think he’s bad and lazy and

he thinks that I'm holding being the number one draft pick over his head when really he's the one holding it over his own head.

Rose: Holy run on sentence. Give me a minute.

Shane: Ok

Shane: Sorry

Rose: Stop texting it scrolls down every time

Shane: Ok sorry

Rose: SHANE

Rose: OK well have you told him that that's why you're doing it?

Shane: No because I don't want him to know

Rose: ...why?

Shane: It's personal.

Rose: Right cuz I'm so bad at keeping secrets

Shane: Because if he knows that I think all that it'll be too much pressure on him.

Rose: So what did you say when he accused you of thinking all that?

Shane: Um

Rose: Oh god Shane what

Shane: I said fuck you and ran away.

Rose: Oh good good

Rose: No that was a perfect response

Shane: Rose!

Rose: You should write a book probably.

Rose: Relationships 101 For Stupid Fucking Idiots

Shane: I panicked! He was saying all this stuff and I was frustrated and he was being so mean

Rose: He was being mean???

Shane: Not mean mean but like he was mad and it was making me mad too

Rose: You have to apologize

Rose: And tell him the truth. He's probably so hurt and sad thinking that you don't think he's good enough and that you think you're better than him.

Rose: I have to go hair and makeup is done and I have to be on set in 10 but call me later and tell me how it goes ok?

Rose: Love you xx

Shane: Ugh fine you're right

Shane: Love you break a leg

Shane stuffs his phone into his backpack and glances around the cafeteria, the seat across from him still empty. He does not honestly expect Ilya to sit with him today, after their fight this morning, but it's not like Ilya to skip lunch completely. Shane spots him eventually, alone at a small table by the windows, his back to the rest of the cafeteria.

Shane gets up and takes a deep breath, making his way over to where Ilya is sitting. Ilya jumps when Shane drops into the seat across from him, and then sighs. "Go away, Hollander."

"No," Shane says. "I'm sorry about this morning."

"Go away, Hollander."

"No. I shouldn't have gotten mad at you for being mad at me. I should've explained."

"Go. Away."

"No," Shane says, exasperated. "Will you just listen to me?"

Ilya leans back in his chair, leveling Shane with an icy glare. Shane shivers, unable to meet his eye, so he looks eyes with a crumb on the table, instead.

"I don't think any of that stuff you said this morning."

"Hollander—"

"Stop fucking calling me Hollander," Shane bites. "And fucking *listen*."

Ilya purses his lips.

"I think you are the best hockey player in the world," Shane says. "And not in a hyperbolic way. Like, I genuinely think you might be the greatest of all time. Or you could be, anyway. And I want you to be. I want you to be the fucking king of the universe because I think you deserve it, and I think you could do it."

"But only if I stop being so lazy and unmotivated?" Ilya says flatly.

“I just—” Shane breathes deep, trying not to let himself get frustrated again. This is how Ilya deflects— he gets Shane all flustered and pissed off, and then he doesn’t have to have the hard conversations. Shane won’t let him win this one. “I just want to be part of your story. I want us to be in this together. I want it to be us at the top, you and me, forever. I want to prove to you that you can handle this. I know you can, but I’m not sure that you believe it yet.”

Ilya looks away, jaw clenched. Shane gives him a minute to process, and then Ilya turns back to him with, alarmingly, damp eyes.

“Ilya,” Shane says softly.

“You are wrong,” Ilya says. “I cannot do it. I *am* lazy, I *am* unmotivated. I will never be like you,” he admits.

“You don’t have to be, that’s the thing,” Shane says. “You could sit around all day long and eat actual garbage off the sidewalk and still look like a god and play hockey like you invented it. Not me— I have to train, and work out, and eat smart. It doesn’t come as naturally to me as it does to you.”

“No,” Ilya says. “I think you are wrong.”

“I’m sorry for pushing you so hard,” Shane says. “I’m sorry for ignoring you, making you do all this shit, and talking about hockey all the time. I just want— well, you know what I want.”

“I just want you,” Ilya breathes. “Just you, Shane.”

Shane’s heart clenches. “You should want more.”

“I do,” Ilya shrugs. “I want hockey, I want the OHL and the NHL and the cups and the glory, but when I am old and gray and dying all I will really care about having is *you*.”

Shane looks down, resisting the urge to leap across the table into Ilya’s lap. “You can have it all, Ilya. I promise, you can.”

“Yeah,” Ilya says. He sounds far away. “Because you want more than just me?”

“I love you, Ilya, but of course I do,” Shane whispers. “I want everything, all of that stuff you just said, and I want it *with* you. And I intend to have it all.”

Ilya meets his eye, and Shane lets him. “Really?”

“Really,” Shane says. “Once we’re drafted in the NHL, it’ll be different. We’ll be set, we can accomplish all of our goals and more, and someday, we can retire and buy a big house with tons of land and you can have all the dogs you want and there will be a private rink and a gym and all sorts of other stuff and we can get old and gray together with all of our trophies and know that we are the greatest of all time, both of us, and we did it all together. We just have to keep our heads down for a few more years, work our asses off for the OHL and get drafted to the NHL. It will be worth it, Ilya, I promise.”

Ilya nudges Shane’s foot under the table, offering him a small smile. “Okay,” he breathes.

“Okay?” Shane says.

“Okay,” Ilya says again. They’re quiet for a moment, watching each other’s faces, and then, “So, meet me at the gym after school?”

Shane grins, nudging Ilya’s foot hard under the table. “Deal.”

June, 2007 – Lanaudière, Québec

There are a lot of things that Ilya loves about the Hollanders’ summer cottage; the peace and quiet, the fresh air and outdoor activities, the views. The views are spectacular. Especially the view he has now, about fifteen paces behind Shane Hollander on a wooded, uphill trail, running like some kind of forest sprite to avoid tree limbs and roots, the back of his t-shirt soaked with sweat, the seat of his shorts riding up ever so slightly...

Ilya has tripped more times than he will admit, and even more times than Shane is aware of. He is not exactly looking where he is going. Shane will be so annoyed with him if he twists his ankle, he will give him those cute little angry eyebrows and fuss over him for the rest of the day. It would not be the worst thing that could happen.

“C’mon, Rozanov, pick up the pace!” Shane calls over his shoulder, taking a lap around a tree just to give Ilya a chance to catch up to him. Show off.

Ilya rolls his eyes and decides to start putting some real effort in. He straightens his shoulders and picks up the pace, not exactly sprinting but working his legs with more intention, blowing past Shane in seconds.

“Hey!” Shane huffs; he has been huffing and puffing this whole time, which Ilya finds delightful, but this time he sounds indignant instead of winded. “Ilya!”

Ilya turns to jog backwards just long enough to blow Shane a kiss, and then darts off up the trail, leaving Shane in the dust. Shane is still shouting after him, some very unkind words drifting through the trees, but Ilya makes sure there is enough distance between them that Shane will not be able to see him when he ducks behind a tree and waits. Shane sounds properly exhausted when he gets up to Ilya’s hiding place, panting and gasping. “Ilya?” he calls, and then screams like a little girl when Ilya jumps out and grabs him from behind, sweeping him off his feet and spinning him around.

“Boo,” Ilya grins, pressing his face into Shane’s very sweaty neck.

“Fuck, Ilya,” Shane hisses, struggling to get out of his arms. Ilya tightens his grasp, and for all the weights Shane lifts at the gym, he cannot get himself free. “Get off! You are such a

child!”

“*C’mon, Rozanov, pick up the pace,*” Ilya whines into his ear, mocking him.

“Fuck you,” Shane says, elbowing Ilya in the ribs just hard enough to make Ilya recoil, but not hard enough to hurt. That is one of Ilya’s favorite things about Shane; even when Shane is really maybe actually starting to get angry, he would never hurt Ilya, could not if he tried.

Ilya drops his arms, still laughing, and Shane turns around to glare at him. The glare is short lived, though. Ilya is shirtless, has been for the last kilometer and a half, and Shane gets distracted very, very quickly.

“Nice views up here, yes?” Ilya says, flexing his chest ever so discreetly while he puts his hands on his hips.

“Oh, fuck off,” Shane mutters, mopping at his forehead with his hand. “How are you not even winded? You’re like a machine, we’ve been running up-fucking-hill for forty minutes.”

“I am like, ah— what did that girl call me on the bus last week? Greek god?” Ilya says.

“Cocky fucking bastard,” Shane says.

“You love it,” Ilya teases.

“Less and less every minute,” Shane says, but he does not mean it. Ilya can tell he does not mean it by the smile on his lips, and the way his eyes have trailed back down to Ilya’s chest.

“Best to get back to the cottage, then,” Ilya says, “before you completely hate me.”

He turns on his heel, taking off back down the trail before Shane has even finished catching his breath. Shane shouts after him, and Ilya can hear his quick footfalls as he tries to catch up, but Ilya is even faster running downhill, jumping and leaping over rocks and tree roots. He is so far ahead of Shane he can only track him by Shane’s loud panting and swearing, but he stops in his tracks when Shane screams.

It is not a conscious decision to turn around, but instinct, like it is his body that makes the decision more than his mind to get to Shane as quickly as possible. Ilya nearly breaks his neck twice as he flies back up the trail, finding Shane curled up next to a particularly large tree root, desperately holding his ankle.

“Shane,” Ilya breathes, dropping to his knees beside him. “Fuck, what happened?”

“I think it’s broken,” Shane whimpers.

“Fuck,” Ilya says. He can carry Shane back, he is absolutely sure of it, but the guilt washing over him is paralyzing, and Shane keeps whimpering like he is going to cry and Ilya thinks he might cry, too. A broken ankle is devastating to a hockey player, especially one who has not yet even gotten a chance to begin his inevitably illustrious career. Ilya should have been more careful with him, should not have left him so far behind, knowing he was getting tired and

yet would stop at nothing to catch up. This could affect the rest of Shane's life, and it is all Ilya's fault.

Ilya gets back up on his feet, reaching down to scoop Shane up, but before he can, Shane sits up, reaching up to Ilya's waist and yanking his shorts down to his ankles.

Ilya is still standing, dumbfounded, shorts pooled at his feet, when Shane is up and running off, laughing like a cartoon villain. "What the *fuck*, Hollander?" he shouts, hastily pulling his shorts up and taking off after him.

Shane laughs gleefully, clearly pleased with himself. Ilya's brain is still struggling to catch up, but his body has no problem, gently pulling at Shane's arm when he reaches him. Shane slows, glancing over at him, and Ilya slows to a stop, holding both of Shane's shoulders.

"You are okay?" Ilya says, glancing down at Shane's feet. "You are not hurt?"

"No, Ilya, it was a prank," Shane rolls his eyes. "I'm fine."

"Was a mean prank," Ilya says, dropping his hands and taking a step back with a hurt frown. "I thought—"

"Hey, I'm fine," Shane says, his face falling. "I'm sorry, baby, that was too—"

Ilya moves quickly, bending at the waist to whip Shane's shorts down, and then he is gone. Shane shrieks like he has been shot, but Ilya does not slow down again until he is out of the woods, stopping on the side of the dirt road to catch his breath and contain his laughter.

"You're a sick, sick man, Ilya Rozanov," Shane pants out when he finally catches up. "Sick and twisted."

"Ah, but you really do love it," Ilya says, taking Shane by the hips and dragging him in for a kiss. They are in the middle of nowhere, not a soul around except birds and buzzing insects, so Shane allows it, but not for long. He pulls away grinning, shaking his head.

"I do love it," he says softly. "I love *you*."

"I love you, too," Ilya hums.

"Yeah?" Shane says, stepping a little closer.

"Yeah," Ilya says.

Shane thinks he is tricky, but Ilya has been on to him since the moment he stepped so close. Shane barely gets his thumbs hooked in the waistband of Ilya's shorts before Ilya takes off again, sprinting down the road with Shane hot on his heels.

They chase each other the entire three kilometers back to the cottage, laughing and swearing and stopping to kiss and roughhouse with each other every now and again. They are both drenched in sweat by the time they get back, the late afternoon sun just sinking down over the

lake, and Ilya runs straight for the water, kicking off his sneakers just in time to dive off the end of the dock.

It feels incredible, the cool water washing over his overheated skin. He swims out a little, in case Shane wants to follow him in, but when he finally resurfaces, Shane is just standing on the end of the dock, watching him.

“Come on,” Ilya says, splashing a little water up onto the dock. “Does Shane Hollander not want to finish this workout with fifteen laps to the big rock?”

Shane laughs, kicking his shoes off and pulling his shirt over his head. He sits down on the edge of the dock, and then eases himself into the water, dunking under for only a second before he comes back up and shakes out his hair. Ilya swims to him, grabs onto him when Shane reaches up to hold onto the dock, letting Shane support both of them with his grip.

“Hi,” Shane says, while Ilya wraps himself around him like an octopus.

“Hi,” Ilya says.

“That was a good workout,” Shane says. “It’s so much more fun when you’re here.”

“Ah, so fun, pantsing your boyfriend in the wilderness,” Ilya says.

“You deserved it,” Shane says smugly. “Actually, I think I owe you one more prank, you can’t have the last laugh.”

“Oh, I am so scared,” Ilya says, deadpan. “Was giving me heart attack not good enough prank? I thought I ended your hockey career with a broken ankle.”

“Sorry,” Shane giggles. He does not sound sorry. He is so cute, Ilya thinks he does not ever have to be sorry about anything, ever. “I did actually trip over that root, by the way. The prank was just a stroke of genius.”

“A stroke of genius, ah?” Ilya smirks. “I will show you a stroke of genius—”

“Boys!” Yuna calls from the deck, “Get out and get cleaned up! Dinner is in ten!”

Shane sighs, but Ilya smiles, planting a kiss to his lips. “Race you to the cottage?”

Shane grins, releasing his grip on the dock without warning. Ilya flounders a little as they immediately sink under the water, and by the time he resurfaces, Shane is halfway to the shore. Ilya swears and hauls himself up onto the dock, taking off at a run and tackling Shane in the grass. Shane goes down shrieking with laughter, and by the time they actually make it to the cottage, they are several minutes late for dinner, covered in lake water and grass, and they both get shouted at by Yuna.

Ilya eats his dinner between Shane and Irina at the patio table on the deck, chats and laughs and jokes with all of his favorite people in the world. After dinner, there is a fire in the firepit, and Shane goes to take a proper shower to finally clean himself of lake water and grass, so Ilya pulls on a sweater and settles next to Irina on the patio sofa.

Irina reaches for him, and Ilya curls himself under her arm; he does not really fit here anymore, he has been bigger than his mother for several years now, but still, there is something comforting in her arm around his shoulders, his head on her chest.

"You had a good day?" Irina asks him, quietly, in Russian.

"Yes," Ilya answers in English. He very rarely speaks in Russian anymore, but Irina seems to want this conversation to be private, Yuna and David chatting quietly amongst themselves on the opposite side of the sofa.

"I love to see you so happy," Irina says in Russian. *"It is all I have ever wanted, solnyshko."*

"I am the happiest I have ever been, Mama," Ilya says, in Russian, now, too.

"I know, sweet boy," Irina says. She cards her fingers through his hair, still damp and wildly curly from the lake. *"Just—promise me one thing."*

Ilya frowns, glancing up at her.

"Promise me, moy lyubimyy," Irina says. *"That you will come talk to me, if you ever— if things are ever not so good, if you feel... lost."*

"What do you mean?" Ilya asks, voice barely above a whisper.

"At some point, in life, you might begin to feel... empty," Irina says. *"Even when you have everything you want, even when everything is as good as it has ever been. It is okay to feel like this, solnyshko, but you should not ever have to feel alone. I want you to know you can come to me, talk to me about anything, anything, okay?"*

"I tell you everything, Mama," Ilya smiles nervously. *"Really. I am happy."*

"I know, darling," Irina says. *"And you are so strong, but it is okay to not be strong all the time. If you ever feel like you cannot be strong anymore, or if it all becomes too much, and you feel like you might... want a way out,"* she says, not quite meeting his eye, *"I want you to talk to me first."*

Ilya does not say anything, cannot find the words. He watches his mother's face, searching her eyes for whatever it is she is not saying out loud, but he cannot make sense of what he finds.

"Your happiness is the only thing I have ever wanted in my life," Irina says, finally meeting his eye and offering him a smile. *"I never wanted anything, before you came along, and you have made my life worth living."*

Ilya smiles at her, and then puts his head back down on her chest. *"I love you, Mama."*

"I love you, solnyshko," his mother says, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. *"More than anything. More than life."*

Shane comes back out to the deck after his shower looking so incredibly soft and comfortable in a hoodie and sweatpants that Ilya cannot help himself, pulling away from Irina and opening his arms for Shane, instead. Shane curls up with him, legs tucked over Ilya's lap, head on Ilya's chest, and Ilya holds him, his chin tucked over the top of Shane's head. When he glances over at Irina, she is watching him with a small smile which only grows upon meeting his eye, but there is something in her gaze, something deep within her, something that Ilya has noticed before, a kind of sadness that she cannot seem to help.

Ilya lies awake for a long time that night in Shane's bed, Shane sound asleep on his chest; Ilya is supposed to be in the trundle, they both promised that he would continue to sleep in the trundle on these trips, but, really, who actually expects that to happen? They would never do anything, not here, not with everyone around, but being in the trundle while Shane is so soft and cozy up here in the real bed seems like a cruel form of torture, and Ilya sleeps so much better wrapped around Shane.

Well, usually he sleeps better wrapped around Shane, but tonight he stares at the darkened ceiling for hours, replaying his conversation with his mother over and over in his head. What had she meant by all of that? *At some point, in life, you might begin to feel... empty, even when you have everything you want, even when everything is as good as it has ever been. Empty? If you ever feel like you cannot be strong anymore, or if it all becomes too much, and you feel like you might... want a way out...*

A way out? A way out of what? Of hockey? Of his relationship with Shane? Of... life? Oh.

Of life.

It hits him like a train. Like a bullet. Suddenly, Ilya is able to put his finger on that deep, murky emotion that emanates from somewhere inside Irina; it is inside of him, too, and he has noticed it before, but never like this, never with so much clarity, like Irina has brought attention to a part of him that could have been buried for ages more.

It is there—he finds it hiding in some tiny crevice deep within his sinking heart. It is there, and it is small, but it is present in him, part of his soul, maybe, part of the fabric of his being.

He has everything he could ever want in the world. He has Shane. He has hockey. He has the OHL, and is well on his way to having the NHL someday, too. He has his mother. He has Yuna and David. He has a full stomach, a roof over his head, a warm bed, and a dull, far away ache in some previously undiscovered hollow of his heart, so deep within his chest he can barely reach it. It is nothing, easily ignorable, but his mother saw it. She can see it in him. She can see it and she brought it up because she knows what it is, because she has it in her, too, and she does not want him to be alone with it. Ilya wonders if she has ever felt not alone with it, if someone has ever asked her to come to them if she ever needed help. Ilya doubts it. He is strong, stronger than he has ever been, but not as strong as he will ever be, and not as strong as his mother. He will never be as strong as his mother.

Shane stirs at some point well after midnight, picking his head up and looking up at Ilya. Ilya looks at him, and Shane smiles, and then frowns.

“What’s wrong?” Shane asks, stroking one finger over the edge of Ilya’s jaw.

Ilya offers him a soft smile; something in his chest expands, big enough to mostly squash that tiny hollow of which he is now aware. He can feel the hollow shrink, looking at Shane's sleepy eyes in the dark, feeling his finger trail across his chin and down his neck.

"Nothing, *moy lyubimyy*," Ilya whispers, carding a hand through Shane's hair and gently coaxing his head back down. Shane settles for only a moment, and then rolls onto his back, blinking his eyes open to look at Ilya again and opening his arms. Ilya accepts the invitation cordially, moving until he is fully on top of Shane, curled up to fit against him like a security blanket. Shane's arm comes down tight across his upper back, and his other hand sinks into Ilya's hair, his fingers gently massaging Ilya's scalp. Ilya is helpless to him, asleep in seconds; if this is what life is always going to be like, Ilya does not ever want to find a way out.

August, 2007 – Ottawa, Ontario

Ilya *whoops* loudly upon entering the locker room, directly into Shane's ear. Shane, who has been on edge since practice started almost three hours ago, nearly turns and shoves Ilya back out the door, but he refrains, gritting his teeth and going straight to his cubby to remove the gear that has started to weigh so heavily on his body. He feels about ready to peel his skin off, once he's stripped down, wrapping his tense arms around his tense torso as he heads to the showers.

He gets hardly a second of peace before some of the other players start filtering in. Ilya, with his undying dispassion for decorum, claims the shower immediately next to Shane and begins reciting all of the words he knows, apparently.

"Ilya," Shane mutters, glancing around the room pointedly.

Ilya gives him a funny look; this is not exactly unusual behavior for Ilya, but this is a brand new team, not the same kids they've been playing with forever, and it's hard to say how they'll react to Shane and Ilya's... unusual closeness. The kids at their school are used to it, used to Hollander and Rozanov being attached at the hip, ever since they were twelve. These kids don't know them like that, though, and as it is, Shane can already see two of the other players shooting odd glances their way.

Shane doesn't elaborate, but Ilya stops talking, blessedly. He keeps glancing over at Shane, trying to figure out what his problem is, but Shane dutifully ignores him, trying to enjoy a rare moment of peace after the day he's had.

Practice was... well. It was hard.

It was amazing— it was challenging, intense, lively, but it was... hard. Shane isn't exactly familiar with hockey being *hard*. Even when Ilya first came along, he posed a welcome challenge for Shane, but it had never been *hard*. This practice was, like, fucking *impossible*.

Ilya had the time of his life. Ilya does not have a maximum capacity for physical exertion, like normal humans. Ilya did not struggle with any of the challenges presented to him during practice today. He has already made three friends on the team.

Shane twists subtly to check the bruise on the back of his upper thigh from when he fell on his ass earlier. He's sore from head to toe, feels like he could sleep for a week, and he's still so overheated that the steam from the shower is making it hard for him to breathe. He has not spoken to anyone today, hardly even Ilya, and he definitely does not see himself being invited to any parties anytime soon.

Ilya follows him out of the showers, all the way back to his cubby, standing much too close for any public setting, let alone a public setting while they are both naked.

"Are you mad at me?" Ilya asks quietly. Shane cannot bring himself to look at him, but he knows that if he did, Ilya's eyes would be all wide and sad.

"No," Shane grits out.

"Are you okay?" Ilya presses.

"No," Shane says again, and his hands are shaking while he throws his shirt over his head and pulls it down over his chest.

"What is wrong?" Ilya asks, and he's so fucking close, and his breath is hot against Shane's face, and his hair is dripping on Shane's feet, and Shane wants to fucking *scream*.

"Ilya," he says desperately. Ilya backs away immediately.

"Oh," Ilya says, rushing to his own cubby and getting dressed in record time. Shane pulls his sweatpants up and shoves his feet into his socks and his sneakers, and then Ilya grabs his wrist, dragging him out of the locker room.

Shane feels a little better as soon as he's out the door, but Ilya keeps pulling him down the hallway, shoving through the door of a janitor's closet and dragging Shane inside. He lets go of Shane's wrist and pushes the door closed after him, and then it's silent, dark, and cool, and Shane takes a full breath in for the first time today.

Ilya says nothing, gives Shane his space and a few unhurried moments to regulate. Shane closes his eyes and breathes until he no longer feels like he's going to implode, and then reaches for Ilya. Ilya is on him instantaneously, wrapping his arms all the way around Shane's body and squeezing just tight enough to make all of Shane's muscles relax at once. Yuna taught him how to do this years ago, but Ilya has perfected it, can do it more effectively than either of Shane's parents ever have been able to.

"Thank you," Shane says into Ilya's shoulder. "Sorry."

“Good?” Ilya hums.

“Yeah, better,” Shane says. “Sorry,” he says again.

Ilya releases him and offers him a smile, shaking his head. “Is okay.”

“Today was— a lot,” Shane says.

“It was,” Ilya agrees. “You did great.”

“Not as great as you,” Shane says. “Ilya, that was like—”

“Yeah,” Ilya says. “Was *really* fucking fun.”

Fun isn’t exactly the word Shane would use, but, then again, he wasn’t really in the right headspace from about fifteen minutes in. “It was really fucking hard.”

“Ah, the great Shane Hollander, taken down a pin,” Ilya grins.

“Peg,” Shane corrects him. “They hate me.”

“They do not hate you,” Ilya rolls his eyes.

“They do,” Shane says. “They think I’m weird. I *am* weird. They just all watched you drag me out of the locker room acting like a total freak.”

“First of all, there was no one there to watch,” Ilya says. “Everyone was in the showers or the bathrooms, no one saw. Second, you are not a freak.”

Shane shakes his head, but he does feel a little better knowing that no one actually saw all that. He doesn’t often get overstimulated to the degree that he used to when he was younger, but it’s still embarrassing when it happens, and he is so ashamed afterwards at how bitchy and rude he is when he feels like his brain is being inflated with a tire pump.

“You are not a freak,” Ilya says again, touching Shane's face lightly. “Well, not for that, anyway.”

“Fuck off,” Shane says, but he can’t help but smile. “Practice was just, like, really hard, and you’ve already made friends, and everyone was just staring at me like a space alien the whole time, because I was acting like one, which only made it harder to stop acting like one. And it was so loud and I was so hot and the coaches just *yelled* the *whole* time—”

“Hey,” Ilya says, cutting him off before he can get worked up again. “You are good here, yes? It is over, I am here with you, we just need to get our things and we can go home.”

“You didn’t think it was totally insane?” Shane asks.

Ilya shrugs. “Kind of felt like old practices, back in Moscow. Did not bother me.”

“Oh,” Shane says. “Right.” Because he’s been playing some kind of kiddie version of hockey for his entire life, and Ilya is the way he is because he was brought up to be. Before he can spiral too far, Ilya touches his face again.

“Okay, Shane,” he says softly. “You want me to get your things for you?”

“No, I can do it,” Shane says.

Ilya leads the way back to the locker room, and Shane takes a moment to look around at the other players. No one so much as glances at the two of them. Maybe Shane was playing things up a little after all, in his stupid brain.

He packs up his bag and shoves his hat over his still damp head, but when he turns to see if Ilya is ready to leave, Ilya is laughing animatedly with one of his new friends, and Shane’s heart sinks a little. He catches Ilya’s eye over the other player’s shoulder and nods toward the door, not waiting for Ilya’s acknowledgement before he shoulders his way out of the locker room and back through the rink to head for the exit. He keeps his head down as he walks, but he barely makes it around the first row of bleachers before one of the coaches calls out from the ice.

“Hollander!”

Shane looks up, frozen in place while the coach skates over to the boards where Shane is. “Coach?”

“Great practice today,” the coach says. “You’ve got serious potential, bud. You’re smart as hell, and quick, too. We’re gonna work on your skating, though.”

Shane feels like he’s been slapped across the face. *Work on his skating?* Shane is probably one of the best skaters in the world. Like, top 1000, for sure. He wants to stomp his foot and argue, but this is his coach, he’s been doing this since before Shane was alive, and Shane does, actually, have respect and decorum.

“Thank you, Coach,” he says, throat tight. “Um, anything in particular about my skating that I should work on?”

“You’re fast, and you’re precise,” the coach says, “but you can be clumsy, bud.”

Clumsy?! “That fall was a fluke, sir, I promise,” Shane says, losing against the urge to argue. He does so respectfully, folding his hands in front of himself. “I’m just having an off day, and I was nervous about today, the first practice, and everything—”

“Well, no more off days,” the coach says. “Not here, anyway. Off days don’t build careers.”

Shane nods, dumbfounded. The coach skates away, and Shane drags himself to the exit to the street, dropping heavily onto the bench outside the doors to wait for Ilya.

He’s never been spoken to like that by a coach before. He’s received constructive feedback, sure, and he likes to think himself pretty good at receiving it, but being called *clumsy* is not something he really knows how to handle.

Ilya busts out of the doors a moment later, grinning at Shane like he's had the best day of his life. He probably has. Shane is so happy for him, really, but he sorta wants to just crumble into sand, currently.

"Coach stopped me on the way out," Ilya says. "He says I am going to go far."

"Yeah?" Shane croaks. His throat is so dry.

"He also said I need to be more humble," Ilya shrugs. "I said I will consider it."

Shane huffs a laugh, pushing himself to his feet. "Did he, uh, have any constructive criticism?"

"Any what?"

"Feedback," Shane says, starting to get irritated. "Things you need to work on?"

"Oh," Ilya says. "Ah, not really. He says he is happy with my accuracy, but I should practice my backhand a little more."

"Cool," Shane says. He wants to throw up. Ilya has to work on his backhand a little, and Shane is downright *clumsy*.

"We got invited to a party this weekend," Ilya says, bumping his shoulder against Shane's as he catches up to him on the sidewalk. Shane didn't even realize he had started walking.

"A party?"

"Yes," Ilya says. "Davis says his parents are out of town for the weekend, he is having the team over for bonding time."

"Davis?"

"Luke Davis," Ilya says. "The one I was talking to when you left?"

"Right," Shane says. "So, are you gonna go?"

"*We* are going to go," Ilya says.

"Ilya," Shane warns.

"Shane," Ilya warns back. "*Dava*i. New team, new league, you need to be a little more, ah, you know."

"A little more what?" Shane growls.

"Friendly," Ilya says. "Less of a bitch."

"I am not a bitch," Shane says.

Ilya raises an eyebrow at him.

“I’m having an off day,” Shane says weakly.

“Sleep it off,” Ilya says, clapping a hand on his shoulder. “We are going to the party.”

Shane groans.

The next night — Manotick, Ottawa

One hour. They have been here for one hour and Shane is *done*. His beer is warm and gross, but it was already gross before it got warm. The music is way too loud; there’s not actually any bonding going on, unless drinking games and loud, raucous laughter about nothing counts as bonding. Shane still doesn’t even know the names of everyone here, and he honestly does not care to, but he probably should. He should make more of an effort.

That’s what Ilya told him, anyway, a little more than half an hour ago, before he disappeared into the kitchen for another drink and never returned. Shane could go look for him, but that would involve pushing through the living room to get to the kitchen, and would also make him feel rather clingy and annoying, as clearly Ilya has found more interesting things to do than babysit Shane and try to make him talk to people.

The sliding glass door to the backyard is wide open, people milling about inside and outside. It is a warm night, and it’s probably less stuffy and loud out on the deck, so Shane takes his emotional support bottle of beer and strafes around the edge of the living room to make his way outside.

To his delight, it is not only much quieter outside, but much less crowded. There are a few guys here and there, digging through the coolers near the door, passing around a joint at the bottom of the steps to the grass. Shane makes his way to the patio sofa and drops down heavily onto it, sighing deeply at the sky. One of the guys from the coolers comes to the sofa a few minutes later, a dripping wet can in his hand, and gestures to the sofa when Shane looks up at him.

“Cool if I hang with you?” he asks. Shane thinks his name is Michael, maybe?

“Sure,” Shane says, sitting up a little even though there is plenty of room.

“Shane, right?” Maybe Michael says.

“Shane Hollander,” Shane says, extending a hand. Maybe Michael looks amused, shaking his hand.

“Austin Greene,” he says. Oh. Not Michael. Ilya was right, Shane really should try harder.

“You play left wing,” Shane says.

“I do,” Austin says. “And you play the most insane center I’ve ever fucking seen.”

Shane smiles bashfully. “Uh, thanks. You’re really good, too.”

“Wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t,” Austin says playfully. “Well, maybe not *here*. This isn’t really my scene. My dad said I should come, though, try to make friends, or whatever.”

“Yeah, same,” Shane says. “My– uh, Ilya, he kinda dragged me here. And then ditched me. So.”

“Rozanov,” Austin says, widening his eyes briefly at Shane. “He’s, uh, an interesting guy.”

There’s a ruckus from just inside the door before Shane can say anything, and then Ilya himself appears, looking elated to have found Shane. He is considerably more drunk than he was when Shane saw him last, and he was already two drinks in at that point– Shane can only imagine what he’s gotten into in the forty minutes or so he was in the kitchen.

“Shane!” Ilya sings, collapsing onto the sofa next to Shane. “This is so fun. You are having fun?”

“Uh, sure,” Shane says.

“You need another drink?”

“No,” Shane says quickly. “Nope. I’m good.”

“I do,” Ilya says, pushing himself up to a normal sitting position from where he was sprawled across the cushions. “*Davai*, we are going to do shots!”

“No,” Shane says. “I’m good.”

“Hollander,” Ilya groans. “You are so boring.”

“Fuck off, Rozanov,” Shane mutters. “You’re drunk.”

“Am not drunk, Russians do not get drunk,” Ilya hiccups. “Come, shots!”

Shane looks helplessly at Austin, who is just watching with an odd expression. Ilya gives up, finally, pushing at Shane’s shoulder to steady himself as he gets up from the sofa. He disappears back inside, to a chorus of cheers; of course Ilya is the life of the party. He was born to be loved and adored.

“You guys are friends?” Austin asks wearily.

“Best friends,” Shane says.

“Cool,” Austin says, looking away like he’d rather be anywhere else on Earth.

“He’s not that bad,” Shane says. “He’s great, actually. He’s just drunk.”

“He’s, like, kind of an asshole, isn’t he?” Austin asks.

Shane blinks. *Ilya?* “What?”

“He’s so full of himself at practice,” Austin says, his face scrunching up. “Like, he’s good, he’s *really* good, but c’mon.”

Ilya is very confident, and often very loud about it, but he’s not an *asshole*. He’s the sweetest person Shane knows, actually, deep and sensitive and smart and caring and so, so kind, but he doesn’t quite know how to tell Austin all of that without sounding like he’s in love with Ilya, which he is, of course, and so he just says, “He’s a nice guy, really. He just talks shit on the ice sometimes.”

“Yeah, sure,” Austin says, nodding toward the door to the living room. Shane looks up to find Ilya standing on the coffee table, knighting someone with an empty vodka bottle. Shane should probably get him home soon.

It’s only been an hour, though. He promised Ilya they’d stay for at least two hours. Ilya is drunk, though, no matter what he says, and to Shane’s knowledge, Ilya has never been drunk before. Shane probably should be doing a better job keeping track of what Ilya has had to drink tonight, but that ship has long sailed, and Shane supposes Ilya’s going to have to learn this lesson the hard way. He leans back a little further into the sofa, mindlessly taking a sip of his beer and then grimacing at the taste.

“Sorry,” Austin says, after a few minutes. Shane looks up at him. “I didn’t mean to, like, shit on your best friend.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” Shane says. “He’s kinda earning it, currently.”

Austin laughs, nodding toward Shane’s beer. “How old is that thing?”

“Um,” Shane looks down at the bottle. “Pretty old, honestly.”

“Here,” Austin says, getting up and rummaging through the cooler near the door. He brings Shane back a can identical to one he came to the sofa with before. “Try this.”

It’s a hard iced tea, which means nothing to Shane, but it’s sweet and refreshing when Shane takes a sip, though the taste of alcohol still doesn’t do much for him. “That’s pretty good,” he says, abandoning his half empty beer bottle in favor of nursing this new drink for as long as he has to.

He and Austin chat for a while; Austin probably won’t turn out to be a lifelong friend, but he’s just about as boring as Shane, and right now, he’s a lifeline. Shane makes it almost another half hour before Ilya comes stumbling back to the deck, blinking twice at Shane.

“Have you moved?” Ilya asks.

“Have you come up for air?” Shane fires back.

“Yes, now,” Ilya shrugs, collapsing next to him again. He pulls a pack of cigarettes out his pocket, clumsily sticking one between his lips and fumbling with a lighter he produces from his other pocket. Shane rolls his eyes; he hates when Ilya smokes. He doesn’t smoke often, and almost never around Shane, but there’s a good chance Ilya doesn’t even know where he is right now, so Shane will let it slide this once.

“That’s so bad for you,” Shane mutters. Okay, maybe he can’t just *totally* let it slide.

Ilya is still struggling with his lighter, and eventually he whines and hands it to Shane, looking up at him pleadingly. Shane makes the mistake of meeting his eyes and, fuck, Shane probably could be convinced to commit serious crimes if Ilya looked at him like that. He takes the lighter, cups his free hand around Ilya’s mouth, and lights the cigarette between his lips. It’s intimate, maybe a little too intimate with Austin sitting eighteen inches away, but Austin doesn’t say anything.

“*Spasibo, moy lyubimyy*,” Ilya grins, turning his head to blow his smoke away from Shane. Shane looks quickly over at Austin, who is watching them both curiously, but he apparently does not know any Russian.

“Well, I think I’ve stayed long enough to appease my dad,” Austin says, glancing at the watch on his wrist. “See you guys at practice on Monday?”

“See you,” Shane says. “Get home safe.”

“Bye,” Ilya calls obnoxiously, earning himself a wave over Austin’s shoulder. “He is so boring,” he tells Shane.

“Hey, you wanted me to make friends,” Shane says. “I made one.”

Ilya gives him a withering look. “Okay.”

“How much have you had to drink tonight?” Shane asks, trying to phrase it conversationally, but Ilya rolls his eyes.

“I am not drunk,” he says, but the way he’s slurring his words betrays him.

“Okay,” Shane says. “But how much?”

Ilya groans. “Ah, I do not know! Some beers, some vodka, some jelly-o shots.”

“Jell-o shots?” Shane says.

“Whatever,” Ilya says. He turns away again to blow a cloud of smoke into the air. He is so goddamn pretty, even when he’s drunk and being kind of an asshole.

“Can we leave soon?” Shane asks. “My parents are—”

Ilya groans again, sitting up so fast he almost goes over forwards. Shane grabs his arm to steady him, and Ilya stands up to point at him like he’s Jack Sparrow, or something. “You, Shane Hollander, are *so* boring.”

Shane purses his lips. “Fifteen more minutes?”

“An hour,” Ilya counters.

“Half hour,” Shane says. “Final offer.”

Ilya rolls his eyes at him, but he reaches down to snatch Shane’s drink and takes a long sip. He splutters as he swallows, handing the can back like it’s offended him. “What the fuck is that?”

“Twisted Tea?” Shane reads the label on the can. “Austin gave it to me.”

“Ah, Austin is your boyfriend now?” Ilya says. “Austin can give you drinks and hang out with you at party, but not me?”

Shane blinks. “Ilya, you ditched me, like, fifteen minutes in.”

“Is a *party*,” Ilya says. “You cannot just stand in same place all night.”

“Whatever,” Shane says. “You have half an hour, then I’m leaving.”

Ilya wobbles a little as he turns on his heel, disappearing back inside. Shane feels rather awkward out here alone now that Austin is gone, so he decides to take Ilya’s advice and try a new spot to hang out. He makes his way back inside, keeping his eyes peeled for a mop of messy curls, but he’s called in to participate in some drinking game that he has very little interest in, and thus loses the next twenty minutes or so very carefully sticking playing cards under the tab of a beer can and desperately trying to avoid being the one to crack it open.

When he manages to break free from the game, he finally spots Ilya, watching him intently from the doorway to the kitchen. Ilya’s eyes are totally glazed over, but they’re locked on Shane’s, a disapproving tilt to his mouth. Shane bobs and weaves through the room to get to him, and Ilya blinks at him very slowly once Shane arrives in front of him.

“Hey,” Shane says, “you okay?”

“Yes,” Ilya says, but the one word comes out so messily, Shane can’t help but wonder how many drinks Ilya has had since he came inside.

“Let’s call it a night,” Shane says, nodding toward the front door.

“No,” Ilya whines. “Shane—”

“Ilya,” Shane says. “You’re fucking wasted. We’re going home.”

“Boring,” Ilya slurs, but he doesn’t try to pull away when Shane takes him by the wrist and starts pulling him toward the front door. He shouts goodbye to a couple of people, which ends up delaying them a few minutes as several of the guys come to bid Ilya farewell and tell him how much of a legend he is. When Shane finally gets Ilya out the front door and into the fresh air, Ilya folds like a puppet with his strings cut, crashing heavily into Shane’s side.

“Jesus,” Shane mutters, wrapping his arm around Ilya’s waist to hold him up. “Fucking shit, Ilya, how much *did* you drink?”

Ilya just moans lowly, and Shane rolls his eyes. He manages to get the both of them down the front steps of the beautiful house they’ve spent their evening in, but once they’re on the sidewalk, Shane pauses. He’s supposed to call his mom to come get them and bring them both back to the Hollanders’ for the night; Irina is working late tonight, and Ilya doesn’t like to be alone in the apartment, so he often sleeps over at Shane’s on nights Irina won’t be home until past midnight. Shane can’t call his mom now, though; Yuna cannot see Ilya like this, they’ll both be in so much trouble.

The house they’ve been at is on a quiet side street, but not far from downtown. Shane looks at Ilya, trying to assess how difficult it’s going to be to drag him to the more populated downtown area to try and get a cab, and Ilya lolls his head toward him, smiling dopily. Shane loves him so much it makes his heart hurt, but right now he could kill him.

“You need to walk,” Shane says, dragging Ilya down the sidewalk a little. Ilya stumbles, but he does his best, leaning heavily on Shane all the while. It takes much longer than it should—Ilya is heavy, okay, and he’s not doing a great job allowing Shane to maintain a straight path—but eventually they make it to the busier end of the street, and Shane deposits Ilya on a bench while he flags down a cab.

The cab driver shoots the two of them some weird looks on the ride home to Ilya’s apartment—Ilya is snoring loudly on Shane’s shoulder, and Shane is chewing anxiously on his thumbnail, but they make it back to the apartment just before midnight. Shane is supposed to call Yuna by twelve o’clock, so he only manages to get Ilya out of the cab and onto the sidewalk outside his building before he digs his phone out of his pocket and calls his mother.

“Hi, honey,” Yuna answers. She sounds tired, having waited up for his call, and Shane feels terrible. “Are you ready to come home?”

“Um, actually, is it okay if I stay at Ilya’s?” Shane says. “One of the other guys drove us from the party, but he lives over this way, I didn’t wanna make him drive all the way back to our house, so I figured I could just—”

“Have Irina call me when she gets home from work, please,” Yuna says. “Or else I will be there in an hour to bring you home.”

Shane flushes. He’s always been a pretty bad liar, but it’s not that big of a lie, and he really *is* at Ilya’s. “Okay, I’ll have her call you,” he says quietly. “Love you.”

“Love you, Shane,” Yuna says.

Shane shoves his phone back into his pocket and drags Ilya back to his feet from where he’s slumped on the half wall of the ramp to his building. He opts for the ramp, instead of the stairs, and they take it one step at a time, Ilya still half asleep draped over Shane’s shoulder.

Shane digs Ilya’s key out of his pocket when they arrive at the apartment, but to his horror, the door is already unlocked. He takes a deep breath while he opens the door, finding Irina

just inside in the kitchen, still in her work clothes, clearly having just gotten home.

Irina flinches at the door creaking open, and then relaxes at the sight of Shane and Ilya, and then tenses again when her eyes lock on her son.

“I’m so sorry,” Shane says, pulling Ilya through the door. Irina looks like she’s going to cry, rushing over to close the door behind them and then putting her hands on Ilya’s face.

“Ilyusha?” she breathes, lifting his head off of Shane’s shoulder to coax his eyes open.

Ilya groans at her, and then hides his face in Shane’s neck.

Irina mutters something angrily in Russian, waving toward Ilya’s bedroom. “Bring him to bed, I will get water.”

“I’m sorry, Irina,” Shane says again, a little more desperately. “Things got out of hand, and I—”

“Oh, *lapochka*, it is not your fault,” Irina says, cupping Shane’s cheeks this time to offer him a comforting smile. Her eyes are shining. “Please, help him to bed?”

Shane nods quickly, dragging Ilya through the living room and into his bedroom. He deposits Ilya gently on the bed, and then starts working his shoes off, while Ilya slumps into his pillow with a quiet moan.

“Shane?” Ilya says, flopping a hand toward Shane and waving it until Shane latches on.

“Yeah?” Shane whispers.

“I think I am drunk,” Ilya says dejectedly.

“Yeah, a little,” Shane scoffs. He is relieved, now that he’s had time to process it, that Irina is here. Ilya is almost completely out of it, and Shane probably would be panicking by now if he had to take care of him on his own. Irina appears with a glass of water and a dinner roll on a napkin; Shane helps her get Ilya into a seated position, and then Irina begins talking quietly to Ilya in Russian, stroking his hair and holding the bread to his lips, trying to get him to eat.

Shane feels out of place, so he removes himself from the room, walking to the living room and sitting down on the sofa. He pulls out his phone and calls his mother again.

“Shane?” she answers immediately.

“I lied to you,” Shane says. “We didn’t get a ride home, we took a cab. We are at Ilya’s apartment, and Irina is here, but Ilya is *really* drunk and I didn’t know what to do.”

Yuna doesn’t say anything for a moment. “Oh, Shane,” she says eventually. “Did I raise you this well, or did you just come out already perfect?”

“I’ll have Irina call you, but she’s taking care of Ilya right now, so it might be a while,” Shane says. “I’m sorry, mom.”

“Are you okay?” Yuna asks. “Did you have anything to drink?”

Shane considers lying to her, but at this point, there is no reason to. “I had a few sips, but I didn’t like anything, so not really.”

Yuna chuckles softly down the line. “I’m proud of you, Shane. But next time, *call me*, please, even if *you’re* the one who’s drunk, okay? I still would have preferred to have picked you up myself.”

“Okay,” Shane says. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright, honey,” Yuna says. “Do you want me to come get you?”

“No, I think I should stay,” Shane says, glancing into Ilya’s bedroom. Ilya is fighting against the bread, and Irina turns to look helplessly at Shane. “Uh, I think I have to tap in.”

“Let me talk to Irina, if she can,” Yuna asks.

Shane walks back into Ilya’s bedroom, trading her the bread for his phone. “My mom wants to talk to you,” he says quietly. Irina takes the phone quickly and flees the room, her voice high and tight when she greets Yuna.

Ilya is slumped against the wall behind his bed, watching Shane wearily. Shane tears a piece of bread off of the roll in his hand and touches it to Ilya’s lips, and Ilya blinks. “Open,” Shane says, just firmly enough that Ilya immediately complies, opening his lips and accepting the bread. Shane tilts the glass of water to his lips, next, and Ilya drinks obediently. They don’t speak, beyond Shane’s quiet commands, until the bread is gone and the glass is empty, and then Ilya slumps a little further down the wall.

“Sorry,” Ilya says, his eyes barely open.

“You should be,” Shane grumbles.

Ilya reaches for him, making to run his thumb over Shane’s cheek, but he does it so clumsily that he smacks Shane in the face a little bit. Shane flinches back, and Ilya lunges for him, dragging him into his arms.

“*Moy lyubimyy*, I am sorry,” Ilya gushes, barely intelligible.

“It’s okay, Ilya,” Shane says, allowing Ilya to hold him for a moment before he pulls back.

“I did not mean to hurt you,” Ilya says, even as Shane lays him down and pulls the blankets over him.

“You didn’t,” Shane says, brushing Ilya’s hair out of his face. “Go to sleep.”

“*Ya tebya lyublyu*, ” Ilya slurs, reaching up to pull Shane down with him. Shane climbs under the covers, pushing Ilya onto his side and curling up against his back. “You are my world,” Ilya says, even as Shane shushes him gently. “I love you, I would be lost without you.”

“I love you, too, Ilya,” Shane murmurs. “Sleep, baby.”

“Sleep,” Ilya agrees, and then he’s gone, clutching Shane’s hand against his chest and snoring loudly.

Irina comes to check on them a few minutes later, leaving Shane’s phone on the dresser. Shane offers her a smile, and nods to the empty napkin and water glass proudly. Irina’s eyes are wet, like she’s been crying, but she hurries over and takes the glass to refill it in the kitchen. She leaves it on the bedside table, pressing a kiss to Ilya’s forehead, and then Shane’s, and turns the light off on her way out.

“Hollander!” shouts one of the coaches from somewhere near the boards. Shane turns quickly, a deer in headlights, but he grins at the two thumbs up he’s presented with.

Today’s practice is going very well, at least in comparison to Friday. Shane has made every effort to prove to his coaches that he is, in fact, *very* good at skating, and so far all of his showing off seems to be working. He’s pulled out all the stops, presented all of the tricks he knows, much to his coaches’ delight, and to the chagrin of most of his teammates.

Ilya, on the other hand, is not quite at the top of his game; he spent the majority of the day yesterday recovering from Saturday night’s shenanigans, both physically and emotionally. Shane and Irina had done their best to nurse him back to health— well, after the verbal lashing Irina had given him the second Ilya opened his eyes yesterday morning. It was in Russian, the lecture, so Shane didn’t catch most of it, besides the word *Papa* being thrown around a lot, but both Ilya and Irina were nearly in tears by the time Irina was finished. Still, though, Irina followed Ilya into the bathroom to rub his back and hold his hair out of his face while he vomited, and then cooked him a really disgusting looking breakfast that was meant to help settle his stomach. Shane had been there with cuddles and reassurances that Ilya didn’t do anything *too* bad at the party, that Shane still loves him, that Shane isn’t upset that Ilya didn’t sit in the corner with him all night.

Truth be told, Shane probably could have been convinced to enjoy the party a little more if Ilya had actually paid him any attention. He didn’t tell Ilya that yesterday, though, for the same reason he didn’t try to seek Ilya out at the party; Shane doesn’t want to be his clingy, needy boyfriend, especially when Ilya is so well-liked already by the entire team, and Shane is, well... not.

He pretends not to notice the dirty looks and annoyed eye rolls from his teammates every time the coaches applaud him for showing off, but he notices. He notices the whispering, the snickering, he notices how everyone tends to cheer for Ilya for doing exactly what they scoffed at Shane for minutes earlier. The difference between them, Shane understands, is that Ilya is both incredibly talented *and* likeable. Shane is talented, every bit as talented as Ilya, but he doesn’t have the same kind of charisma that Ilya has, doesn’t have the same level of

charm. Shane isn't a circus freak, by any stretch, but he's more serious than a lot of the other kids their age, and it doesn't always provide a lot of room for people to get close to him. Shane Hollander has never been called warm, or approachable, or even, like, funny, but he doesn't need to be any of those things to be good at hockey. He just needs to be good at hockey.

Ilya, for his part, does a remarkable job of picking up the slack in Shane's people skills. He makes an effort to include Shane in conversations with the other players, which is sometimes a rather tall task, as the other players tend to retreat when Shane comes closer. Ilya has a few guys cornered toward the end of practice, has them roaring with laughter, and when Shane finishes the drill he's been working on, Ilya subtly nods to summon him closer.

Shane skates over, pulling his helmet off when he gets there. The laughter dies down a little when the other players notice who has joined the group, but Ilya's smile only grows bigger.

"Shane," Ilya says, clapping a hand on Shane's shoulder in an aggressively heterosexual way. Shane fights the urge to scowl at him for it. "I was just telling these guys about the first time I visited the cottage? Remember? And I thought there was a wolf?"

"Oh, yeah," Shane says, cracking a smile.

"Tell the story, tell them," Ilya says, nodding toward the other boys. Shane doesn't know any of them by their first names. He probably, absolutely should.

"It was a loon," Shane tells the small group of players. "He'd never heard one before."

There is a deafening silence from his audience. "That's a really cool story," one of them mutters, and the snickering Shane is used to starts back up.

The group disperses, and Shane turns helplessly toward Ilya; Ilya is looking at him in utter disbelief.

"You have talked to people before, yes?" Ilya asks. "Or was that your first time?"

"Shut up," Shane grumbles. "I'm not good at making friends."

"No shit," Ilya says. "You made friends with me. I know you are capable."

Shane scoffs. "I gave you an old hockey stick and made my dad let you join the team for free. Isn't exactly a foolproof method of making friends."

Ilya's eyebrows raise a little. "You— what?"

Shane replays what he just said in his mind, stomach sinking. God, it really is like it's his first time talking to other people. "I— asked him to consider you for the scholarship," Shane says. "You knew that."

"Oh," Ilya says, but he still seems weary. Shane is an idiot. "Okay, well, there is another party next—"

“No,” Shane whines. “No more parties. I can’t carry you home every weekend.”

“I have learned my lesson,” Ilya says, placing his hand over his heart. “Russians *do* get drunk, and we *do* get hungover. I will not drink so much. And I will not ditch you.”

Shane sighs, rolling his head forward and back to make his neck pop. “Fine.”

“And we will prepare some stories for you to tell, so that you do not continue to act like a space alien in front of all these nice boys,” Ilya says.

“You are not going to script my conversations for the night,” Shane says, crossing his arms over his chest. Ilya raises his eyebrows at him, and Shane sighs again. “Okay, fine, we can rehearse a couple of stories.”

Chapter 10

May, 2008 – Regina, Saskatchewan

Ilya is still in control of the puck when the final buzzer sounds, and his shot is just a fraction of a second too late. It sails past the other team's goaltender, but only because the other team's goaltender is already busy celebrating the win, and Ilya drops to his knees on the ice as the cup slips away. He could have at least tied the score, sent the game into overtime, given his team one last chance to secure the title, but he failed. He failed.

A hand comes down on his shoulder, and then another, and then there is a small huddle around him, dragging him back to his feet to vacate the ice while the other team celebrates. Ilya follows his teammates miserably back to their bench; Shane is already on the bench, was not on the ice for the end of the game, and he is staring at the floor when Ilya hauls himself over the boards.

"That was a hell of an effort, Rozanov," one of the coaches is saying, but Ilya's eyes are stuck on Shane. He looks sick, so disappointed he might never recover.

The walk back to the locker room feels like the walk out of the church after a funeral service. The coaches are congratulating them for making it this far, *all the way to the finals*, what an accomplishment, they should all be very proud. Ilya does not feel proud. He feels like he should be held down and kicked in the teeth.

He will get to play another season, he is sure of it. He has had a fantastic season, up until now, has been one of the top scorers in the league, right behind Shane. He has been told by every coach, fan, sports radio host, and talent scout he has come into contact with that he has a long, impressive career in front of him, he will be one of the greats, his name will hang from the rafters of the arena of whichever team is lucky enough to have him. This is just a bump in the road but, fuck, it is a devastating one.

Shane heads to the showers as soon as the head coach's consolation speech is over. He had received a special shout out for a job particularly well done, as had Ilya, and a couple of the other players, but it had not seemed to lift Shane's mood at all. It also did not lift Ilya's mood at all. Ilya may have to enter a brief period of mourning.

Ilya does not get a chance to speak to Shane until after they have both showered; Shane is working on tying his shoes when Ilya gets back to his cubby, towel tied around his waist.

"Hollander," Ilya says quietly.

Shane hums, but does not look up.

"Shane?"

Shane's eyes flicker up to Ilya's face, his hands pausing with his shoe laces looped between his fingers. "Yeah?"

Ilya fidgets, turning his back to the rest of the locker room. "Are you okay?" Ilya asks.

Shane sits up, and then slouches. "Are you?" he asks.

"No," Ilya says simply; he cannot say more than that right now, lest he cry in front of all these friends he has made over the past several months.

"Yeah," Shane says, looking back down at the floor. "You know, it's not your—"

"It is," Ilya says tightly, turning away to get his clothes.

"Ilya," Shane says. "It's not."

"I should have—"

"You couldn't have," Shane says. "You did everything you could have, they were all over you, they were just running down the clock and you—"

"I could have taken the shot earlier," Ilya says. "I should have. I was waiting for the perfect moment, but I should have—"

"Stop," Shane says. "Get dressed. I want to get out of here."

David and Yuna are waiting for them in the parking lot, away from the majority of the crowd in and around the arena. Shane marches directly into Yuna's arms, and David smiles sadly at Ilya with his hands in his pockets; David Hollander is an affectionate man, always patting Shane's back, his head, hugging Irina and touching Yuna however he can, whenever he can—but not with Ilya. Ilya suspects it has something to do with the way he nearly gave himself whiplash at the age of twelve when David clapped him on the shoulder, but that was so long ago, and Ilya does not fear grown men anymore, at least not the way he used to. He locks eyes with David, arms twitching forward, and David all but runs to him, wrapping Ilya in his arms the way Yuna is squeezing the despair out of Shane.

"We're so proud of you, kiddo," David says into Ilya's shoulder. Ilya squeezes his eyes shut, allowing David to hug him for just a moment longer before he pulls away. Yuna all but shoves David out of the way when she is done with Shane, wrapping Ilya in her arms, next.

"Don't be so hard on yourself," she whispers, like she can read Ilya's mind. She probably can. Ilya should be careful what he thinks around her. "You did amazing. Your team should have supported you more, I mean, really, where the hell were your defencemen? I'm going to send an email to—"

"Mom, stop," Shane groans. "Can we go back to the hotel?"

It is a tense ride; Yuna chatters the whole way, which does nothing to soothe anyone, and by the time they get back to the hotel, Ilya feels like his brain has melted into the back of his throat.

“Can I borrow your phone?” Ilya asks Shane quietly, once they get into the lobby of the hotel. Shane hands his phone over immediately, lingering a little as Ilya’s fingers brush against his own.

“Do you want the room?” Shane asks. “I can go to my parents’ room, or something—”

“It is okay,” Ilya says, nodding toward an armchair in a quiet corner of the lobby. “I will not be long.”

“Okay,” Shane says. He brushes his fingertips over Ilya’s hip, just quickly, and then glances around to make sure no one saw. “I’ll be upstairs,” he says, taking the first few steps toward the elevator backwards until he has to turn to press the button.

Ilya walks to the armchair he scouted, but he waits until Shane is in the elevator before he dials his mother’s phone number. The playoff schedule was too unpredictable, and they were not even sure they would make it to the final game, so Irina was not able to request time off of work in order to come with them to Saskatchewan. She was devastated, as was Ilya, but even after all of these years, they are not totally out of the woods financially, and every shift Irina works is truly necessary.

“Ilyusha,” Irina answers. Ilya collapses back against the armchair at the sound of her voice. *“Solnyshko, oh, my darling.”*

“We lost, Mama,” Ilya whispers.

“I was watching, moy lyubimyy,” Irina says. *“One of the waiters gave me his iPhone so I could watch it on the internet. You were amazing, my sweet boy.”*

“We lost,” Ilya says again. *“Because of me.”*

“Hush,” Irina says firmly. *“It was not your fault. Your teammates should have—”*

“Yes, I know,” Ilya says. He has heard quite enough about it from Yuna, already. *“But I should have done better, too.”*

“You did so well, solnyshko,” Irina says. *“I am so proud of you.”*

Ilya lets his eyes fall closed. *“Mama, do you think—”*

“What, Ilyusha?” Irina says, when Ilya hesitates.

“Papa,” Ilya breathes. *“Do you think he— knows? Or... cares?”*

There is silence from the other end of the line.

They do not often talk about Ilya’s father, except when Irina is reminding him in the throes of a hangover what alcohol did to his father, or when Ilya has one of his (now rather infrequent) nightmares and wakes up screaming for his father to leave his mother alone. Ilya has never dared to ask a question like this before, because he knows it does not matter, he should not care, and usually he does not, but right now, it is all he can think about, whether or not his

father is aware of what has become of his youngest son, if he would think twice about it if he did find out, if he ever thinks about Ilya, or Irina, and regrets what he did, how he treated them. He does not care, but he does think about it. He is thinking about it.

"I do not know, Ilyusha," Irina says eventually. *"I– Why are you asking this?"*

Ilya scoffs. *"I do not know why. Sorry."*

"Do not be sorry," Irina says. *"Solnyshko, is this... is this something you think about?"*

"No," Ilya says, too quickly. *"Not often. And it would not make a difference to me if he cared or if he did not, I just–"*

"You just what?" Irina pushes.

"I do not want him to know," Ilya says, finally. *"He does not deserve to."*

Irina is quiet. Then, she snuffles. *"I am so proud of you, Ilyusha. I am so, so proud."*

"Thank you, Mama," Ilya says softly. *"For everything."*

"I love you, solnyshko," Irina says. *"More than life."*

"I love you, Mama," Ilya says. *"I should go. The Hollanders made dinner reservations, and Shane is waiting for me in the room."*

"Hug that little boy for me, Ilyusha," Irina says. *"Tell him I am proud of him, too."*

"I will," Ilya says. *"Bye, Mama."*

Irina makes a smooching sound into the phone, and Ilya smiles as he hangs up. He rides the elevator up to the fourteenth floor with Shane's phone clutched in his hand, and when he gets to the room, Shane is sitting on the edge of one of the queen sized beds, staring at the floor. Ilya hands over the phone, and Shane immediately tosses it onto the other bed, opening his arms for Ilya.

Ilya collapses against him, getting his arms around Shane's middle and holding him tight. "Mama says she is proud of you."

Shane huffs out a breath. "I can't believe we lost."

"I am sorry," Ilya breathes.

"Stop, Ilya," Shane says. "It's not your fucking fault."

"Okay," Ilya says, but it is not okay. It is his fucking fault.

"Ilya," Shane says. "It's not."

"Okay," Ilya says again.

Shane sighs, pulling out of Ilya's arms and pushing him down onto his back on the bed. Ilya goes easily, allows Shane to climb on top of him and kiss all the breath from his lungs, bends his knees and plants his feet on the bed to give Shane something to lean back against when he finally breaks away.

"I love you," Shane says, leaning heavily against Ilya's thighs.

"I love you," Ilya says, gazing up at him, arms spread out to either side on the bed.

"You are so hot," Shane says.

Ilya, for the first time since about halfway through the last period of the game, cracks a smile. Shane grins in response, which makes Ilya smile a little wider, which makes Shane kiss him again.

"We should get ready for dinner," Shane murmurs against his lips.

"We should," Ilya agrees, gripping Shane by the sides of his head and kissing him a little deeper.

They are only a few minutes late to dinner.

June, 2008 – Ottawa, Ontario

"And how about that Ilya Rozanov?"

"I'll tell you what, Tim, he's a star in the making. Just too bad he didn't have a better team around him at the OHL championship game this year."

"If only he'd had Hollander on the ice with him at the end there. Those two kids are going places, Jim."

"You know, I read that they're childhood best friends, Hollander and Rozanov."

"It'll be interesting to see how that plays out when they're in the NHL. There's gotta be some serious competition in that friendship, don't you think?"

"Yeah, Tim, I'd think so. Anyway, we'll see more of them on the ice together next season— so long as they can handle the pressure."

Ilya drops from the bar in his doorframe with a loud thud, grabbing the TV remote off of the coffee table and jamming his finger against the power button, before Jim or Tim or Kim or

whoever can say another word. None of the media coverage about the game that Ilya lost for his team has blamed him for the loss, which makes him question their credibility as news sources. Everyone just keeps talking about how talented he is, how much potential he has, how big of a star he is going to be, and Ilya is— well, Ilya is freaking out, a little bit.

It is a lot of pressure, a lot of expectations that Ilya is not sure he can live up to. He is good at hockey, he is *incredible* at it, even, and he knows this, but knowing that other people know it, too, people who Ilya does not know, people who maybe should not know... it is all a bit much.

He returns to his pull ups with no background noise, only the sound of his harsh breaths with every time he drags himself up. It starts to make him feel crazy, after a while, the voices from the TV replaying in his mind over and over. School is not out for another two weeks, which means it is two more weeks until Ilya can escape to Lanaudière with Irina and the Hollanders for while and forget about real life, but until then, he is stuck here at the apartment on the weekends, all by himself and dying for a distraction from the crushing weight of knowing he will never be good enough.

He abandons the bar and retrieves his sneakers from his bedroom, tying them tight and beginning his run before he has even left the apartment. Irina will be out all day, working a double shift at the restaurant, and Ilya is supposed to meet Shane at the gym in an hour, but Ilya needs this nervous energy out *now*. He runs all the way to the Hollanders' house; it is warm out, not unseasonably so for late spring, but Ilya is drenched in sweat by the time he arrives, still bouncing, on the doorstep.

Yuna answers the door. She looks delighted to see him, until she notices the sweat dripping off of him, and she steps back an inch. "Ilya," she says, "Is Shane expecting you?"

"Probably no," Ilya says. "He is home?"

"Shane," Yuna calls over her shoulder. There is no response. "He must be in his room. You can go up, just take your—"

Ilya already has his shoes off before she can finish the sentence, smiling politely at Yuna and then taking off up the stairs. He knocks only as a formality, opening the door before Shane answers. Shane sits up quickly on his bed, shoving his laptop to the side. "Ilya!"

Ilya freezes, grinning madly. "What were you doing?"

"Nothing," Shane says quickly.

"Come work out with me," Ilya says.

"We're supposed to meet at the gym in, like, thirty minutes," Shane says.

"Yes, but since you are doing nothing," Ilya says pointedly, "we can go now."

"Did you run here?" Shane asks. "You're all sweaty."

“Yes, I did, and we are going to run to the gym,” Ilya says. “*Davai*, Hollander, get up. You can jerk off later.”

“I wasn’t!” Shane huffs, but he pushes himself up off the bed to grant Ilya’s wish. Ilya lunges for the laptop as soon as Shane is out of the way and pries it open, and Shane shrieks behind him, trying to climb Ilya’s back to tear the laptop away from him.

“*Ilya Rozanov March 2008 Highlight Reel*,” Ilya reads, turning around to flash all of his teeth at Shane. “You were jerking off to videos of me playing hockey?”

“I was not jerking off!” Shane hisses.

“Okay,” Ilya says, plopping down on the bed and pressing play on the video. On the screen, Ilya effortlessly skates circles around three other players at once, shooting the puck into the net as if the goaltender is not there at all. Off to the side of the video, there is a list of recommended videos, all of Ilya, all with full timer bars, to indicate that Shane has watched them already.

“You’re just, like, really awesome to watch,” Shane mutters. He is more flushed than Ilya, probably, sitting down on the bed next to Ilya with his head in his hands like he is completely mortified.

“You have watched every video there is,” Ilya says, scrolling through the list of recommended videos. “I did not know you were such a fan, Hollander.”

“I am your biggest fan,” Shane says earnestly. “Besides maybe your mom. And my mom.”

“And yet, you are the only one watching my greatest moments in his bed with the door closed in the middle of the afternoon,” Ilya says suggestively.

“Okay, first, *gross*,” Shane says. “And I was not. Jerking. Off.”

“Not yet,” Ilya teases. “Okay, *davai*. We are not getting any younger.”

“What has gotten into you?” Shane mutters, standing up again to change into his gym clothes. He dresses with his back to Ilya, so Ilya stares openly.

“It is summer, there is no practice, we need to stay in shape,” Ilya says.

“You almost broke up with me last summer for making you work out all the time,” Shane says. “What’s with the sudden burst of dedication?”

“Fine, Hollander, you were right. I should have worked harder. I have seen the error of my ways,” Ilya says, mostly just to appease him, but he earns himself a half dressed Shane whipping around to look at him.

“Hey,” Shane says, pulling his shirt the rest of the way down and crossing back over to the bed. “This isn’t about–”

“Do not turn this into therapy, Hollander,” Ilya groans. “I just want to see you all sweaty and tired at the gym.”

“You need to stop being so hard on yourself,” Shane says, like Ilya said nothing at all. “That loss was not your fault.”

“I am going to gym,” Ilya says, standing up abruptly. “Are you coming, or no?”

“Yeah, I’m coming,” Shane says, rushing to pull a pair of socks onto his feet. “But I think we should talk about—”

Ilya starts running, down the hallway, down the stairs, all the way out the front door. Shane is hot on his heels, but Ilya does not give him an opportunity to catch up until they have reached the gym.

September, 2008

“Okay, one more time, let’s go from the top,” the director says. The room comes alive for a moment as the crew resets the shot, and Shane resists the urge to roll his eyes as yet another can is taken from his hand and replaced with an unopened one. He has wasted at least fifteen cans of this energy drink, at this point, and he’s put his mouth on every single one of them, so it’s not like the crew can even take what’s left over from the shoot, this is so wasteful, and Shane’s had *so* many sips of energy drinks which he doesn’t even usually drink and *god* this shoot better be almost done because he has to pee so fucking bad—

“Shane!” the director shouts. “Ready?”

Shane nods curtly, rolling his shoulders back and pasting on his loveliest smile.

“Action!”

Shane holds the can as still as he’s able to for the camera— he’s had a lot of caffeine in the past few hours, okay— watching the director in his periphery for his cue to crack the can open and take a sip. He swallows, recites the ridiculous brand slogan, and smiles again.

“There it is,” the director says. “That was perfect, Shane, totally perfect. Let’s do one more, just for good measure.”

One more take turns into ten more takes, and Shane can barely think straight by the time he’s allowed to leave the set and return to where Yuna has been waiting behind the crew and their equipment.

“That was great, honey,” she says, barely glancing up from her phone to smile at him. “Hey, do you think Ilya would be interested in doing a commercial with you for CCM? Oh—nevermind, he’s already signed on. Okay, so, you’ve got a meeting with Reebok Thursday afternoon, and there are three games this weekend, so it’ll have to be next week, at some point—”

“Mom,” Shane says. “Can we go?”

“Of course, honey,” Yuna says, hopping up from her chair without looking up. “How’s Tuesday?”

“I have practice,” Shane says, following Yuna down the corridor back to his dressing room.

“Oh, right,” Yuna tuts. “Okay, hm. I’ll have to look at the calendar when we get home.” She is quiet for a moment, until she squeals in the doorway of the dressing room. “You have an offer for an ad with Peloton!”

“Mom, I have, like, homework and stuff,” Shane says.

“Shane, this is a lot of money we’re talking about,” Yuna says. “I’ll do your homework, for fifteen percent of this payout,” she says, flashing her phone screen at Shane.

Shane’s eyebrows shoot up. “Deal,” he says. “Wait, I’m doing a commercial with Ilya?”

“Unless you have too much homework,” Yuna says.

“I’m just surprised Ilya would agree to it,” Shane says. “He’s been so— y’know.”

“That boy would eat rocks if you were doing it, too,” Yuna says. “I just wish he would do more on his own. He should really be working on building his brand, you know, making his own money, helping his poor mother—”

“Yeah,” Shane mutters, quickly collecting his things from the dressing room. He really does have homework to get done tonight, and it’s already going on nine o’clock. “I’ve tried to talk to him about it, but—”

“Me too,” Yuna sighs. “Oh well. I’m proud of you for keeping your head on straight.”

Shane stays quiet at that, following his mother back out of the dressing room and out of the studio, where David is waiting with the Volvo to drive them both home.

Ilya has been... well, kind of a pill all summer. When he’s not pushing his body to its absolute limit physically, he’s partying— with kids from school, kids from the team, kids Shane’s never even met before. There’s not an invitation that Ilya has turned down. He’s mostly stopped dragging Shane along with him, which is nice, in a way, but also kind of hurtful. Shane has gotten a little less stiff at parties, but Ilya doesn’t like that Shane can’t cut loose and forget himself like Ilya does, and Shane doesn’t like feeling like he’s ruining Ilya’s fun by simply existing, so it’s probably for the best. Still, Shane has woken up at least three times a week this summer in the middle of the night to a phone call from Ilya, asking for help getting home from a party, or a cover story for Irina when he inevitably doesn’t make it home

by curfew. Irina has been at her wit's end with him, but Ilya hasn't gotten as deliriously wasted again since that first time, and Shane has gotten pretty good at coming up with clever lies to help keep Irina off his back.

For all the brand deals and commercials that Shane has done this summer, Ilya has only been forced into doing a couple of them by Yuna. Even so, Ilya has made enough of his own money to buy and pay for his own cell phone, a membership at a fancy gym near the rink where their team practices, and driving lessons, on top of all the alcohol and cigarettes and weed.

It's a fight Shane cannot continue to pick with him. He's made Ilya more than aware of his feelings about Ilya's lifestyle choices, but Ilya cannot be reasoned with lately. Shane loves him more than anything, will always love him despite everything, and for that reason, he has stopped bringing it up.

Well, he has *mostly* stopped bringing it up. Sometimes he can't stop himself. Sometimes it boils over at inconvenient times, like the day of their CCM shoot, when Ilya is nowhere to be found when the director is ready to, well, *direct* them, and Shane finds him in the parking lot with a cigarette between his lips and his eyes glued to his phone.

"Ilya," he growls, glaring when Ilya startles and looks up at him. "What the fuck are you doing? The director wants to—"

"I will be there in a minute," Ilya says, waving him off easily.

Shane's blood boils. He marches over to where Ilya is leaning against the wall, letting the heavy door of the rink fall closed behind him, and plucks the cigarette out of Ilya's mouth. Ilya whines in protest, but Shane throws the cigarette on the ground and stomps on it much harder than strictly necessary.

"What the fuck, Hollander," Ilya says.

"Who are you texting?" Shane bites.

"Davis," Ilya says, glancing back down at his phone. "He is having party this weekend."

"Another one?" Shane scoffs. "Does he even *have* parents?"

"They are traveling," Ilya shrugs. "You should come," he says, glancing up at Shane through the corner of his eye.

"No fucking thanks," Shane says. "Come inside, *now*."

Ilya groans, pushing himself off the wall. "You are so boring, Hollander," he sighs.

"And you are out of fucking control," Shane retorts, turning on his heel and marching back to the door. He turns to wait for Ilya once he's pried the door open, but Ilya is rooted to his place in the parking lot, watching him.

"Ah, you are in charge of controlling me?" Ilya says.

“What?” Shane says. “No, I didn’t–”

“I am out of control? Because, what, I do not spend every second of my life chasing fame and money? Because I like to have fun? Because I want to be a *fucking teenager* for a little bit? Why?” Ilya spits.

“Don’t do this right now, Ilya,” Shane says lowly.

“Am I in the way of your fame and money?” Ilya gasps, placing a hand over his chest in mock distress.

“Fuck you,” Shane says. “This is a big deal, Ilya, it’s good for our careers, it’s good for our brands–”

“My career is hockey,” Ilya says, slow and articulate. “Playing hockey. That is all I am interested in.”

“Besides drinking and smoking and partying all the fucking time?” Shane says. “Why did you even agree to do this commercial?”

Ilya falls quiet at that, leaning back against the wall and looking away.

“Huh?” Shane presses. “Why?”

Ilya mutters something so softly that Shane misses it. Shane rolls his eyes, letting the door fall closed again.

“Speak up, Rozanov–”

“To see you,” Ilya spits suddenly, turning around with fire in his eyes.

Shane blinks. “What?”

“You do not party with me, you are always busy with commercials and photoshoots and whatever the fuck– I thought this would be fun, like old times, me and you, on the ice. But you have ignored me since we got here,” Ilya says.

“Ilya, I–” Shane stutters. “We’re *working*, babe, we can’t just hang out–”

“We never do,” Ilya says.

“Don’t put that on me,” Shane says. “You’ve been fucking crazed this summer, if you’re not drunk off your ass you’re killing yourself in the gym, don’t act like I’m the one who hasn’t been around.”

“Whatever,” Ilya breathes, shaking his head and making to brush past Shane to get to the door.

Shane stands in his way, putting himself between Ilya and the door handle and forcing Ilya to meet his eyes. “Hey,” he says softly.

“They are waiting for us, Hollander,” Ilya says lowly, defeated.

“They can wait another minute,” Shane says, reaching for Ilya’s hips. “I’m sorry.”

Ilya swallows, eyes flickering to Shane’s lips. “Me too.”

“Skip the party this weekend,” Shane says, brushing his lips against Ilya’s. “Let’s do something, just us.”

“Come to the party with me,” Ilya counters, stealing a kiss quickly before Shane can pull back.

“Skip it,” Shane says again, backing away an inch when Ilya tries to chase his lips.

“Come,” Ilya says. He reaches for Shane’s face, pulling him in gently and kissing him sweetly, and then a little less sweetly, until Shane is pressed against the door behind him and he has to use both hands on Ilya’s chest to push him away so he can breathe.

“An hour,” Shane says, eyes stuck on the way Ilya’s lips glisten with his spit.

“Two,” Ilya says.

“No.”

“Fine.”

After a few hours of mostly ignoring every cue from the director, giggling and fooling around when they were supposed to be intense and serious, and generally doing a very mediocre job of showing off the gear they are meant to be advertising, Shane and Ilya are released, the cameras are turned off, and the rink lights are turned back on. They race to the locker room, tripping over each other on their skates.

They seem to be operating in extremes lately; it’s either this, or they’re at each other’s throats, with very little in between. They’ve always been intense, the two of them, and Shane loves Ilya more than anything in the world, but sometimes it gets a little hard to remember whether he’s supposed to be smiling or scowling at him.

The locker room is empty besides for the two of them, which is unsettling. Shane has come to expect the loud chaos and disorder of the locker room after a practice or a game, but it’s rather peaceful with just Ilya at the cubby beside him, stripping out of his borrowed gear.

Shane gets to the shower first, turns it on as hot as he can stand, and lets the water cascade over him for a few minutes. The shoot wasn’t terribly strenuous, but it gets cold just standing around on the ice so much, and it’s nice to warm up like this.

Ilya joins him before long, choosing the showerhead immediately next to Shane's, as if he doesn't have the whole room to choose from. Shane smiles to himself, glancing over and letting his eyes sweep over Ilya's body while Ilya isn't looking. Ilya, as if by some sixth sense, catches him immediately, waggling his eyebrows at him.

"Fuck off," Shane smiles, angling his body away from Ilya and reaching for the shampoo on the wall. He washes his hair leisurely, his muscles slowly loosening in the hot water, and when he blinks his eyes open again, he glances reflexively over at Ilya.

Ilya is turned fully to face him, his cheeks and chest flushed from the water. He's got this look on his face that Shane's only seen him make when they— oh, Ilya is touching himself.

Shane's eyes go wide, stuck on the sight before him. It's nothing new, not exactly— they haven't done *everything*, but they've done *some stuff*, things they're both comfortable with. It's new in this setting, though, in the locker room showers. It's never been a thing before, showering together like this at the rink; they have been doing it since they were twelve, and never once has it ever been weird. Now, Shane fears he may never take another shower in another locker room without thinking of this moment.

Ilya's free hand twitches, an invitation, but Shane looks away quickly. "Not here," he mutters, prying his eyes away to turn the water off and all but run from the showers.

He's not unaffected, and Ilya obviously knows that, but this can't be a thing, this can't— this can't seep into hockey. Hockey has always been a part of Shane, and Ilya has almost always been a part of hockey, but Shane and Ilya, that's something different entirely. They can't let their relationship with each other become part of their relationship with hockey, because someday, well, someday things will be different, they might not share the same locker rooms anymore, and as heartbreaking as that thought is, Shane is almost more scared of the idea of the alternative.

Shane has almost finished getting dressed by the time Ilya comes out of the shower. He focuses very intently on getting his shoes on his feet, and not staring at Ilya with only his towel wrapped very loosely around his waist.

"Okay?" Ilya says, without really looking at him.

"Yeah," Shane says immediately, and then, "we can just forget that happened."

Ilya is quiet for a moment. "Okay."

Shane's mouth is so dry. Yuna is waiting outside for them. They're in a *locker room*.

"My mother is working late tonight," Ilya says, glancing over his shoulder at Shane.

Shane doesn't even pretend to hold Ilya's eye contact, his gaze sweeping across Ilya's shoulder, down the curve of his back, the swell of his behind under the towel, which Ilya drops unceremoniously.

"Okay," Shane says, dropping his second shoe in his haste to get it on. "Get dressed. Now."

Two days later – Manotick, Ottawa

Ilya is drunk. Not so drunk he cannot see straight, not like the last time he was in this particular kitchen, but he is definitely drunk, and it is definitely too early. Shane is only giving him an hour tonight, so Ilya has been drinking accordingly, his red solo cup never leaving his hand for a moment— except to be refilled.

Shane is drinking vodka, which is very exciting to Ilya, but it is mixed with ginger ale *and* grenadine which is a crime against Russia, actually, and he has not taken more than a couple of sips. He is trying, though, Shane is, which is all Ilya can really ask for. He has been very good tonight, talking to people who are not Ilya *or* Austin, which is quite a feat for him. He still will not dance with Ilya, but that is okay, because he is here, with a drink in his hand and a smile on his face, and Ilya loves him so much he does not even know what to do with it.

Ilya pours a little more vodka into his cup while Shane is not looking— Shane glares at him every time he notices Ilya getting more to drink, which is very cute and a little bit arousing, but ultimately not great. Shane will make him leave before his hour is up if he thinks that Ilya has had too much to drink, but Ilya has learned to hold his liquor more effectively since the last time Shane came to a party with him, and he is very good at managing his own limits. Usually.

He has just finished topping up his drink when Shane turns around from the conversation he was having with a couple of the guys, and Ilya leans heavily against the counter, nearly dropping the bottle in his hand in his effort to hide the fact that it was, well, in his hand. Right on cue, Shane gives him that cute little disapproving glare, and Ilya shows him all of his teeth.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” Shane says, leaning a little too close to Ilya’s ear to be heard over the music. It sends shivers all the way down Ilya’s spine. Ilya opens his mouth to ask if Shane wants company, but then Shane is pressing his cup into Ilya’s free hand. “Can you watch my drink for me?”

Ilya looks down at Shane’s cup in disgust. “I will not be seen with this,” he says.

“Fuck you,” Shane says, rolling his pretty eyes and dragging his body quite unnecessarily against Ilya’s while he scoots around him to get to the bathroom. The alcohol slows Ilya’s recovery time, leaving him leaning against the counter for just a moment too long in Shane’s absence.

“Rozanov!” someone shouts, and Ilya turns to find Davis and a few of the other guys from the team in the doorway to the kitchen. “Come on, Kings is starting and we need you!”

“I am waiting for Shane,” Ilya says, holding up the second cup in his hand.

“What is he, your boyfriend?” Davis snickers. “Come on, fag, come play.”

Ilya bristles, but in the interest of Davis not pulling that thread too far, he follows. A space is made for him at the folding table on the deck where a single can of beer and a deck of cards are waiting in the center, and when the game starts, Ilya loses a few rounds on purpose just to have an excuse to take long pulls from his cup.

There is no telling how much time has passed before there is a tap on his shoulder. Ilya turns to find Shane, mouth pursed in annoyance.

“I’ve been looking for you for, like, twenty minutes,” Shane says. “I came out of the bathroom and you were gone.”

“Rozanov!” the crowd around the table jeers. Ilya turns to find everyone, besides himself, is pointing at the sky. He rolls his eyes and drinks, but he drinks from Shane’s cup, by accident, which he is still clutching in his left hand. He pulls a face and turns back to Shane, thrusting his cup back to him.

“It’s eleven thirty,” Shane says, but he accepts the cup. “Can we go soon? You said we only had to stay an hour.”

“Yes, but now I am so busy—” Ilya is cut off by the group calling his name again, and he does not bother turning around, taking a sip from his cup and then holding it in the air.

Shane crosses his arms over his chest. He is so cute, but he is going to be livid when he has to carry Ilya out of here because he keeps distracting him from the game.

“Your turn, Rozanov,” Willard says, elbowing him a little too hard. Ilya turns and pulls a card, flashing it to the rest of the table.

“Two,” he says uninterestedly. “Jones.”

Jones groans like he is being asked to do something much worse than taking a sip of the beer in his hand. Ilya stretches across the table to slide his card under the tab of the beer can in the center and, of course, the can cracks.

The table erupts in cheers, and Ilya sighs as he turns around to hand Shane his cup. “One minute,” he says, grabbing the can from the center of the table and chugging it easily.

“Ilya,” Shane hisses. “That’s going to make you sick. I think we should—”

“Can you fuck off?” Ilya says, a little too harshly. Shane’s eyes widen, and the crowd around the table supplies a mixture of low *oohs* and raucous laughter.

“I would love to,” Shane says through his teeth. “But I can’t leave you here.”

“You are so boring, Hollander,” Ilya says, crushing the can in his hand and tossing it into the center of the table. Shane, annoyingly, is right— Ilya does feel a bit sick already, but he will

not be dragged out of this party like a child.

“You always fucking do this,” Shane spits. “Whatever.”

“Oh, I do?” Ilya counters. “What do I *always* do? How would you know, you are never *fucking* there!”

“We’re not doing this here,” Shane says quietly. “Stop.”

“Do you turn to pumpkin at midnight?” Ilya sneers, but Shane is already storming away, so Ilya goes after him. “You need your beauty rest, is that it? Need to go home and get full eight hours so you can keep being Mister Perfect?”

“Shut the fuck up, Ilya,” Shane shouts without even turning around, marching through the living room toward the front door.

“Mister Perfect Shane Hollander,” Ilya says, “Mister—”

Shane slams the door in his face.

Ilya wrenches it open, chasing Shane down the front steps. “Shane—”

“Go fuck yourself,” Shane says.

Ilya gets his hands on Shane’s hips from behind, but there are people around on the front lawn, so Shane whirls around and shoves him back. Ilya stumbles, manages to catch himself on a shrub, and suddenly there is a crowd drawn around them, expecting a fight.

“I’m going home,” Shane bites. The crowd parts for him, and Ilya thinks he might be sick, scrambling to right himself on his feet and rushing after Shane.

“I am sorry,” Ilya says, when they have rounded the row of cars parked along the street. “Shane—”

“Get in the fucking car,” Shane says, jaw tight, not even glancing in Ilya’s direction.

Ilya nearly trips over himself in his haste to get to Shane’s Jeep Cherokee, gets the door open, and then pauses. Shane is already in the driver’s seat, car rumbling to life, watching Ilya in horror.

“Fucking *do not*,” Shane says, but it’s too late.

Ilya turns just in time, vomiting into the hedge lining the property behind him. Shane groans loudly, but Ilya can barely hear him.

“I’m never fucking coming to another party with you,” Shane is muttering, but he’s there, suddenly, holding Ilya around the waist from behind. “Go on, get it out.”

“I love you,” Ilya says, retching into the hedges again. “I am sorry.”

“I love you too,” Shane says distractedly. “Are you good?”

“I am good,” Ilya says, straightening up and wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. “I am sorry, Shane.”

“Yeah, you’ve mentioned,” Shane says, helping Ilya up into the passenger’s seat. He leans over him to do up his seatbelt for him, and Ilya chases him on his way back, trying to kiss him. “Ew,” Shane jerks away. “You just puked *everywhere*, don’t kiss me!”

“Oh, yeah,” Ilya says, head lolling back against the seat. “Sorry.”

Shane slams the door a little harder than necessary and Ilya watches him cross back in front of the car, hopping back into the driver’s seat.

“You are okay to drive?” Ilya asks.

“I didn’t even have one full drink,” Shane says. “I took, like, four sips, and you drank half of it.”

“I did not,” Ilya says firmly.

“You fucking did,” Shane argues.

“Then no wonder I am sick,” Ilya says. “Fucking *gross*.”

“You are *such* an asshole,” Shane says.

“Are you mad at me?” Ilya asks.

Shane does not answer for a moment too long. “No.”

Ilya groans. “You are.”

“You’re such a fucking dick when you drink,” Shane says.

Ilya stares straight ahead at the road while Shane pulls out of his parking spot, closing his eyes when the streetlights passing overhead start to make him dizzy. “They think I am fun,” he says quietly. “They like me when I am drunk.”

Time passes, it is hard to say how much.

“I like you all the time,” Shane says eventually. “I always think you’re fun.”

Ilya pries his eyes open, dropping his arm across the center console so his hand lands in Shane’s lap. Shane grabs it without hesitation, slotting his fingers through Ilya’s. “I am sorry for what I said,” he says, almost a whisper.

“Yeah,” Shane says. “It’s okay.”

“I like you all the time, too,” Ilya says. “Even when you are boring and have a stick up your butt.”

Shane scoffs, but he is smiling when Ilya looks over at him. “Asshole.”

“Yes, asshole,” Ilya says. “That is where the stick is.”

“Shut up,” Shane laughs, squeezing Ilya’s hand gently. Ilya drags their interlaced fingers back across the center console, pressing a kiss to the back of Shane’s hand. He half expects Shane to complain about it, given Ilya’s recent state, but Shane just smiles at the road and says nothing.

Ilya is asleep before they arrive home. He is still half asleep when Shane wrestles him out of the car and up to his apartment, and it does not take him long to knock back out once he is in bed, but Shane curls up behind him, so warm and solid, and Ilya is gone.

October, 2008 – Ottawa, Ontario

“Now to the OHL– it’s been a hot start to the season, Jim.”

“You know, Tim, I’m starting to think you’re psychic.”

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

“Reports are coming out of Ottawa that there’s a rivalry brewing between Rozanov and Hollander– the two biggest stars in the league this year.”

“Well, Jim, my grandmother could have predicted that.”

“She’s a big sports fan?”

“She’s dead.”

“Some of their teammates have been reported talking about the heat happening in the room– sounds like all these guys do is fight with each other.”

“They’ve been friends since childhood, and they’re two generational talents, Jim, that’s a lot of pressure. Not a lot of guys could handle that kind of smoke. It’ll be interesting to see how this season shakes out, if that’s the truth– they’ve most likely got one more season playing on the same team, I wonder if they’ll be able to put their differences aside for hockey’s sake?”

“They are captain and assistant captain of the team this year– they better hope to hell they can put their differences aside, or it’s going to be a rough season for everyone.”

“That’s gotta be fueling some of the fire there. Hollander is an excellent captain, but it’s gotta sting for Rozanov to have that *A* on his jersey.”

“They’re so evenly matched in talent, too. I’ll tell you, Tim, Hollander’s a better guy than I am if he doesn’t hold that over Rozanov’s head every single day.”

“Ha! If he can reach over Rozanov’s head! You seen the size of that kid, Jim?”

“You can take the kid out of Russia, but you can’t take the Russia out of the kid, Tim.”

Ilya’s finger is hovering over the power button on the remote, but it is Shane who finally takes it from him and turns the TV off. “Such bullshit,” Shane mutters, tossing the remote onto the coffee table. “We don’t fight in front of the team.”

“Yes, we do,” Ilya says.

“No we don’t!” Shane argues. “Name one time we fought in front of the team!”

“Yesterday, at practice,” Ilya says. “And two days ago, at practice. And Saturday afternoon, after the game. And Saturday morning, before the game. And—”

“Okay, but, those aren’t *fights*,” Shane says. “It’s just, like, bickering.”

“You told me to eat shit and die yesterday,” Ilya says. “Twice.”

“But you know I don’t mean that,” Shane says softly.

“Yes, I know that,” Ilya says. “But the other guys do not.”

Shane sighs, pulling Ilya’s hand into his lap. “If they only knew how we really felt about each other,” he says, and then chuckles. “God, can you imagine?”

Yes, Ilya can imagine. In fact, he often does. He hates having to restrain himself around Shane in public, to not be able to pull him in and kiss all his annoyance away when Shane starts a pointless argument with him during practice. He hates that they can only be like they are now here, in the privacy of his apartment, or at Shane’s house, where they are safe and accepted. The hockey world simply would not tolerate it, though, and it is easier to have this in secret than it would be to have to choose between this or hockey.

“If only everyone could know,” Ilya sighs, resting his head atop Shane’s. “If they could see that you are not just a whiny bitch, you are *my* whiny bitch.”

Shane jerks away from him. “I am *not* a whiny bitch!” he whines, bitchily.

Ilya raises his eyebrows at him.

“You’re a fucking asshole.”

“And you are a whiny bitch,” Ilya says. “Both of these things are true.”

“Fuck you,” Shane spits, sitting up abruptly and swinging his leg over Ilya’s lap to straddle him. Ilya grins and settles back against the sofa, watching Shane’s pinched, annoyed face. “I’ll show you a whiny bitch.”

“Yes, please,” Ilya says, stretching his arms up and locking his fingers together behind his head.

“It’s you,” Shane clarifies. “*You’re* the whiny bitch.”

“I do not whine,” Ilya says. “Russians do not do this.”

“Really?” Shane says, reaching up to pinch Ilya’s nipple through his shirt and twisting hard. Ilya whines, squirming away from him. “What was that?” Shane challenges.

“Fuck you, Hollander,” Ilya says, gripping Shane’s hips and slamming him down on his back on the sofa, getting up on his knees to loom over him. All of the fight goes out of Shane instantly— if only Tim and Jim could see them now.

“What time does your mom get out of work?” Shane asks, later, lounging against Ilya’s chest atop the covers on his bed.

“Why?” Ilya asks. “Trying to see if we have time to go again?”

“Fuck off,” Shane mutters.

“She will be home in an hour or two,” Ilya says, carding his fingers through Shane’s hair.

Shane makes a quiet noise of contentment. “I’ll stay until she gets home, then I should probably leave,” he says, stifling a yawn. “Don’t let me fall asleep.”

“Okay, *moy lyubimyy*,” Ilya says softly, instead of any of the multitude of dirty remarks that come to mind first. He drags his fingernails along the crown of Shane’s scalp, and Shane melts into him a little more.

“I said don’t,” Shane murmurs, but he nuzzles into Ilya’s hand when Ilya stops.

Ilya smiles, watching what he can see of Shane’s face from this angle while he twirls Shane’s hair and massages his scalp. Shane’s eyes keep fluttering closed, snapping open, and fluttering closed again. It is mesmerizing.

Shane is so perfect, in Ilya’s eyes, with his little freckles and his soft hair and his flawless skin, his kind heart and his quick temper. Ilya cannot stop thinking about the sports news program they were watching earlier; Jim and Tim are idiots, but one thing they said was true— after next season, everything is going to change. With a supposed rivalry brewing, and their

status as top choices for many NHL teams come June, it is nearly impossible that they will be drafted to the same city. It will not make for very interesting hockey if they are on the same team, in addition to it being devastating for every other team in the league. It is terrifying to think about, having to do any of this on his own, without Shane, *against* Shane, in a different city, maybe even a different country, and what will become of them? They bicker and fight enough as it is, will they be able to withstand the distance and drama that hockey will inevitably bring to their lives? Will Shane think it is worth it?

Ilya will. He will always think Shane is worth it, no matter what *it* is. He would like to think that Shane feels the same way, but hockey has always been more important to Shane than it has been to Ilya. Shane has devoted a lot more time, passion, and energy, both physical and emotional, to the sport than Ilya has. Ilya loves hockey, he really does, but not as much as Shane does, and not as much as he loves Shane.

“What are you thinking about?” Shane asks eventually, his voice quiet and raspy with impending sleep.

“I am thinking about making you fall asleep so that you will stay,” Ilya says, pressing the pads of his fingers firmly against Shane’s scalp and massaging slow, luxurious circles. “Is it working?”

“Fuck you,” Shane hums, but his face is so mashed into Ilya’s chest at this point that it is barely intelligible.

“You love me?” Ilya says, before he can stop himself.

Shane blinks his eyes open, shifting to look up at Ilya. “You know I do,” he says softly.

“Okay,” Ilya says, smiling placatingly, but Shane shifts again to lean his weight on his own elbows, watching Ilya’s face carefully.

“Hey,” Shane says, reaching up to smooth a thumb over Ilya’s cheekbone.

“What is going to happen?” Ilya asks. “After the NHL draft?”

“What do you mean?” Shane asks.

“When we get drafted to different teams,” Ilya says. “Do you think—”

“Stop,” Shane says quickly. “No, that’s not gonna happen.”

“Shane,” Ilya says. “You cannot possibly think that—”

“I’m not talking about this,” Shane says. “No. Nope. We have two years, still.”

“Shane,” Ilya says again.

“We’re both getting drafted to Ottawa,” Shane says firmly. “We will buy a big, beautiful house outside of the city, build our own cottage up at the lake, and we’ll play on the same team forever until we both retire and *that’s* what is going to happen.”

“Shane,” Ilya breathes.

“Stop,” Shane says again, a little desperately.

Ottawa is, statistically, the worst team in the league, at present. Unless they have a really spectacular two seasons, Ottawa will not be able to afford both of them, and there are bigger, better teams which will undoubtedly snatch them both up quickly. “Okay,” Ilya says, burying his fingers in Shane’s hair again. “Okay, Shane.”

Shane watches him for a moment longer; he looks upset, but Ilya can see the wheels turning in his head while he talks himself out of it, and back into his delusion. He puts his head back down on Ilya’s chest, but his eyes stay open this time, staring blankly at Ilya’s bedroom wall.

“I love you,” Shane says, curling a finger in the front of Ilya’s t-shirt, over his heart. “I love you so much.”

“*Ya tebya lyublyu,*” Ilya whispers, pressing a kiss to Shane’s hair. “More than I can say in any language.”

Shane smiles, tipping his head back to look at him. “That was romantic,” he hums.

“Ah, I am not just a pretty face,” Ilya says.

“Oh, I know,” Shane says, biting at Ilya’s pec lovingly.

“Will you stay tonight?” Ilya asks, heart already clenching in anticipation of Shane saying no. Shane almost never sleeps over on school nights, especially not on days they have practice after school, and Ilya should know better than to even ask, but the thought of letting go of Shane tonight feels too difficult to bear.

“Okay,” Shane says, after a brief internal struggle which Ilya watches in his eyes. “Yeah. I’ll text my mom.”

Ilya grins, releasing Shane so that he can go get his phone from the living room. Shane will stay with him, for the same reason Ilya did not press the conversation about the NHL; they love each other.

They will get drafted to separate teams, they will have to live in different cities during the season, but they will be fine. They will not talk about it, because Shane does not want to, but Shane will stay with him tonight, because Ilya wants him to, and they will give and take from each other in the little ways that work for them and it will be okay, it will all be okay.

May, 2009 – Mississauga, Ontario

Shane is the first one over the boards when the buzzer sounds. Ilya has not even had time to process; in fact, he is not even sure the puck actually went in the net, he turned around as soon as he took the shot, locking eyes with Shane across the ice as the clock ran out. It must have gone in, though, the entire arena is on their feet, and Shane is barreling toward him, the rest of the team hot on his heels, but as soon as Shane slams into him, the rest of the world disappears.

“You fucking did it!” Shane is squealing into his ear, squeezing Ilya as tight as he can through all of their gear. “You did it, Ilya! Fuck! Oh my god!”

Ilya wants to kiss him, to pick him up and spin him around and kiss him, right here, in front of everyone, but Shane is so happy, and that probably would not go over well. Ilya digs his face into Shane's neck, instead, laughing brightly.

“For you, sweetheart,” he murmurs. “I love you.”

Shane pulls back quickly, too quickly, but the way his eyes sparkle when they meet Ilya's feels a lot like *I love you, too*.

They have been on their best behavior this season, keeping their bickering to a minimum around the team and the press, but careful to keep the pendulum from swinging too far in the other direction, too, never too close, too gentle with each other. Shane does not let go of him now, though, even as the rest of the team piles in.

They shake hands with the other team when the initial celebrations have finished, and then the press begins to swarm. Shane does not leave Ilya's side, smiling politely at the first reporter who manages to corner both of them.

“Captain Hollander,” the reporter says, shoving her microphone in Shane's face before even asking him a question. “Congratulations on the win!”

“Thank you,” Shane says, a bit breathlessly.

“This is your first season as captain, your first OHL Cup win, and only your second season overall. How do you feel right now?”

“I'm proud, overwhelmed, super happy,” Shane says. He glances sideways at Ilya, and Ilya smiles tightly.

“Rozanov, you scored the winning goal,” the reporter says, shoving her microphone toward Ilya, now.

Ilya stares at it for a moment, and nods.

“How do you feel?” the reporter asks.

Ilya could be snarky, could be sarcastic, but Shane is probably not above kicking him on camera, so he smiles again. “Very good.”

“You two have been playing together, on the same team, since you were children, right?” the reporter asks.

“Since we were twelve, yeah,” Shane says.

“You make a great pair,” the reporter says. Ilya turns to grin at Shane. “How does hockey translate into your friendship? Are you guys as competitive off the ice as you are on the ice?”

“Well, like we said, we’ve been playing on the same team our whole lives,” Shane says politely. “So, no, we’re not exactly competitive with each other. We push each other, sure, but we take a lot of inspiration and motivation from each other, so it’s a good thing.”

“And how about the rumors of a rivalry brewing between you?” the reporter asks. She shoves the microphone in Ilya’s direction this time, and Ilya can feel Shane hold his breath beside him.

“Is bullshit,” Ilya says cheekily.

“We’re best friends,” Shane says quickly, drawing the microphone back in his direction. “We always have been. We bicker sometimes, sure, but that’s how we’ve always been. There is no rivalry,” he says easily.

“What’s gonna happen at the draft next month?” the reporter asks. “You’ll most likely be drafted to separate teams. Have you considered how that might affect your friendship?”

Shane stiffens, and the reporter gravitates back to Ilya. “I will very much enjoy kicking his ass all season long,” he says, grinning. “*If* that happens.”

Instead of laughing and agreeing, like he *should* do to drive home his point about their playful bickering, Shane turns to glare at Ilya. “Yeah, I don’t know about that,” he says, forcing a smile as he turns back to the reporter. “But we’re super excited for the draft, and I think we’ll both be happy no matter what. But we have another season in the OHL to look forward to first, so we’re gonna keep focusing on that for now,” he says. Such a diplomat.

Ilya leans in, prompting the reporter to shift the microphone back in his direction. “He is too proud to say that he knows that I will kick his ass,” he teases.

Shane huffs, elbowing Ilya beneath the frame of the camera. Ilya turns to grin at him, and Shane forces another smile, but his annoyance is written all over his face.

“Okay, well, before this gets too heated,” the reporter chuckles, “good job out there tonight, boys, and good luck next month!”

“Thank you,” Shane says earnestly, and Ilya nods, and the reporter shuffles off. Shane takes Ilya by the elbow and drags him to the edge of the fray before anyone else can approach them, fixing Ilya with his scrunched up face of discontent.

“What the fuck was that,” Shane hisses.

“What?” Ilya says. “Me being charming, and you running for mayor?”

“You totally just fueled those rumors that we’ve been trying so hard to end,” Shane says.

“I did nothing,” Ilya says, holding his hands up as if to prove his innocence. “It is not my fault you cannot take a joke.”

“Fucking asshole,” Shane breathes. “Why can’t you just—“

There is a team of camera people behind Shane, and Ilya kicks at Shane’s skate with his own, shaking his head once.

“Fuck,” Shane mutters. “Okay, we’re only gonna make this worse. Let’s just move on, okay?”

Ilya does not point out that he is not responsible for any part of this issue. He does not point out that Shane is the only one who needs to move on. He is so tempted, so attracted to the concept of making it worse just to see Shane’s irritation continue to sit so adorably atop his cheeks and between his eyebrows, but instead, he surrenders. “Okay.”

They return to the celebrations easily, though they take the rest of their interviews separately for the remainder of the evening.

The celebrations continue off of the ice, and back to the hotel bar. Ilya is showered in free drinks from his teammates in gratitude for his game winning goal, and even Shane partakes a little more than he normally would, and by the end of the night, Ilya very nearly has to be carried back to his bed.

Shane gets him undressed and tucked into bed, but Ilya forces himself to keep his eyes open until Shane climbs in, too.

“I’m so proud of you, baby,” Shane whispers, tugging Ilya into his chest and kissing his forehead. Ilya grins so hard it makes his cheeks ache.

“You are?” he hums.

“Of course I am,” Shane says. “You won us the cup, Ilya. And you looked *so* hot doing it.”

Ilya cannot help but kick his feet under the blankets. “You love me?”

“I love you,” Shane confirms, kissing Ilya’s forehead again, and then his cheek, the tip of his nose. “I am always, always going to love you.”

“Even when we do not play for the same— oops,” Ilya cuts himself off; he knows better than to bring this up again. “Sorry.”

“Yes, even then,” Shane whispers. “Go to sleep, Ilya.”

“I love you always, too,” Ilya slurs, pressing his face into Shane’s chest.

Shane cards his fingers through Ilya’s hair, scratching gently at his scalp, but Ilya does not fall asleep right away. He lets his eyes fall closed and his breathing even out, but he does not

let his brain turn off, memorizing the way it feels to be held against Shane's chest like this, hear his heartbeat through his t-shirt, feel his bones under his skin. He loves every bit of Shane, every muscle, every tendon, every cell that comprises him. He wonders if Shane feels that way about him, too, if Shane also wishes he could open Ilya's skin and crawl inside with him.

Ilya is just starting to actually drift off when Shane squeezes him a little tighter, clearly thinking that he is already asleep. "Please," Shane whispers, lips buried in Ilya's hair. "Please don't leave me. Don't go away."

Ilya's heart breaks in his chest. He forces himself to keep his breathing even and consistent—this one is between him and God.

Shane does not whisper anything else into Ilya's hair, and eventually he fades away, arms going limp around Ilya. Ilya will be lucky to even remember this in the morning, but he falls asleep brainstorming ways to fix the draft so that he will not ever have to go away from Shane.

June, 2009 – Lanaudière, Québec

The day of their high school graduation, as soon as the ceremony is over, Shane and Ilya climb into Shane's Jeep Cherokee and drive all the way to the cottage by themselves, still in their graduation gowns. They stop just over the border of Quebec to pick up a few cases of beer, just because they can, and it's nearly dark by the time they arrive at the cottage, but Ilya starts preparing a couple of sandwiches in the kitchen while Shane gets the fire going outside. Yuna, David, and Irina will arrive late tomorrow morning, but for tonight, they have been given the cottage to themselves for the night as a graduation gift.

Ilya comes out with dinner once Shane has successfully built a fire in the fire pit, and they settle down together on the patio sofa. Life has been good the past few weeks, and they chat lightheartedly while they eat, and then Ilya stretches himself across Shane's lap, only picking his head up every now and again to sip his beer. The conversation fades out naturally, and Shane reaches for his phone—it's a new habit, within the past few weeks, to scroll through any new articles and publications about himself, or Ilya, or both of them. It's amazing to Shane how many people care, how they are already stars, even before the draft at the end of this month.

Ilya, in particular, is very fascinating to the public. Shane gets it, even agrees; Ilya is a mysterious, charismatic Russian transplant with no public backstory beyond having moved to Ontario at the age of twelve. He is cocky on the ice and on camera, but charmingly so, even

when he's being a complete asshole. It's one of the many reasons Shane is in love with him, he isn't surprised that the world is starting to fall in love with him, too.

There are so many articles about Ilya, predictions for his future and his career, conversation pieces about his stats thus far, opinion pieces on his legitimacy as a professional player in the making. Shane stumbles upon one published just this morning, titled *A Comprehensive Guide to Ilya Rozanov: Ontario's Biggest New Hockey Star*

Shane resents the claim that Ilya is the biggest star out of Ontario this year— they're neck and neck, really— but if he's honest, Ilya probably is the bigger star. He's more likable, more interesting, more— well, everything.

The article is full of pictures of Ilya on and off the ice. The author has cited loads of sources, and it really does appear to be a comprehensive summary of Ilya's past, as far as information he has shared publicly. It's a very well done piece, very tasteful, well-written, well-researched, but... a little bit scary.

"Hey," Shane says, tapping the top of Ilya's head. Ilya cranes his neck to look up at him, cheeks pink from the fire. "Have you seen this?"

Ilya takes the phone when Shane offers it, glancing at the title of the article and scrolling quickly through it. "What is this?" Ilya says, scrolling back to the top and reading more carefully.

"It's, like, your whole life story," Shane says. "Well, starting when you moved here. But it's, like, scarily accurate."

Ilya reads for a few minutes, and then scrolls through the article a few more times after he's finished reading. "Wow," he says quietly, pausing on a picture of himself and Shane from just a few weeks ago, smiling together on the ice after their cup win. "They did not miss a thing."

"Are you, like, okay?" Shane says. "With this, y'know, existing?"

Ilya is quiet, idly scrolling through the article a few more times. He sits up, eventually, turning to face Shane on the sofa, eyes still glued to the phone. "I am a man now, yes?"

Shane blinks. "I mean, yeah, I guess, technically," he says.

"I cannot live my whole life in fear of one mean old man," Ilya says quietly.

"I totally agree," Shane says, just as quietly.

They never talk about this. Shane has tried, he really has, to bring it up over the years, but Ilya always gets so pissed off and irritated every time Shane tries, Shane has learned to stay in his lane and let Ilya come to him when something is bothering him.

Ilya looks upset in the light from Shane's phone; he's not crying, and he doesn't look like he will, but his features are pinched and tight, and he won't look up from the phone to meet Shane's eyes.

“Then how do I stop?” he whispers.

Shane’s heart falls into his stomach. He takes the phone gently from Ilya’s hand, dropping it onto the sofa out of Ilya’s reach. “I can’t pretend to know,” he says, opening his arms. Ilya falls into them immediately, and lets himself be held. “But I want you to know, Ilya, if you don’t already, that I love you, and I am here for you. No matter what happens with the draft, or with our careers, you and your mom will always always be my first priority.”

Maybe it doesn’t mean a lot to Ilya because, really, what the hell is Shane going to do if Ilya’s dad shows up belligerent someday? Ilya squeezes him, anyway, and that’s that, or at least Shane assumes it is. Ilya is quiet for a while, breathing evenly against Shane’s chest, and when he finally speaks, Shane jumps in surprise.

“My brother is police now,” Ilya says.

Shane’s mind begins to race. “How do you know?”

“I looked him up,” Ilya admits. “I have been so scared of them looking for me, I forgot I could look for them, too.”

Shane hums, trailing his fingers down Ilya’s spine. “You’ve never really told me about your brother,” he says softly. Ilya says nothing. “You don’t have to.”

“He is married,” Ilya says. “Just this year. Some poor woman.”

Shane plays with Ilya’s hair, the collar of the polo he’s been wearing since the graduation ceremony this afternoon. He smoothes all the wrinkles across Ilya’s shoulders, puts all of his curls back in place, and then stills. There is nothing but the crackling of the fire and the occasional loon in the distance, and Ilya’s deep breaths.

“You can ask,” Ilya says eventually. His eyes are fixed on the fire, Shane can just barely see the reflection from this angle.

“You don’t have to answer,” Shane says.

“Okay,” Ilya breathes.

“What’s your favorite memory from Russia?” Shane asks.

Ilya shifts to look up at him, his eyes cool and blue with the firelight no longer dancing in them. He smiles almost imperceptibly, but it grows, until it overtakes his face. He puts his head back down on Shane’s chest, and a loon calls sadly in the distance.

He doesn’t answer the question for so long that Shane figures he isn’t going to, which is fine. Shane hopes that at least he’s thinking about it, running back all of the happy moments from his childhood and trying to decide which is his favorite.

“Mama took us to a hockey game, when we were small,” Ilya says, after so long that the sound of his voice makes Shane jump again. “Me and Sveta, my best friend. Sveta’s father was very famous goalkeeper,” he says.

“Yeah, you’ve mentioned that,” Shane says.

“He gave us tickets to one of his games. We never could have afforded them on our own, not these seats. We were right behind the boards, it was amazing. Mama took us, because Papa was too drunk. We had the *best* time,” Ilya says, and Shane can hear the smile in his voice. “Mama did not ever care for hockey, but she loved it because I loved it. That day, I decided I wanted to be a famous player, too, and she told me she knew I could do it, and she would always support me.”

“She’s the best,” Shane says.

“She is,” Ilya says reverently. “Sveta’s father took us to meet the team after the game. He was not a mean man, but very serious, never smiled. He introduced me to his teammates as one of the best hockey players he had ever known. I had never felt so happy in my life.”

“That’s so sweet,” Shane says, kissing the back of Ilya’s head. “I’m so glad you had them in your life.”

“They gave me a puck, some of them signed it,” Ilya says. “It was my prized possession. A few days later, Alexei took it and gave it to the neighbor’s dog. It was destroyed. He was mad that he could not go to the game.”

“Oh,” Shane says. “Fuck.”

“I cried, and he hit me— ah, happy story is over,” Ilya chuckles sadly. “He was not a good brother.”

“I’m so sorry, Ilya,” Shane says.

“He was just like Papa,” Ilya says. “And Papa loved only him. Perfect, cruel, horrible Alexei. I was the lazy, weak, crybaby, and Alexei was a saint because he beat me when Papa was too tired or drunk to do it himself.”

“Ilya,” Shane breathes.

“I hate them,” Ilya says through his teeth. “I hate them, Shane.”

“So do I,” Shane says, stroking a soothing hand through Ilya’s hair. “You’re nothing like them, Ilya, you know? You have so much good in you. They were so wrong about you.”

Ilya nods. “Mama has depression,” he says.

“Oh,” Shane says.

“I always thought she was so sad because of Papa, and because of Alexei, but it is something that lives in her. She is so much better now, happier, but it never really goes away,” he says.

“Yeah,” Shane says. “It’s an illness.”

“Sorry,” Ilya says suddenly. “I do not know why I am telling you all of this.”

“It’s okay,” Shane says. “Really, Ilya. I like when you talk to me,” he admits.

“Sometimes I worry—” Ilya cuts himself off. The fire pops loudly, and they both flinch.

“I love you,” Shane says, pushing Ilya to sit up so that Shane can take his face in his hands and kiss him sweetly. “And I always will. No matter what happens, no matter if you’re— you know,” he says. “There is no part of you that I don’t love completely, Ilya. Not one bit.”

Ilya smiles at him, but it’s emptier than Shane would like. “I love you, too,” Ilya says quietly. He lays himself back over Shane’s lap, head pillowed on Shane’s thigh.

“What about, um, Sveta?” Shane asks. “Have you looked her up?”

Ilya shakes his head. “I could not bear it if she is not well,” he says. “It is easier to not know.”

Shane nods, even though Ilya can’t see him from this angle. The fire is starting to die, the flames barely flickering over the glowing embers, and Shane tucks his cold hand into the back of Ilya’s shirt. Ilya does not recoil. “Do you want to go inside?” he asks.

“No,” Ilya says, staring intently at the fire.

“Okay,” Shane says.

They end up falling asleep outside, while the fire burns down to nothing. It is only ash when Shane blinks his eyes open at some point after midnight, the cold having settled deep in his bones without the fire to warm them. Ilya is sound asleep in his lap, but he is trembling, and Shane gently shakes him awake.

Ilya sits up with a start, whipping his head around to find Shane in the dark. “It’s me,” Shane says quietly, reaching for Ilya’s hand. “We should go to bed.”

“Bed,” Ilya says, and then nods. “It is cold.”

“It is,” Shane agrees, standing up off the sofa and tugging Ilya along inside. It is much more comfortable inside the cottage, and even more so once they’re tucked up in Shane’s bed together, tangled up under the covers.

“*Ya tebya lyublyu*,” Ilya whispers, holding Shane tight to his chest as he drifts back to sleep.

Shane closes his eyes and tries very hard to allow Ilya’s body to absorb him. “I love you, Ilya.”

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

this author does not know very much about hockey. this author cares very deeply for the city of boston. this author is trying desperately to disguise both of these truths in the chapter hereafter.

June, 2009 – Los Angeles, California

Three hundred miles. Roughly five hours by car, less than two by plane. Across the border—different country. Three hundred fucking miles between Montréal and Boston.

Montréal is a fucking great team. It was Shane's second choice, after Ottawa, which he knew deep down wasn't going to happen, anyway. He's over the moon. He's absolutely thrilled. His mom is beside herself with joy. He's been drafted second overall by the Montréal fucking Voyageurs. It's a dream come true.

Except. Except Ilya. Except Ilya got drafted by the Boston Bears. Except Boston is three hundred miles away. Except Boston is in a different fucking *country*. Except Ilya is going to move to *Boston* and Boston is *three hundred miles away* and Shane feels like he might fucking *die*.

They haven't had a chance to talk about it. It's only just happened, they haven't even had time to process, and they've already been whisked away for interviews and photos and— fuck, Shane is going to die.

There's a party at some hotel. Shane and Ilya agreed to arrive separately, to solidify their status as individuals in the hockey world, but that was before Shane knew that Ilya was going to be *three hundred miles* away from him for the entirety of their careers, probably, and now every inch of space between them feels like Shane's skin is being pulled from his bones.

"Breathe," Yuna says, quietly, directly into Shane's ear. "This is an important evening, honey. Savor it. Don't panic yet."

Shane nods, swallowing down the panic that has definitely already begun. There's a glass of champagne in his hand, which he probably will just carry around for the whole night, and Yuna and David are flanking him, helpfully fielding all of the important men in fancy suits who keep coming to their table to introduce themselves to Shane.

Ilya is up on a mezzanine, with a half-drunk glass of champagne in his hand, and a smile as bright as the sun on his face. Irina has her arm linked through his, and she looks almost as

happy as Ilya does, but when she glances down and meets Shane's eyes, her smile turns as sad as Shane feels. Ilya, as if sensing his mother's mood shift, looks away from the owner of the Boston Bears and directly at Shane, but his smile only wavers a little bit before he looks determinedly back at the man in front of him.

Three hundred miles. How the fuck is Shane supposed to survive three hundred miles when approximately fifteen vertical feet is too much to bear? How the fuck is Shane supposed to put on his skates and get on the ice and play *against* Ilya Rozanov? How the fuck is Shane supposed to put on his skates and get on the ice and play *without* Ilya Rozanov?

Shane barely makes it to the end of the conversation he's half-heartedly participating in, and as soon as the man Yuna has been doing her damndest to charm on his behalf walks away, Shane puts his champagne down a little too hard. "I have to go to the bathroom," he says lowly.

"Shane," Yuna starts, but Shane is already gone, weaving through the hotel function room in search of any kind of exit. He finds a bathroom, blessedly, but there are two other men already inside when he pushes through the door, so he smiles politely and locks himself in a stall.

Fuck. Shane takes a deep breath, but it kind of smells in here, and the breath doesn't really help, anyway. He waits for the others to leave the bathroom before he comes out of the stall, walking to the sinks to splash a little water on his face and try to slow his racing mind. He spends far too long waiting, but Ilya never comes after him, which only serves to further widen the fissure spreading across his heart.

Finally, when he really can't spend another moment in the bathroom without causing concern, he shoves back through the door and back into the function room. He runs smack into Ilya, who steadies him with warm, solid hands and wide eyes.

"Shane," he breathes, looking him over with those wide, beautiful eyes. "I am sorry, I saw you leave and I tried to get away faster but I—"

"I'm fine," Shane bites out.

"You look—" Ilya looks panicked, nevermind how Shane looks. "You look sick. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Shane says again, through his teeth. "Fuck. Fuck, Ilya."

"I know," Ilya says.

"We can't do this here," Shane says, brushing Ilya's hands off of his shoulders.

"Okay," Ilya says, but he's still got his wide eyes locked on Shane's face. Shane pushes past him, but Ilya steps just slightly in his path. "Hey," he says, nodding once when Shane looks up at him. "Congratulations."

"Fuck off," Shane hisses, storming back toward the table where he left his parents.

“What?” Ilya splutters, but Shane has already put quite some distance between them. He follows after Shane, and Shane realizes with a pit in his stomach that Irina has joined David and Yuna at their table, and Shane can’t really face any of them right now. “Shane,” Ilya says from behind him, and Shane whirls around to look at him. “Hey, I know this is not—”

“Don’t fucking do this right now,” Shane says lowly. “I can’t, Ilya.”

“Shane,” Ilya says again, bewildered. Shane is being too intense, he knows that, but he’s *panicking*, this is everything he’s never been brave enough to consider might happen, and Ilya was right, they should have talked about this before now, they should have prepared for this, *Shane* should have prepared for this, but he’s too fucking stubborn, he’s such a fucking idiot and now Ilya is looking at him like he’s crazy and maybe he is, but he can’t do this right now, he fucking *can’t*—

“I can’t,” he says again, with slightly less venom. He glances around the room, finding more than a few eyes on the two of them. It is not surprising, they are the stars of the evening, but Shane is sure he looks crazed, and Ilya is starting to look like he might burst into tears.

He turns on his heel, marching back to the table and taking his place between David and Yuna. Irina frowns over his shoulder, and Shane stares at the table, taking a long sip of his, now quite warm, champagne.

“Where is Ilyusha?” Irina asks. “Did he find you?”

Shane glances over his shoulder, but Ilya is gone. Fuck.

“He was going to get some air, I think,” Shane says.

“Is everything okay?” Yuna asks.

“Yeah, perfect,” Shane says. All eyes remain on him for a long, tense moment, and Shane drains the rest of his champagne into his mouth. “I’ll go check on him,” he mutters, turning away from the table again and all but running from the function room. There is no trace of Ilya.

There is a sea of reporters outside the front doors of the hotel, and a few in the lobby, as well, so Ilya likely did not hang out here for long. They are not staying at this hotel, but Ilya probably would not have left, so Shane glances quickly around the lobby for any clue as to where he might have gone. There’s a sign near the elevator for the rooftop lounge, which seems a good place to start, so Shane rushes to the elevator and jams his thumb into the correct button.

He finds Ilya almost immediately after stepping out of the elevator. The rooftop lounge is around the corner to the right, but to the left, a long expanse of railing separates the floor from the LA skyline, and Ilya is hunched over the railing at the furthest end, shrouding himself in a cloud of smoke.

Shane walks to him like he’s walking to his death. Ilya does not turn around, even when Shane steps up next to him, taking a long, slow drag of his cigarette and blowing it out at the

city.

“Ilya,” Shane says softly.

“Go away, Hollander,” Ilya says.

“I’m sorry,” Shane says. He already feels a little more human, alone with Ilya, out here in the fresh air, even if it is tinged with the smell of cigarette smoke. “I shouldn’t have talked to you like that, I’m just— overwhelmed.”

“And I am not?” Ilya scoffs. “*I* am the one who has to move a hundred miles away, not you. You get to stay in Canada, two hours from home, your second choice team. I have to leave *everything*, and *everyone*.”

“Three hundred,” Shane says quietly. Not helpful, probably.

“What?” Ilya says, finally turning to look at him.

“Three hundred miles,” Shane says, even quieter. “From Montréal to Boston. Over four hundred from Ottawa.”

“Fuck you, Shane,” Ilya says. “Is that supposed to help?”

“No,” Shane says. The Hollywood sign glitters in the distance. This feels like a movie. This cannot be happening. “Sorry.”

Ilya sucks on his cigarette, and Shane closes his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Shane says again. “I’m— I’m kinda freaking out.”

“That makes two of us,” Ilya grumbles.

“Boston is— Ilya, it’s amazing,” Shane says. His eyes are stinging.

“Yeah,” Ilya says. “Montréal is nice?”

“It’s nice, yeah,” Shane says. “Fuck. Ilya, I really thought—”

“Did you?” Ilya says tiredly. “Or did you just think that if you kept avoiding it, this would not happen?”

“That, maybe,” Shane says miserably. “I know you tried, and I’m sorry—”

“Fuck, Shane,” Ilya says, putting his cigarette out with his shoe and then leaning down to pick it up.

“What are we going to do?” Shane asks, voice beginning to tremor slightly. Ilya shakes his head, looking out at the city. “Do you— fuck, can we try? Can we please try?”

Ilya frowns, glancing over at him. “Try what?”

“To be together still,” Shane says. No tears have gotten loose, but he can barely see Ilya through the moisture in his eyes. “I don’t want to lose you, I can’t—”

“Shane,” Ilya says, and then he’s there, wrapping Shane in his arms and holding him against his chest. “Sweetheart.”

“We can call, and text, and spend breaks together,” Shane says, trembling hands clenched in the back of Ilya’s shirt, under his jacket. “I love you, Ilya, I can’t—”

“Of course, *moy lyubimyy*, of course,” Ilya says into his neck. “Shane, I am not— you are not going to lose me, ever. We can figure this out, we will make it work. Sweetheart, did you— you thought we would break up?”

Shane crushes him closer, chokes down a sob, and shrugs. “I don’t want to break up,” he says.

“Me either,” Ilya breathes. “Oh, Shane, are you crazy? You cannot lose me that easily.”

“Really?” Shane asks, pulling his face out of Ilya’s chest to look up at him.

“There are not enough miles in the world to keep me from you,” Ilya says, brushing Shane’s hair back from his forehead. “There is no city that I would not crawl back to you from.”

“That’s so cheesy,” Shane grins, a single tear finally dripping down his cheek.

“*Ya tebya lyublyu*,” Ilya breathes, wiping the tear away with his thumb and kissing Shane once, gently. “I love you, Shane.”

“I love you,” Shane says, pulling away to rub at his eyes and get his composure back. Ilya leans back against the railing, and Shane looks out toward the city again, his heart rate returning to normal for the first time since this afternoon. “First overall draft pick. *Boston*. I’m so fucking proud of you, Ilya.”

“Yes, right?” Ilya grins. “But you know what this means?”

“What?” Shane frowns.

“Boston and Montréal are rival teams,” Ilya says, reaching for Shane’s hips and pulling him close. “We are officially *rivals*.”

“As prophesized,” Shane rolls his eyes. “We don’t have to buy in. I don’t want to be your rival.”

“No?” Ilya pouts. “I think it is kind of sexy.”

“You would,” Shane says.

“A lot of people would,” Ilya argues.

“A lot of sick freaks,” Shane says.

“Ah, guilty,” Ilya hums, pulling Shane even closer and catching his lips to kiss him deeply. Shane melts into it, hands on Ilya’s chest, and when they break apart, Shane feels like he can finally breathe properly again.

“We still have one more season together,” Shane says, “so don’t go hating me yet.”

“I could never hate you, *moy lyubimyy*,” Ilya says. “You are okay?”

“I’m okay,” Shane says. “I’m sorry, again, for being so harsh earlier. I just— I didn’t know what was gonna happen, I was freaked out, and when you didn’t follow me to the bathroom I just— I got in my head, I guess, and convinced myself that you—”

Ilya kisses him again to shut him up, and then once more for good measure. “We are okay,” Ilya says against his lips. “You are okay, I am okay, and we are going to be okay for a long, long time. It will not be easy, and it will be a secret we cannot tell, but we will make it work.”

“Okay,” Shane breathes. “Should we go back to the party?”

Ilya hums affirmatively, but does not release his grip on Shane’s hips. “One more,” he says, smiling while he presses his lips to Shane’s again.

One more turns into several more, and then a few after that, and by the time they decide to head back to the party, they have to go one at a time to avoid raising any eyebrows, but they’re okay, they’ll always be okay, and that’s enough for now.

September, 2009 – Ottawa, Ontario

“You should’ve fucking had that!”

“I cannot teleport to the other side of the fucking ice!”

“No, but you can skate, can’t you?”

“Can you pass?”

“Hollander! Rozanov! Enough!”

Ilya huffs, turning away from Shane to where their coach is on his way to separate them. Ilya backs up of his own accord, and Shane turns fully away from him, still grumbling under his breath.

“What was that?” Ilya sneers.

“I said you’re a *fucking dickhead*,” Shane says over his shoulder.

“Gentlemen!” the coach says, exasperated. “This is practice, not playoffs! Let’s save that heat for the real games, alright? And, y’know, for the other team, preferably?”

“Sorry, Coach,” Shane says, skating off quickly.

“Sorry,” Ilya mutters, meandering to the boards to grab his water bottle. He is not thirsty, but he needs something to do with his mouth other than scream across the rink at Shane again.

“Alright, let’s call it a day,” the coach sighs. “Nice work today, guys. Jones, rest up that ankle, okay? Davis, I want those backhands cleaned up before our first match. Hollander, Rozanov, kiss and make up, will you?”

Shane splutters, overly outraged at the suggestion that he and Ilya should *kiss*, but Ilya takes his helmet off and makes a show of blowing Shane a kiss across the ice. It earns him a couple of chuckles and a very intense glare from Shane.

They do not speak in the locker room, or in the showers, or while they are getting dressed, or during the walk out of the rink. They do not even look at each other until they are at Shane’s car, safely parked three blocks away from the rink, and Shane looks around quickly and then drags Ilya into the backseat.

“You’re the fucking worst,” Shane growls, tearing Ilya’s sweatpants down to his thighs and sinking to his knees on the floor of the car. He has more to say, Ilya’s sure of it, but his mouth is otherwise occupied rather quickly, and Ilya groans.

“Fuck, Shane,” he breathes. “So much better when you use your mouth for this instead of bitching at me on the ice.”

Shane glares up at him through his eyelashes, and Ilya tips his head back, seeing stars.

He makes quick work of Shane, after, right there on the floor of his Jeep, and Shane whines into Ilya’s thigh until it is over.

It turns out that the rivalry thing is sexier than either of them imagined. Their bickering has reached new extremes, and only half of it is ever serious. The other half lands them in moments like this, in the backseat of Shane’s car, Shane’s head in Ilya’s lap with Ilya’s fingers in his hair, coming back to Earth together.

“You missed that pass on purpose,” Shane says into the fabric of Ilya’s sweatpants.

“Shut the fuck up, Hollander,” Ilya mutters, dragging Shane back up into his lap to kiss him.

It is dark outside, and they are in a secluded parking lot, but even so, it is not long until Shane starts to get fidgety. “We should go,” he says, fixing his sweatpants and clamboring off of Ilya and out of the car. Ilya lifts his hips and slides his own sweatpants back up, climbing over the center console into the passenger seat while Shane glares at him from the driver’s seat. “I hate when you fucking do that,” he says.

“But you love me,” Ilya says, taking Shane’s hand and pressing a kiss to the back of it. Shane offers him a shy smile, reluctantly taking his hand back to start the car.

“Yeah,” he says. “I do.”

December, 2009 – Toronto, Ontario

Shane is so pretty when he is angry. He is pretty all the time, with his freckles and his eyes and his hair and his skin, but he is especially pretty when he is all tense and irritated, tugging Ilya’s hair too hard in a way that Ilya can only assume is intentional.

“Ilya,” he complains, squirming against Ilya’s grip where Ilya is holding his hips down to the bed. Ilya glances up from where he has been teasing Shane for the past ten minutes, heat rushing through him at the aggravated furrow of Shane’s brow.

“Shane,” Ilya says, resting his chin on Shane’s hipbone and looking at him expectantly.

“Fucking *stop*,” Shane groans, using his grip on Ilya’s hair to push at him, this time.

“Okay,” Ilya says easily, sitting up. “What do you want to do? Watch a movie?”

“What?” Shane says, watching Ilya climb off the bed. “Where are you— no, I meant stop *teasing*, not *stop*.”

“Oh,” Ilya says, “you should be more clear. English is not my first language, you know.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Shane sighs.

“Okay,” Ilya says, and disappears into the bathroom around the corner of their shared hotel room.

“Ilya!”

Ilya turns the sink on, and then presses his ear to the door to listen for the beautiful sound of Shane begging him to come back. Shane is suspiciously quiet, though, and eventually Ilya wrenches the door open to find Shane has taken matters into his own hands.

Shane is putting on a show, all flushed and stretched out on the bed. Ilya cannot help himself, climbing up on top of him and pinning his hands to the bed.

“Come *on*, Ilya,” Shane whines.

“Okay,” Ilya shrugs. He shifts Shane’s hands down to his sides and pins them down with his knees, instead, lifting his hips and getting a hand around himself. Shane looks drunk, watching him, eyes fluttering closed when Ilya finishes over his chest. When Shane manages to wrench his eyes open, he looks up, bewildered, at Ilya. “You said come on,” Ilya says. “I came on.”

“What the fuck,” Shane hisses, squirming under his weight. “Why are you— is this about what I said earlier?”

“Sorry,” Ilya says, exaggerating his accent. “I do not understand the question.”

“Oh my god,” Shane says. “I was doing damage control, Ilya, you made a total jackass of yourself, I was trying to help—“

“By telling interviewer I do not understand English?” Ilya says.

“That’s not what I said,” Shane huffs. “I only said that you don’t always mean exactly what you say, because English isn’t your first language.”

“Because I am stupid,” Ilya says. “This is what you want them to think of me.”

“*No*, because you told the Toronto Times that I’m a *pussy*,” Shane spits.

“You are,” Ilya says, but he releases Shane’s hands, slinking back down Shane’s body and between his legs.

“I am not, fuck y— *fuck*, ” Shane breathes, tipping his head back against the bed. Ilya swallows around him, and Shane gets both hands in Ilya’s hair this time, tugging much harder than necessary. It is possible that Ilya deserves it. “You’re a fucking— oh my god— fucking piece— of sh— fuck, *fuck*.”

Ilya taps Shane's thigh lightly when he is done, and Shane releases his grip on Ilya’s hair immediately. Ilya pulls off and sits up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and watching Shane gather the pieces of his brain together. He looks blissful, relaxed, sleepy, but as soon as he meets Ilya’s eyes, his gaze turns cold again.

“Asshole,” he accuses.

“Yes,” Ilya agrees, “you are.”

“Come here,” Shane says, reaching up for him.

Ilya crawls up the bed beside him, holding Shane’s face with one hand and kissing him like a man starved. Shane is completely boneless by the time Ilya pulls away, watching him with soft, tired eyes.

“Sorry,” Shane says, jaw moving under Ilya’s fingertips. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“I should not have called you a pussy,” Ilya says, stroking his thumb under Shane’s bottom lip. “Was uncalled for.”

“It’s okay,” Shane says, a slow smile spreading over his face. “Now could you please go get me a towel?”

Ilya kisses him once more before he goes, and then returns to clean Shane gently, pressing a trail of kisses along his skin, irritated from the towel. Shane has become one with the mattress by the time Ilya is done, and Ilya tosses the towel to the floor and curls himself into Shane’s chest.

“Good game today,” Shane yawns, lifting one heavy arm to gently massage Ilya’s scalp, a stark contrast to the way he was touching him earlier. “You played well.”

“You played better,” Ilya mumbles into Shane’s shoulder. “Scoring four goals in a single game is just disrespectful.”

“Wow, the master of disrespect thinks *I’m* disrespectful? I’m honored,” Shane says.

“You are learning so good,” Ilya hums.

“So well,” Shane corrects him.

“Ugh, sorry, my English,” Ilya says.

“Oh, shut up.”

May, 2010 – Boston, Massachusetts

Both of their games for this weekend have been canceled; one for an unseasonal snowstorm in northern Ontario, and the other for a case of the flu taking out three quarters of the visiting team. It’s Shane’s idea to use the time off to take a trip down to Boston; he’s never been, and neither has Ilya, and if Ilya is going to move there at the end of the summer, they probably should go check it out first.

It’s not a long plane ride, which is comforting to Shane. because at least three hundred miles is still surmountable by an hour and a half in an aircraft. Ilya spends the entire ride from the airport to the downtown area pressed against the window, taking in the scenery of his new city.

“What do you think?” Shane says, once they’re on the sidewalk outside of their hotel. It’s a gorgeous area, tall, beautiful buildings on one side of the street and an expansive park on the other, the trees bursting with the colors of mid-spring.

“It is nice,” Ilya says, but the look on his face is something Shane has only seen after a particularly good hockey game, or a particularly good time in bed; he looks overjoyed, eyes glittering at his surroundings.

“It’s a lot bigger than Ottawa,” Shane says.

“Yeah,” Ilya says. “Come on, I want to put our things away and go for a walk.”

They check into the hotel and ride up to the twelfth floor in the elevator, and Ilya goes directly to the window once they are inside their room. Shane busies himself with getting their bags situated, and then joins Ilya by the window, wrapping his arms around Ilya’s waist from behind.

“Everything you dreamed of?” Shane hums.

“*Davai*,” Ilya says, turning around in Shane’s arms and planting a kiss on his lips. “I want to explore.”

They start in the park across from the hotel, which seems to be the heart of the downtown area. A winding path takes them through various ponds and gardens and then to a long, high-end commercial street, which Ilya sets off down like a child on Christmas morning. Shane spends more time watching Ilya than taking in the scenery; Ilya is transfixed by every detail of the city around him, and Shane has probably never loved him more than he does in this moment.

Shane is so distracted by Ilya that he keeps nearly walking into things, narrowly dodging street lights and fence posts, but he does eventually take down a poor, unsuspecting woman on the sidewalk.

“Shit, I’m so sorry,” Shane says, immediately reaching down to help her up. The woman glares at him, but accepts his hand, rising effortlessly to her feet. She is quite possibly the most beautiful woman Shane has ever seen; she has striking pale eyes, a perfect shock of curls atop her head, and she is dressed as stunningly in business casual as anyone has probably ever been.

“*Sranyye amerikantsy*,” she mutters, but when she looks up at Shane again, her gaze softens. “*Chto*— Shane Hollander?”

Shane blinks, a blush rising to his cheeks, inexplicably. “You know who I am?”

“Yes,” the woman says, frantically looking around herself at everyone on the sidewalk. “Only because— Ilyusha!”

Ilya, who made it a few feet down the sidewalk before noticing that Shane had mowed down a pedestrian, is staring, slack-jawed, at the woman. She takes off for him at a run, shrieking in Russian, and Shane’s eyes lock on Ilya’s face.

“Sveta?” he says, voice breaking, eyes wide.

Svetlana crashes into his arms, and Ilya picks her up without a second thought, whirling her around. Svetlana is speaking a mile a minute, all in Russian, much too fast for Shane's tenuous grasp on the language to translate. Ilya is laughing brightly, but he looks like he might cry, placing Svetlana back on her feet and pulling away to look at her.

Shane stands dumbly in the middle of the sidewalk, watching Ilya cup Svetlana's face and plant a kiss to her cheek. They are both talking over each other in Russian, laughing and shrieking, hugging and touching each other like they cannot believe their eyes. Eventually, Ilya remembers that Shane exists, and quickly drags Svetlana over to him.

"Sveta," he says, giddy, "this is my— Shane," he says, his eyes sparkling like Shane has never seen when he looks at him. "My Shane."

Svetlana launches herself at Shane next, pressing up on her toes and wrapping her arms almost too tightly around Shane's neck. Shane is gay, like, vehemently so, but if there ever was a time to question that, it's now. He is sure he is blushing down to his toes when he pulls back, offering a friendly smile.

"Shane, my Sveta!" Ilya says, pulling Svetlana away from him and back into his arms.

"It's so nice to meet you," Shane says, while the most gorgeous creature to ever exist cuddles Shane's boyfriend on the sidewalk. "I've heard so much about you."

"You did not forget about me, Ilyusha?" Svetlana coos, turning around to plant three quick kisses to Ilya's face. Shane is horrifically confused at the sensations within him.

"I have thought about you every day," Ilya says, his eyes wet.

"I thought I would never see you again," Svetlana says. "I hoped and prayed for years that you and your sweet Mama were alright, that you made it somewhere safe, that you were happy and healthy. And then, out of nowhere, you are drafted to *my team!*"

"You live here, in Boston?" Shane asks.

"I moved here last spring," Svetlana says. "I was in New York for school, but I transferred here. New York is too, I do not know, too big, and their hockey team is so bad. Boston is much better fit."

"I cannot believe you are here," Ilya says.

Svetlana speaks very animatedly in Russian for a moment, and then her eyes flicker to Shane, and she smiles apologetically. "I am sorry," she says, cupping Shane's cheek, "I do not mean to leave you out, I am just so happy."

"That's okay," Shane says, skin burning under Svetlana's touch.

"You," she says, hands moving to Shane's shoulders. Shane blushes a little harder, and Svetlana grins. She says something quietly over her shoulder to Ilya, and Ilya bristles a little bit, eyes snapping to Shane's face. "Come, we are getting lunch," she says, hooking one arm with Shane's, and the other with Ilya's, pulling them both along with her. They take up quite

a lot of room on the sidewalk, the three of them all in a line, but Svetlana does not seem to notice or care about the people having to step out of their way, leading Shane and Ilya to a cafe up a small flight of stairs from the sidewalk.

Once they're seated, Svetlana rests her chin in her hands, gazing adoringly at Ilya. Ilya is looking at her like he still cannot believe she is really here, in front of him, and Shane can't imagine how this feels for him, seeing someone he thought he would never see again, someone he cared for so deeply.

"I have been trying to find out how to contact you since the draft," Svetlana says. "I was so busy, I had not kept up with all of the boring Canadian hockey news, so I had not known you were among the eligible. I nearly died, Ilyusha, when I heard your name, and saw your face. It was like seeing a ghost."

"I have always wondered what you thought," Ilya admits. "I left you at school that afternoon and then vanished. I felt so guilty that I never got to tell you I was okay."

"Oh, Ilya, I knew," Svetlana says. "Your father nearly burned the city to the ground over it. But we knew, we all knew, you got away. We were all so proud of you, and your Mama." Her eyes brighten somehow even more. "Is she here, your Mama?"

"She is not," Ilya says, "but she will be so happy to hear that you are here. She has been worried sick about me leaving for Boston."

"It is the perfect city for you," Svetlana gushes. "You will love it here. We will run things, you and I," she grins.

Shane sinks back in his seat a little, and Ilya shifts, pressing his thigh against Shane's under the table. Svetlana watches them both carefully, her eyes settling on Shane.

"I understand you took my place as Ilyusha's protector?" she says.

"I don't know about that," Shane chuckles quietly.

"He gave hockey back to me," Ilya says earnestly. "He was the only person in Ottawa who talked to me for a long time, he gave me a stick, got me on the team, gave me the best part of my life back. And I— well, I never would have made it without him," he says, gazing sideways at him.

"Thank you," Svetlana says, before Shane can downplay his role in Ilya's transition to Ottawa. She reaches across the table and takes both of Shane's hands in her own, squeezing when he manages to meet her eye. "Thank you, Shane Hollander, for loving my Ilyusha while I could not."

Shane squirms a little, glancing over at Ilya. "Um. Yeah."

"What are you in school for, Sveta?" Ilya asks, successfully freeing Shane from the moment. Shane sinks back and tucks his hands into his lap while Svetlana talks about business school, about why she decided to move away from Russia, what she has planned for her life, and,

again, how much Ilya is going to love it here in Boston. Shane fights against the urge to tune her out; she is important to Ilya, she loves Ilya as much as Shane does, and that's going to cause as many problems for Shane as it is going to solve for Ilya. They are speaking in English, for Shane's sake, so he does his best to listen actively and smile at all the right times, but by the time their food comes, he's so sick to his stomach he can hardly touch his salmon.

Ilya keeps nudging him under the table, and Shane is trying his best to be sociable, he really is, and Svetlana is so lovely, but Shane is so jealous he can barely think. Shane is losing Ilya not only to Boston, but to this incredible woman, and there is absolutely nothing he can do about it. Svetlana had him first, anyway, who is Shane to stop her from reclaiming Ilya now, how is Shane going to keep Ilya's heart with him from all the way in Montréal—

“Shane?”

Shane realizes he is white-knuckling his fork, and both Ilya and Svetlana are looking at him expectantly. “What?”

“Sveta asked if you are excited to play for the Voyageurs,” Ilya says. The press of his knee against Shane's asks *are you okay?* and Shane nods once, sharply.

“Uh, yeah, I can't wait,” Shane says. “My mom is, like, the biggest Voyageurs fan ever, so I think she's more excited than me, but it's a great team.”

“You have always lived in Ottawa?” Svetlana asks.

“Yeah, my whole life,” Shane says. “My parents have a cottage sort of near Montréal, actually, and we spend the summers there, but Ottawa has always been home.”

“A cottage, hm?” Svetlana says.

“You would hate it,” Ilya grins. “Sveta, they have these birds— they sound *exactly* like wolves, it is so—”

“They really don't,” Shane says, finally cracking a smile. “They sound like *loons*, because they are loons, and they have different calls that mean different things, and—”

“Shane can do the noise so well, do it,” Ilya says, nudging Shane's shoulder.

“I'm not gonna do it here!” Shane hisses. “We're in a restaurant, Ilya!”

“Do it,” Ilya pleads. “Okay, fine, later. Don't let him get away with not doing it, Sveta,” he says.

“Shut up,” Shane laughs.

Svetlana is watching them curiously, picking at her salad. “You two are friends?” she says, eyes catching on Ilya's face. “Just friends? Or...?”

Fuck. What the fuck? There's no fucking way—

“Yes,” Ilya says quickly, before Shane can start to panic. “Best friends.”

“Right,” Svetlana says. “And?”

Ilya fidgets. Shane becomes very interested in his salmon.

“Oh, Ilyusha,” Svetlana sighs.

“Sveta,” Ilya says lowly.

“Ilya had a crush on a boy back at home,” Svetlana whispers conspiratorially to Shane. Shane might pass out. “He got so angry whenever someone would bring it up, but it was so obvious. His hockey coach’s son,” she winks.

“Sveta!” Ilya growls.

This is the worst day of Shane’s whole life. “Oh.”

“Oh, he still does it,” Svetlana says, delighted. “Relax, Ilyusha, Sasha is being a slut somewhere in France, these days.”

Ilya says something quietly in Russian, and Svetlana chirps back just as sweetly as ever. Shane shovels a few bites of food into his mouth just to have something to do, despite the fact he thinks he may vomit them back up.

“Okay, okay,” Svetlana says eventually, holding her hands up in surrender. “I am sorry, Shane.”

“No worries,” Shane says, his voice rough to his own ears. Ilya squeezes his thigh under the table. Shane wants to go back to Ottawa, *now*.

“How long are you in Boston?” Svetlana asks casually, like Shane’s world isn’t rocking on its axis.

“Just until tomorrow,” Ilya says.

“What are you doing tonight?” Svetlana says. “There are a few good clubs here, but only one of them does not check IDs. We could go, if you are not busy,” she says.

Shane would rather die, but Ilya squeezes his thigh again, and Shane smiles. “Sounds fun,” he says tightly.

“Yes!” Svetlana grins. “Where are you staying?”

“Downtown,” Ilya says. “Near the park.”

“Perfect,” Svetlana says, checking her watch and pulling some cash out of her handbag. “I have to get to class, but I will meet you at nine, yes?”

“Okay,” Ilya says, standing to hug Svetlana goodbye. Shane offers her a friendly wave, and then she is gone, and Ilya sinks back into the seat next to him.

“She is amazing,” Shane says, before Ilya can say anything.

“She is,” Ilya agrees. “She is... very perceptive. She always has been.”

“She knows you very well,” Shane says.

“She does,” Ilya says. “Shane—”

“Are you done?” Shane asks, nodding at Ilya’s plate. He pulls his wallet out of his pocket, adding to the pile of cash Svetlana left on the table.

“Shane—”

“We should keep exploring, see how much of the city we can see today,” Shane says, pushing his chair back abruptly. “I think we could—”

“Shane,” Ilya says sharply, tugging his chair back in. “Fuck. Stop.”

Shane clenches his jaw, staring at Ilya’s chest.

“You are freaking out,” Ilya observes.

“No,” Shane says, too quickly. “I’m fine.”

“You just agreed to go clubbing,” Ilya says. “You are freaking out.”

“About the beautiful fucking goddess that just hugged and kissed you eighty-five times and knows everything about you and lives in the city you’re moving to that’s three hundred miles away from me?” Shane says. “Nope. Not at all.”

“Shane,” Ilya sighs.

“Come on, we only have one afternoon, let’s go explore,” Shane says desperately.

“Sveta was my lifeline when I was small,” Ilya says, like Shane said nothing at all. “She was my best friend, but she was more than that, she was like— like part of my soul,” Ilya says, touching his chest.

“Oh, that helps,” Shane says.

“Do not be like this,” Ilya says. “Shane—”

“I get it,” Shane says. “I really do. I’m happy you found her again.”

Ilya watches him closely. “But you are freaking out,” he says.

“Yeah, a little,” Shane admits.

“I love you,” Ilya says, so quietly Shane almost can’t hear him over the noise of the restaurant. His eyes are locked on Shane’s, reading his every emotion like a book. “I love Sveta, but not like— not like I love you, Shane. Please do not—”

“Ilya,” Shane says, like a warning.

“Okay,” Ilya says, defeated. “Okay, yes, we can go explore.”

Shane hates nightclubs. He has never been to one before. He hates it *so* much.

The music is far too loud, the lights are far too bright, it is far too hot, and there are far too many people. Ilya is in his element, dancing with Svetlana at the outskirts of the dancefloor, but his eyes are locked on Shane, who has been refusing to leave the safety of the booth near the bar since the last time Ilya tried to make him dance, a little over an hour ago. He is being a wet blanket, probably, but Ilya seems to be having fun, anyway, even though he keeps coming over to check in.

“Is more fun if you get up,” Ilya says, returning to the table only to sip at his drink.

“I’m having fun watching,” Shane says.

Svetlana falls into the booth beside Shane, draping herself across his shoulders. Shane could almost swear he’s straight.

“Shanya,” she purrs, “come and dance.”

“Fine,” Shane mutters, allowing Svetlana to take his hand and pull him out of the booth. Ilya, amused, trails after them, but Shane loses track of him as soon as Svetlana wraps her arms around his shoulders and presses close.

“I want you to know,” Svetlana says, her warm breath sending shivers down Shane’s spine, “that I will take care of him. He is happier now than he ever was— I can see it in his eyes. You have changed him.”

Shane glances over at Ilya, who is distracted by a girl who has materialized to attempt to dance with him. He waves her off politely, and Shane swallows hard.

“He was a happy child, despite everything,” Svetlana says. “But there has always been a sadness about him. It goes out of him when he looks at you.”

“I can’t lose him,” Shane says, almost too quietly to be heard, but Svetlana presses a little closer.

“You will not,” she says.

Shane glances over at Ilya again; he is now surrounded by a small crowd of women, but his back is to Shane, and Shane takes the opportunity to lean in closer to Svetlana.

“He, uh– his dad–”

“Yes,” Svetlana says quietly. “Ilyusha is big news in Moscow.”

Shane’s heart falls into his stomach. “Fuck.”

“You should not worry,” Svetlana says. “Grigory and Alexei are too stupid and useless to ever do anything.”

Shane nods, breathing a sigh of relief. “Don’t tell him I asked you.”

“Your secret is safe with me, Shanya,” Svetlana says, pulling away to wink at him. “All of them.”

Shane blushes, and he hopes it’s too dark for Svetlana to tell, but she seems to know everything, like she is some sort of cosmic being. God, she’s fucking beautiful.

“I will go save him,” Svetlana says, “and you will stay here, and you will dance with us for ten minutes, and then you may take my Ilyusha home and make sure he knows how loved he is.”

All of the blood in Shane’s body is in his cheeks. “Okay,” he says.

And that is how it goes. Ilya does not take his eyes off of Shane as long as Shane allows the dancing to continue– dancing is a term used loosely, as Shane is sort of just swaying to the music, watching the way Ilya and Svetlana move so freely and naturally. It goes on for longer than ten minutes, surely, but eventually Svetlana moves to say something in Ilya’s ear, and Ilya finally tears his eyes away from Shane to look over at her. She grins, and he smiles back, wrapping her in his arms one more time.

They both leave the club with Svetlana’s phone number saved in their phones, and stumble into a taxi once they’ve made it to the street. Boston seems to shut down rather early; it’s not even midnight, but they apparently have the city to themselves. Ilya keeps his eyes firmly out the window for the drive back to the hotel, but his foot stays pressed firmly against Shane’s, and then Shane is dragged through the mostly empty hotel lobby and into an elevator. Ilya all but throws him against the wall once they are safely back in their room, and Shane reaches reflexively for Ilya’s pants, but Ilya grabs his hands and presses them back against the wall to stop them.

“Are you okay?” Ilya asks, eyes sweeping over Shane’s face.

“Yeah,” Shane breathes. God, Ilya is so hot, still slightly flushed from the heat of the club, his curls extra bouncy, his eyes dark from the few drinks he had.

“Shane,” Ilya says, backing away from every point of contact between them except for where his hands keep Shane’s arms immobilized against the wall.

“Ilya,” Shane says, trying to press forward to follow his body heat, and failing.

“Stop, sweetheart, for a minute,” Ilya says. “I want to— we did not get to talk, earlier.”

Shane sighs, going limp against the wall.

“Shane,” Ilya says.

“I hate Boston,” Shane admits.

Ilya nods belatedly. “Why?”

“Because it’s perfect for you,” Shane says. His eyes are wet, suddenly, which is inconvenient, because Ilya probably is not going to touch him any time soon if he cries.

“*Moy lyubimyy*,” Ilya says.

“You’re going to love it here,” Shane says. “And Svetlana— she’s amazing, and you’re going to make so many friends, and you’re going to be so famous—”

“Shane,” Ilya says, a little desperately.

“—and I’m gonna be in Montréal losing my fucking mind, and—”

“And I am going to be loving you all the while,” Ilya says, stepping close again and releasing Shane’s hands in favor of cupping his face. “And nothing is ever going to change that. And we are going to see each other every time our teams play, and every break, and every summer,” he says, kissing Shane sweetly.

“Promise?” Shane says, like a child, like a man so in love he can’t even fully understand it, let alone know what to do with it.

“I promise, *moy lyubimyy*,” Ilya says. “You are going to have to kill me if you ever want to get rid of me.”

Shane shakes his head, grabbing at Ilya’s hips to pull him impossibly closer. “I love you,” he says.

“I love you,” Ilya smiles, and kisses him. He drags Shane to bed, and Boston twinkles outside the window the whole night long, but it can’t reach them here, not yet.

June, 2010 – Mississauga, Ontario

It is surreal to watch Ilya hoist the OHL Championship Cup over his head, skating a full lap around the ice before coming to a stop at the boards where Irina, Yuna, and David are now on their feet, celebrating with the rest of the crowd. “*Dlya tebya, Mama!*” Ilya screams, and then he is swallowed up by his teammates again, having been the one, for the second year in a row, to score the winning goal of the championship game.

“And to think,” Yuna says, tears forming in her eyes when Irina glances over at her, “this is only the beginning for them.”

They are invited down to the ice to join the celebrations, and Irina rushes to her boy, who awaits her with open arms. He is so big with all of his gear, but he is big inside of it, too; he has grown so much, he is a man now. Irina’s work is done. She could not be prouder of the boy she brought into this world, the boy she worked so hard to save, the boy who gave her a reason to keep living. The boy who is much too big for this little world she created for him. The boy who is leaving for Boston in just a few weeks. The boy who will probably never come back home.

“*I am so proud of you, solnyshko,*” Irina says into Ilya’s chest. “*My perfect boy, you are so amazing.*”

“*I love you, Mama,*” Ilya says, his voice ragged with adrenaline. “*Thank you. Thank you, Mama, for everything.*”

Irina has to turn away to collect herself, watching Yuna and David release Shane from their grasp, as well. Shane turns directly to Ilya, who plants a kiss to the side of Shane’s helmet, and then Shane’s eyes lock on Irina’s, his excited grin softening. He skates over to her, wrapping her in his arms as if she is his own mother.

“I am so proud of you, *lapochka,*” Irina says, pressing a kiss to Shane’s cheek.

“Thank you,” Shane says, holding her tight. “Thank you, Irina. Thank you for him. Thank you for bringing him here, for choosing Ottawa, for— everything. Thank you.”

“Oh, Shane,” Irina says, stifling a sob. “Oh, thank *you*. For everything you have done for him. I am so grateful to you, *lapochka.*”

Shane pulls away with wet eyes, but he is still grinning that beautiful grin. Ilya grabs him by the back of his jersey, and then they are gone, racing across the ice for the team photo being set up. Yuna shuffles over to hug Irina, and David wraps an arm around both of them, forming an emotional little huddle.

“There they go,” David says, prompting both Irina and Yuna to look up to watch their boys pose with the OHL Cup. “You spend their whole lives preparing them for the world— but I think maybe we should have been preparing the world for *them.*”

There is no kind of preparation that a parent could do for a moment like this, but for the first time since the day they left Russia, Irina feels completely at peace, knowing she has done everything in her power to give Ilya the life he has always deserved.

One Week Later – Boston, Massachusetts

“It’s too small,” Shane says.

“But it is so close to me,” Svetlana argues.

“But it’s too small,” Shane argues back. “It’s so cramped, there’s no space for furniture, or anything.”

“It could be cozy,” Irina says, gazing out the window at the view of the river. “I can help you decorate, Ilyusha.”

“No,” Ilya says, emerging from the bedroom. “I think I will keep looking.”

This apartment is fine. It is on the small side, sure, but Shane is exaggerating the lack of space for furniture. Shane does not like it, though, and so Ilya does not like it, either, because if Ilya is going to move all the way to Boston, the least he can do is find an apartment that Shane actually likes, so that Shane will be comfortable when he comes to visit.

Finding Shane’s apartment in Montréal was easy; everything in Montréal is beautiful, spacious, and modern, and Shane was thrilled with the architecture of the apartment he ended up signing a lease for last week. He will not move in until July, but his hunt for housing is out of the way, and he will be ready and comfortable by the time training starts up in August.

Ilya will not move to Boston until the first of August, leaving him only a little bit of time before training camp, but he is okay with that. He has been savoring every last moment in Ottawa, with Shane, with Irina, knowing that those moments will be few and far between until next summer, at least.

“There’s another apartment I could show you closer to the Garden,” their poor, overworked real estate agent says. “It’s more spacious, three bedrooms, two and a half bathrooms—”

“Yes, let’s go see it,” Shane says.

“Okay,” Ilya says.

Svetlana huffs, but does not argue; she had her heart set on Ilya finding an apartment close to her neighborhood, but Shane has hated every option so far, though Ilya suspects it might have more to do with their location than the apartments themselves. The only one Shane has approved of so far was a brownstone on Beacon Hill, but it was at the top end of Ilya’s budget, and Ilya thinks he should try to avoid pissing all of his signing bonus away on housing before the season has even started.

It takes three more tours and a stop for lunch before Ilya (read: Shane) finally makes a decision. It is a penthouse suite, two bedrooms, two bathrooms, with a spacious open kitchen and living room and a cozy loft space. Ilya pulls Shane aside to the main bedroom while Irina and Svetlana are distracted by the harbor views from the window, and the real estate agent is busy on her computer to get the application process started.

“Is nice, yes?” Ilya hums.

“If you have to be three hundred miles away from me, you might as well be in a beautiful penthouse,” Shane says. “I hate Boston.”

“I know you do, *moy lyubimyy*,” Ilya smiles, but it does not quite reach his eyes.

Shane has been as supportive as Ilya could ask him to be, but Ilya knows that this is killing him. It is different for Shane; he is only moving two hours away, close enough for day trips back home, and he has two parents who are both in positions where it is possible for them to drop everything and come to him if he needs them. Ilya is going to be so far, a plane ride away, without anyone from his comfortable life in Ottawa. He will have Sveta, sure, but that is a problem in and of itself for Shane, who cannot seem to move past the jealousy which Ilya has assured him again and again is unfounded.

Svetlana is beautiful, yes, but she is like a sister to Ilya. Ilya could never see her as anything but that, even in some horrible twisted fantasy world where he and Shane are no longer so in love. Ilya is so happy to be reunited with her, to be able to have her by his side in this new adventure, but he would be lying if he said he is not worried that Shane is going to let it come between them.

“It’s a great apartment,” Shane says to Ilya’s chest. “You’re gonna love it here.”

Ilya wraps him in his arms, hooking his chin over Shane’s head.

“I’m gonna miss you so much,” Shane breathes.

“We have another month, *moy lyubimyy*,” Ilya says. “Do not start missing me yet.”

“Too late,” Shane mumbles into Ilya’s shirt.

Ilya’s heart has been breaking in little chips and cracks all day, and he feels another fissure begin to spread. Shane has been acting like they will never see each other again, like Ilya is going to war, not moving a couple of hours away to play for one of the best hockey franchises of all time. Irina has been a shell of herself since the OHL Championship game; Ilya catches her looking at him at least a couple of times a day with tears in her eyes, as if she is preparing himself for his death and not the most exciting opportunity of his life. He understands, and is touched that the people he loves are so distraught at the idea of losing him, but it is beginning to weigh on his mind that nobody seems terribly excited for him. He feels almost guilty for being excited for himself, which in turn is starting to make him angry, because he should not feel guilty for this. He *should* be excited, he *should* have his loved ones rallying behind him for this new adventure.

Svetlana comes to find them, eventually, peeking quietly around the doorframe into the bedroom. Ilya looks up at her, but her eyes are on Shane, her lips pulled down into a frown at the sight of him burrowed into Ilya's chest. When she finally looks up at Ilya, she gives him a sympathetic smile, and nods toward the living room. Ilya nods in acknowledgement, and waits until she has gone before he pulls away from Shane.

"Come on," Ilya says, pinching Shane's chin to angle his face up. "Time to go."

Shane nods and turns away, sulking out of the bedroom. Ilya takes a moment to sweep his eyes over the room one last time before he goes, allowing himself just a moment to feel the wave of pride and happiness sweep over him as he takes in what he has managed to create for himself here, in a beautiful apartment, in a beautiful city, on an incredible hockey team. It is okay if no one else is happy for him; he is happy enough for himself to make up for it all.

August, 2010 — Montréal, Québec

It has been a very long day. They have just finished dinner at Shane's brand new dining table in Shane's brand new apartment that he has to live in all by himself in Montréal where he doesn't know anyone or anything and Shane is exhausted and emotional and he wants nothing more in the world than for everyone to leave, but at the same time, he's not sure if he'll be able to survive it.

His parents long overstay their welcome; they have been so helpful today, and for the past few weeks, helping Shane pack up his life in Ottawa and set it all back up in Montréal, but they linger even after there is nothing left for them to do, chatting with Ilya on Shane's brand new sofa while Shane paces around the kitchen, fretting about which cabinet he should store his dishes in.

"Shane, honey," Yuna says, eventually, looking up at him over the back of the sofa. "Leave it until tomorrow. Come relax."

"You guys should go," Shane says, and then, when he realizes how rude that sounds, quickly adds, "it's late, and you still have a two hour drive home."

"That's okay," Yuna says, shrugging one shoulder. "We don't mind, it's really not that—"

"Yuna," David says quietly, giving her a pointed look and standing up from the sofa. "We should go."

"Oh," Yuna says, smiling tightly. "Well. Okay."

“Thank you for everything,” Shane says, walking Yuna and David to the door and hugging them both. “Text when you get home, okay?”

“We’re so proud of you, Shane,” Yuna says, teary eyed for the first time all day. Shane has been on the brink since they crossed the border between Ontario and Québec, and his eyes fill up again immediately as his mother wraps him in a second hug. “So, so proud. Call if you need anything, okay? Anything at all.”

Shane stares at the door for a moment after it closes, and then turns to look at Ilya, still stretched out in the corner of the sectional. Ilya is watching him carefully, but he offers him a soft smile. Shane drags himself across the room to collapse into his lap, and Ilya buries his fingers in Shane’s hair immediately, massaging his scalp while his other hand strokes down Shane’s spine.

“Okay?” Ilya hums.

“Yeah,” Shane says, and he means it. He’s okay. He’s so tired, and he probably will completely freak out tomorrow about being on his own, but right now, he’s okay.

“Bed?” Ilya asks.

Tomorrow, Shane will wake up in Ilya’s arms, and then Ilya will get up, collect the suitcase and duffel he has stashed next to Shane’s front door, and he will move to Boston. Irina is flying from Ottawa to Montréal, and then Ilya will join her for the flight to Boston, where Ilya will arrive to an apartment already fully furnished by a company he hired to get it done today. Shane is devastated that he can’t be there for Ilya’s first night in Boston, and he is even more devastated that he won’t see Ilya again until November, when they play each other for the first time in Montréal, but Shane and the other Voyageurs rookies are supposed to be meeting with their new captain tomorrow, and Ilya was adamant that Shane not miss that. Tomorrow, Shane will kiss Ilya goodbye in this living room and then they will both go about their days and life will be completely, irrevocably different, forever.

Tonight, though, he has this. He has Ilya. He has Ilya’s fingers in his hair, and Ilya’s hand on his back, and Ilya’s strong thigh under his cheek. He has Ilya’s clean, spicy scent in his nose, and he has twelve more hours to memorize it.

“Yeah,” Shane says, belatedly, so much so that Ilya hums in confusion. “Bed,” Shane says, but he doesn’t move to get up from the sofa. He shifts just enough to turn his head, pressing his mouth against Ilya’s thigh. He nudges with his nose, prompting Ilya to open his legs a little, and then shifts again, to press his face against Ilya’s crotch.

Ilya sighs, fingers stuttering in Shane’s hair. Shane mouths against him for a moment, and Ilya rucks Shane’s t-shirt up his back so that the hand trailing down Shane’s spine can make contact with skin, instead.

“Bed,” Ilya says again, with a little more intention in his voice this time. Shane hums against his crotch, and Ilya sits up, dragging Shane up to kiss him.

They make it to bed, eventually, but it takes them a while to find it, tripping over stray boxes and each other all the way down the hall. Shane goes willingly when Ilya pushes him down on the bed, pressing up on his elbows to watch Ilya tug his shirt off over his head. Shane starts struggling out of his clothes while Ilya gracefully shucks his own, and then Ilya is back on him, pressing him into the mattress with the force of his kiss.

Shane hums into his mouth, pushing weakly at his chest. Ilya pulls back just enough to look at him, his eyes dark and shiny when Shane looks up at him.

“Get the stuff,” Shane breathes, pushing at Ilya again.

“Yeah?” Ilya says, voice rough.

“Yeah,” Shane says.

“Where did we put it?” Ilya says, all but jumping off of the bed.

“I hid it in my backpack,” Shane says, getting a hand around himself mindlessly while he watches Ilya search the room. “Under the bed.”

“Very subtle,” Ilya says, dropping to his knees to reach under the bed—Shane has to remove his hand from himself at the sight.

“C’mon,” he whines, spreading his legs when Ilya returns to the bed. Ilya brings the whole backpack with him, kissing up Shane’s body while he fishes around for the bottle of lube and strip of condoms they bought last week.

“You are sure?” Ilya says, shoving the backpack back to the floor and settling himself between Shane’s legs.

“Yeah,” Shane says, bending his knees and pressing himself back into the pillows. “C’mon.”

“Easy,” Ilya teases. “We have all night.”

We only have tonight, Shane thinks, but he bites his tongue.

Ilya gets his hands on Shane’s thighs, pressing them up toward his chest and lowering himself down. Shane groans and tips his head back against the pillows, his body tight and trembling, already, and Ilya has barely touched him.

Ilya spends a while just touching him gently before he ever reaches for the lube. They don’t often get the time and space to do this; they are always either in Irina’s apartment or David and Yuna’s house, or hotel rooms surrounded by their teammates, and beyond that, Shane has been nervous for quite some time about going all the way. He’s ready for it now, though, watching Ilya’s every move as he reaches for the lube and drizzles a copious amount over his fingers.

“Okay?” Ilya asks, before he reaches down.

“Yes,” Shane says. His eyes flutter closed as Ilya gets to work, touching him so gently Shane almost feels fragile— but he isn’t, and he huffs after a moment. “More.”

Ilya obliges, his gaze locked on Shane’s face when Shane opens his eyes again. “Good?”

“Yes, good,” Shane says. “C’mon, Ilya.”

Ilya, for all of Shane’s whining and complaining, remains careful and attentive, watching Shane’s face with every new movement. They have done this part before, Shane knows what to expect, knows how it’s going to feel when Ilya gets in deep enough and crooks his fingers just—

“Oh, fuck,” Shane sighs, eyes snapping to the ceiling. “Ready, I’m ready, Ilya—”

“Okay,” Ilya says, pulling his fingers out and wiping them on his own thigh, so as not to dirty Shane’s brand new bedsheets. “Okay?”

“Okay, Ilya, fuck,” Shane says, huffing a frustrated chuckle. “Can you just—”

“Relax, *moy lyubimyy*,” Ilya says, crawling up Shane’s body to kiss him sweetly. Shane melts, boneless by the time Ilya is done with him. “Do not be impatient. I am going to keep checking, and you are going to keep answering me. Yes?”

“Yes,” Shane says, his voice barely there. God, Ilya is so hot.

“Good,” Ilya says, tapping his jaw lightly with two fingers before sitting up and reaching for a condom.

He doesn’t check in again until he’s halfway inside of Shane, and Shane is seeing stars.

“Sweetheart?” Ilya says; his voice trembles a little, and Shane chokes on his answering, *fuck, yes*.

Time melts away. Nothing exists outside of Montréal, outside of this bedroom, outside of Shane and Ilya and the heat between their bodies. Shane feels out of his mind, out of his body, completely intertwined with Ilya in every single way, body and soul, mind and heart, every single one of his senses consumed entirely by the way Ilya moves, the way Ilya touches him, the way Ilya presses his face into Shane’s neck and says his name, deep and low and gorgeous, and Shane’s eyes roll back and his body is glowing, he’s sure of it, waves and waves of shimmering heat and pleasure and ecstasy.

Ilya continues to be so gentle with him after, checking in consistently while he puts Shane back together again after having taken him apart so thoroughly. He cleans Shane up with one of Shane’s soft new face towels and then deposits it into Shane’s new laundry hamper and then gathers what’s left of Shane into his arms in Shane’s new bed, kissing his face, his neck, his chest, his ears, his hair, until Shane manages to wrench his eyes open to look up at him.

“Worth the wait?” Ilya asks, smiling knowingly at him.

Shane would be sarcastic, if he had the capacity to do so, but as it is, all he can do is grin stupidly at Ilya and thread his fingers through his hair. “Fuck, yeah,” he says, dragging Ilya in to kiss him again.

Ilya gets the both of them under the covers somehow, and settles with his back to Shane’s chest, humming contentedly when Shane kisses his forehead and holds him around his shoulders.

They should talk about tomorrow, probably. They should check in with each other, have a conversation about how they’re feeling and what’s going to happen in the three and a half months until they see each other again, but that would be so hard, and it is so much easier to pull Ilya down until they’re both flat against the pillows, tuck his face into Ilya’s hair, and drift off to sleep.

Chapter 12

September, 2010 — Montréal, Québec

“Now, Jim, let’s talk about the NHL. Preseason starts up next week, everyone’s got their rosters secured, and it’s going to be a very interesting season.”

“Why’s that, Tim?”

“You’ll recall our favorite OHL stars, Hollander and Rozanov? Well, Jim, they’ve made it to the big leagues.”

“And the internet can’t get enough! The rivalry between these kids has gotta be intense.”

“Pretty heated, I’d say. These guys are keeping it classy, though. Hollander was quoted last week saying he thinks Rozanov is going to end up being one of the greats, and Rozanov took to Twitter to share a photo of the two of them from back when they won nationals for their school’s team for the first time. Almost makes you wonder if those reports out of the locker room of all the animosity between them were ever legit...”

“Yeah, I don’t buy it. Two kids this talented, playing on rival teams? They’re gonna grow to hate each other, if they don’t already. I give it one season, maybe two.”

“There are no preseason matchups for Boston and Montréal, so we won’t see Hollander and Rozanov back on the ice together until mid-November, but we’ll be looking forward to it, for sure.”

“Rumor has it they’ll both be on the starting lines by that time, Tim, you think we’ll get a face-off from them?”

“I’d be shocked and disappointed if we don’t!”

Shane rolls his eyes, pulling his phone out of his pocket and slowing his pace, ducking off to the edge of the sidewalk he’s been jogging along so he doesn’t interrupt the flow of the foot traffic around him.

Shane: You listening to this shit?

Ilya: You need to stop listening to idiot Jim and Tim, Hollander.

Shane: They mentioned the interview I did last week where I talked about you and the photo you posted, and still they think we probably secretly hate each other.

Ilya: They are idiots.

Shane: Why are they so obsessed?

Ilya: Maybe I should post that photo you sent to me the other night.

Ilya: That would give them something to talk about.

Shane: Shut up.

Shane: And delete that.

Shane: Wait you saved it?????

Shane: Ilya!

Ilya: It is my phone wallpaper.

Shane: ILYA!!!!

“Shane Hollander?”

Shane looks up from his phone, immediately pasting on the smile he’s perfected for interactions like these in the past few weeks or so. “Yeah, hi.”

“Oh my god, no way,” says the stranger gawking at him, fumbling for his phone. “Can I take a picture with you?”

“Sure,” Shane says, carefully nonchalant, just the way he’s been practicing in the mirror.

This happens every time he leaves his apartment now, sometimes multiple times a day. He has become something of a household name in Québec, ever since being drafted second overall to the Voyageurs. The older guys on the team tell him he’ll get used to this, it won’t always feel like such an invasion of privacy to be stopped on the street with his full government name by strangers multiple times per outing. Part of Shane hopes that this never stops feeling kind of weird.

Hockey isn’t as big a deal in the States as it is in Canada, so Ilya hasn’t really had to face this side of it all, yet. Ilya is just as big of a deal in the hockey world as Shane is, of course, as their careers have already become sort of inextricably linked to one another, but Ilya can go out all he wants (which he often does) without issue, besides an inevitable few hardcore hockey fans. His actions are always well-documented in sports news, as are Shane’s, but Ilya has been having somewhat of an easier time living in the moment since he’s been in Boston.

Shane can deal with all of it, he really can, as long as he still gets to play hockey at the end of the day. He doesn’t mind the photos, the awkward conversations with fans at the grocery store, the staring and pointing when he’s out for a run downtown.

What he does mind, increasingly so, is the comparisons between himself and Ilya. It is not unexpected, not even uncalled for; Shane and Ilya are very different players who come from the same city, they have very different personalities, and they have very different appearances. Unfortunately for Shane, he finds he is often painted as the inferior of the two of them in each of these categories. He doesn’t play like Ilya, he doesn’t act like Ilya, he doesn’t look like Ilya, and thus he is boring, prudish, and boyish. Ilya is exciting, he’s

unpredictable and charming and funny and gorgeous and intense, he's a shooting fucking star, and Shane is just a steady, constant light.

It's not something he's talked to Ilya about, or anyone, for that matter. He knows Ilya likes Boston, but he also knows that Ilya is struggling with how much he likes Boston, because he feels guilty for leaving everyone else behind. Ilya has never really voiced that, but Shane knows him well enough to know that Ilya's big, soft heart is aching for Shane, for his mother, for Ottawa. The last thing Shane wants to do is give him something else to feel guilty about, because it's not Ilya's fault that Shane is frustrated with the way the media portrays them. It'll probably get better once the season starts up, anyway. Yeah, it'll all be fine by then.

He runs another four kilometers, takes three more pictures with fans, and puts his hood up before he jogs back to his own neighborhood. He makes it to his building without issue, and then all the way up to his apartment, and finally checks his phone again just as he's stripping down to get into the shower.

Missed Call – Ilya Rozanov

Ilya: [One photo attached]

Ilya: Answer.

Well, the shower can wait a little longer.

One Week Later – Boston, Massachusetts

It is late morning when Ilya finally peels his eyes open; Svetlana broke up with the man she had been seeing yesterday, and consequently had dragged Ilya on a tour of Boston's nightlife scene last night in search of someone new. Well, dragged is not the right word– Ilya was an active and willing participant, and Svetlana had been generous with the liquid compensation. He is feeling it now, though, rolling over to groan uselessly in the direction of the window he had forgotten to draw the blinds over before passing out at some point very, very early this morning.

He fumbles for his phone on the bedside table, which he is pleased to find he had the wherewithal to plug in last night. There are a smattering of notifications, including a text from Shane: *Good morning :) Call me when you're up, love you xx*

It was sent hours ago. Like, several hours ago. Ilya is going to get a ration of shit for how many hours ago this text was sent. Fate sealed, he figures a few more minutes will not hurt, and opens Twitter to help his brain finish booting up. There are pictures of himself and Svetlana from last night, but nothing too ugly, nothing that will get him in trouble with

Shane, or with the NHL. He checks his email, just for good measure, scrolling mindlessly through promotional emails, sponsorship offers, an updated season calendar from his coach, and—

From: Alexei Rozanov

Subject: Иди на хуй.

Ilya's blood runs cold. He stares at the unopened email, sitting up slowly. This cannot be real. He cannot have an email in his inbox from his brother. How would Alexei have even gotten his email address? Are such things public record? Has Alexei been in contact with someone in Ilya's life, someone who would have given up his email address? Ilya cannot bear to think of Alexei contacting Svetlana, Irina, the Hollanders, *Shane*— and he is sure none of them would have given Alexei his information, but perhaps someone on his team? Someone from the team staff who is not aware of Ilya's relationship— or lack thereof— with his family in Russia? Alexei is police, maybe he has access to some kind of database where Ilya's contact information is stored now that he has a real job.

Go fuck yourself, the subject line reads. Ilya is numb, fingertip tingling as he taps to open the message.

Found you. You are pathetic, thinking you can run and hide forever. You are a fucking loser, fucking faggot, piece of worthless shit. You think American hockey makes you special? It is the most shameful league you could play for, but I guess it suits you well. How much are they paying you?

You are a fucking coward. I should tell the world how you ran away like a little bitch because your daddy hit you. You and your mother should be dead, the world would be a cleaner place.

You cannot hide anymore.

Ilya reads it through a few times, his throat dry, heart racing. Fuck.

He is shocked that Alexei did not outright ask for, or demand, money, but Ilya supposes that will come in time, whether Ilya answers this email or not. Ilya is not going to answer this email; he has nothing to say to Alexei, has had nothing to say to Alexei since he was twelve years old, and will never feel compelled to communicate with him, no matter how severe the threat.

In all honesty, Ilya kind of knew this was coming. He had suspected that news of his being signed to the Bears would have reached Moscow by now; despite what Alexei thinks, the NHL is a big deal, especially when Russian players are signed to American teams. For all he has fretted and feared his father and brother finding out where he is, what he is doing, and being able to contact him, this does not feel as world shattering as he thought it might. It is just Alexei being Alexei, exactly who he has always been: a stupid, mean-hearted bully, starting fights he cannot finish with the lowest blows he can muster. Still, Ilya feels entirely unsettled, sick to his stomach at the thought of having been found out.

Before he has fully finished processing the email, before he can decide what he is going to do about it, whether or not he should tell Shane, Svetlana, Irina, or just keep it to himself and pretend it never happened, his phone starts ringing in his hand.

Incoming Call – Shane Hollander

Ilya accepts the call without thinking, but as soon as he holds the phone to his ear, he wishes he had let it ring.

“Hello,” he says weakly.

“Good morning, sunshine,” Shane says. “Did I wake you? Are you seriously still sleeping?”

“I was awake,” Ilya says. He sounds distant even to his own ears. “Just– had not had a chance to call.”

“How late were you out last night?” Shane asks.

“Ah, I do not know– how do you know I was out last night?”

“It was a day that ends in y, so, y’know, I figured you’d be out celebrating,” Shane says.

“Svetlana needed a wingman,” Ilya says. “I was a very good boy, promise.”

“Are you okay?” Shane asks.

No. “Yeah, fine,” Ilya says unconvincingly.

“You sound weird,” Shane says. “Are you hungover?”

Russians do not get hangovers. “Yeah, I think,” Ilya says; it is easier than having to tell Shane the real reason he feels sick.

“Make sure you drink water,” Shane says. “You have a game tonight, right?”

“Yes,” Ilya says, pulling his phone away from his ear to check the time. He has hours before practice. Good.

“Maybe you should stay in tonight, after,” Shane says. “Maybe we can Skype? If you’re up for it?”

Ilya loves nothing more than Skype sessions with Shane– well, there are a few things he would prefer over a Skype session, but when he cannot have those things, Skype does the trick. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Shane says. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I am fine,” Ilya snaps, harsher than intended. He can almost hear the way Shane flinches.

“Okay,” Shane says again, but Ilya can tell by the tone of his voice that he does not believe him. “Um, alright. Well, text me when you’re done with practice, I guess. Love you.”

“Love you,” Ilya mutters, and ends the call. Poor Shane, so perceptive, and yet so clueless. Ilya loves him so much his chest hurts. Alexei and his father can never, ever get close to him. Ilya will go to any lengths necessary to make sure his sweet, beautiful Shane stays safe.

He drags himself out of bed eventually, after reading Alexei’s email a few times more. Too many times. He should tell someone. He should at least tell Shane, but then Shane would get so worried, would be so doting at the thought of Ilya being upset by this, and Ilya cannot handle that. He could tell Svetlana, but she would probably want to do something about it, take matters into her own hands, and Ilya does not want that, either. Irina should know, probably, but Ilya does not want to scare her, to make her feel unsafe, especially since Ilya is the one who finally got them discovered. Ilya will have to figure it out on his own, then, and make sure that he can keep the people he loves safe.

He moves through the rest of the day like a zombie; Alexei’s words keep running through his mind while he works out, while he showers and eats, while he leaves for the Garden, while he warms up with the team. He is on edge, and it makes him rather intense, which is not bad for his hockey, but does earn him a few sidelong glances from his teammates.

He cannot stop catching sight of the camera throughout the game, knowing that every time he sees a lens pointed at him, he is being broadcast live to be seen anywhere, by anyone. Is Alexei watching him? Is his father watching him?

The thought earns him a penalty via a frustrated shove to a player from the New York Admirals. He stewes in the penalty box, and then comes back to the ice even meaner, taking his anger out on everyone who gets in his way. He almost hopes Papa and Alexei are watching, that they can see how tough he is, how strong, how powerful.

The Bears lose to the Admirals 3-2. Ilya is so ashamed he could cry. He wants to go home, hide away under his covers, and forget about this entire day. He thinks he will do just that, but he does not even make it to the locker room before his coach pulls him aside.

“Roz,” the coach calls to him, “you okay?”

I would be better if everyone stopped asking me that. “Yes, coach.”

“You seemed off tonight,” the coach says. “Something going on?”

“No,” Ilya says, too quickly. “I, ah— I am not feeling well.”

“You need to see the team doctor?” the coach asks.

“No, no,” Ilya says. “I think I will just go home and sleep.”

He is sent off with a firm pat to the shoulder, and Ilya keeps his head down while he heads to the locker room to shower and change. He is tempted to ignore the press outside of the Garden when he finally makes it out, but the thought of his father and brother watching him shy away from the confrontation has him pausing for microphones to be shoved in his face, pasting on a steely scowl.

“Rozanov, any comment on your loss to the Admirals tonight?”

“Is embarrassing,” Ilya says, shrugging on shoulder. “Scott Hunter is one hundred years old. We should have played better.”

“You got your first penalty of your career tonight, what do you have to say about that?”

“I say: stay out of my way, or get pushed. Goodnight,” he says lowly, squaring his shoulders as he walks away from the fray.

Alexei’s email has replayed in Ilya’s head countless times more before he arrives home. *You are pathetic.* He fumbles with the key in the lock of the front door of his building. *You are a fucking loser.* He storms to the elevator, jamming his thumb into the button and scowling at the doors while he waits for them to open. *Piece of worthless shit.* He slams his apartment door when he gets inside, quickly stripping out of his suit coat and whipping it across the room. *You are a fucking coward.* His phone buzzes in his pocket, and he wrestles it out, glaring at the notifications on the screen. *Fucking faggot.*

Shane: Home yet?

Ilya wants to scream. He throws his phone a little more aggressively than necessary onto the sofa, choosing to leave Shane’s message unanswered while he stomps to his bedroom to change into a t-shirt and soft pair of sweatpants. There are a few more messages waiting for him when he finally comes back to the living room, slamming himself down on the sofa.

Shane: Ilyaaa

Shane: I know you left already, I saw you talk to those reporters. Text me when you’re home, please.

Svetlana: *Shitty game. Want to go out?*

Ilya spends a few moments rubbing at his face, and then reopens his text thread with Shane.

Ilya: Home.

Shane: Skype?

Shane’s response comes through immediately, which means he was waiting by the phone. Ilya takes a deep, cleansing breath, like Shane has taught him to do, and then reaches for his laptop on the coffee table. Shane is already online when Ilya logs in, so Ilya calls him, glaring at his keyboard while he waits for Shane to pick up.

Immediately upon seeing Shane’s grainy, pixelated face appear on his screen, Ilya feels a fraction of the ice leave his veins. Shane smiles reflexively at him, but his gaze quickly turns into something a little more concerned.

“Hey,” Shane says. He is in his bed, reading glasses on. Ilya loves him so much. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Ilya says easily. “Just got home, changed. Sveta wants to go out.”

Shane tries not to let his face fall, but Ilya can see the shift in his emotions like a shadow passing over him. “Oh. Are you gonna?”

Ilya considers for a moment. Going out and getting drunk might help him to forget his worries, but it also might make him feel even worse, and he knows that Svetlana will not let him make it through the night without telling her what is bothering him, and he does not want that. “No,” he tells Shane, “I am too tired tonight.”

“Do you want me to let you go?” Shane asks.

“No,” Ilya says immediately.

“Okay,” Shane says, pulling his glasses off. “I watched the game.”

“Put your glasses back on,” Ilya says.

“I don’t need them, I can see you just fine,” Shane says.

“On,” Ilya demands.

Shane rolls his eyes, but slides his glasses back on. “Happy?”

Ilya smiles, but it must not reach his eyes, because Shane frowns.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

“Nothing,” Ilya says. “I am tired.”

“Yeah, you mentioned. But you seem— I don’t know, did something happen?”

“No,” Ilya says. He is quickly becoming irritated, but doing his best to disguise it.

“You got a penalty tonight,” Shane says, voice soft. “And when the reporters asked you about it, you said ‘stay out of my way, or get pushed.’ That doesn’t sound like you, Ilya. What’s going on?”

Fuck Shane and his ability to read Ilya like this. “Nothing. I was trying to win, I pushed someone. I did not succeed, I was angry, I said rude thing,” he sighs.

“That’s all?” Shane pushes.

“That is all, Hollander,” Ilya says lowly.

“Don’t call me Hollander, not like that,” Shane says. “*Rozanov*.”

The sound of his last name makes Ilya’s skin prickle. “Shane.”

“Ilya.”

“Take your clothes off,” Ilya says, moving his laptop to the coffee table and tugging his shirt off over his head.

“Jesus,” Shane says, blinking at his screen a few times. “I thought you were tired?”

“This will help me sleep,” Ilya says, lifting his hips off the sofa to shove his pants down to his ankles. “Clothes. Now.”

Shane obeys, albeit hesitantly. He’s watching Ilya’s face, Ilya can tell, so Ilya reaches forward and angles his laptop screen down, so the camera only catches him from the chin down.

“Fuck,” Shane says, settling back on the bed, naked. He has lost his glasses. Ilya leans close to his laptop, so his face fills Shane’s screen, and taps his cheekbone. Shane huffs and reaches for his glasses, flipping Ilya off once he has put them back on.

“Better,” Ilya says, leaning back on the sofa again and getting a hand around himself.

Shane, for all that he is perceptive and empathetic, is very easily distracted. Ilya manages to shut him up for the better part of an hour from three hundred miles away, and Shane falls asleep on camera, and Ilya brings his own laptop back to his bedroom, plugging the charger in next to his bed so that it will not die while he falls asleep watching Shane sleep.

He texts Svetlana back to let her know he thinks he is coming down with something, texts his mother goodnight as he does every night, and then turns his phone off, leaving it off the charger while he settles under his covers and pretends he can feel Shane’s steady breath on his neck.

November, 2010 — Montréal, Québec

Shane keeps his eyes down, swallowing his nerves and focusing on breathing. Ilya is so close that Shane can feel his breath on his face, and Shane cannot look at him, because if he does, there is no telling what he might do.

“Shane Hollander,” Ilya says. His voice sends chills down Shane’s spine. “Will you disappoint them?”

The crowd is roaring all around them, and Shane focuses on the noise, letting it drown out the anxious buzzing in his mind. He forces himself to look up, just before the puck is dropped.

Ilya is so beautiful, so real, so *here*, and he’s grinning like an asshole, hunched over the face-off circle with his helmet on and his mouth guard in and *god* Shane wants to kiss him, wants

to knock the stick out of his hands and the helmet off his head and climb on top of him right here on the ice, but he forces himself to simply smile back and say, “nope.”

He wins the face-off. Ilya is hot on his heels, but Shane has won their first ever face-off against each other, and he’s never going to let Ilya live it down.

That is, until a few minutes later, when Shane collides hard with the boards, crushed between the plexiglass and Ilya’s bodyweight. He shoves Ilya off, turning to shoot him a shocked, horrified glare, but Ilya is looking at him like he could eat him alive, and not in an entirely sexy way.

“The fuck?” Shane bites.

Ilya gets a penalty for it. Shane spends the rest of the game looking over his shoulder, and for good reason— Ilya takes every chance he can get to come after Shane, and the crowd loses their minds every time, as Ilya undoes all of the work they have done over the past year to convince the world that they do not hate each other, and never will. Shane does hate Ilya, a little bit, by the end of the game; Ilya blows him a kiss as they leave the ice, and Shane really cannot tell if it’s meant to be mocking or sweet.

They didn’t get a chance to see each other before the game. The Bears’ plane was delayed, and they didn’t arrive until the very last minute, which meant Shane had to go to lunch with his parents and Irina alone earlier today and pretend that he wasn’t scared out of his mind for— well, for exactly what just happened.

Ilya has been... different, since moving to Boston. Shane noticed it pretty soon after preseason games started, and it has only gotten worse. He is an aggressive player, and he always has been, but he has been taking it much further than usual, as of late. He is always chirping other players on the ice, he is cocky and rude in interviews, and several players from other teams have had some pretty negative stuff to say about him in the press. Ilya refuses to acknowledge it when Shane asks outright, but there is something wrong, and Shane just cannot figure out what it is.

The media is entirely convinced that they hate each other now. Tonight’s game has been highly anticipated, simply because the whole world has been waiting with bated breath to see how they’d interact with each other on the ice. It was not at all what Shane expected, but probably pretty on par with what the rest of the hockey world expected, and Shane can’t deny that he is a little shaken up when he gets back to the locker room, sitting down hard on the bench to take a mental moment before he hits the showers.

“Don’t sweat it, Hollander,” says one of his teammates, patting him on the back. “Rozanov’s a fucking dick.”

“Yeah,” Shane says. That’s not true, of course, but he can’t look Hayden Pike in the eye and tell him that Ilya Rozanov is a sweetheart, a sensitive soul, and a very generous lover.

“Can’t believe you were friends with him,” Hayden says.

“We are friends,” Shane says weakly.

“Really? Didn’t look like it out there tonight,” Hayden says. “Hey, speaking of friends, are you around tonight?”

“Uh, no, sorry,” Shane says. “My parents are in town for the game.”

“Damn,” Hayden says. “You gotta come out with us one night, Hollander, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” Shane says. He’s probably lying. “Another night, for sure.”

“Yes,” Hayden grins. “Alright, go hit the showers. Don’t keep your family waiting too long.”

Shane’s parents and Irina are leaving for Ottawa as soon as Shane and Ilya are able to come out and say goodbye to them. Shane hurries through his shower and gets dressed in his suit like he’s in a dream, and then heads out to find David, Yuna, and Irina waiting near the back door of the rink.

“That was a great game, honey,” Yuna says, wrapping him in her arms and squeezing. Shane hugs her back, and then glances over his shoulder.

“Ilya isn’t out yet?” he asks.

“Oh, he’s already gone,” Yuna says. “He wanted to get back to the hotel and change before he went to yours, he left already so he could be quick about it.”

“Oh,” Shane says, heart sinking. “Right.”

“We have to get going, honey,” Yuna says, hugging him again. “We’re so proud of you. We’ll text when we get home, okay?”

“Okay,” Shane says, hugging his father, and then Irina. “Thanks for coming.”

Irina lingers for a moment, watching Shane’s face. Shane has trouble holding her gaze.

“Take care of him, please,” Irina says quietly, stroking Shane’s cheek. “He is…”

“Yeah,” Shane says. “I know. I’ll try.”

Irina hugs him again, and then the three of them are gone, heading for the main exit of the arena. Shane leaves through the back, races all the way home so that he’ll beat Ilya there, and then spends over an hour sitting alone in his apartment.

Shane: I’m home, come over whenever.

Ilya: Okay

Shane: What’s your ETA?

Shane: Ilya?

Shane: Are you coming?

Just when Shane is about to cave and call him, Ilya texts him back.

Ilya: Here.

Shane buzzes him up, and then waits awkwardly by the door until Ilya knocks. He wrenches the door open, glaring when he finds Ilya leaning coolly in the doorway.

“What the fuck?” Shane hisses, dragging him inside and then pushing him back against the closed door. “I have been waiting over an hour for you.”

“Was delicate procedure,” Ilya shrugs. “I had to change, tell Marlow I was going out, and then get through Montréal without being seen headed to Shane Hollander’s apartment,” he says. “Took some time.”

“Well, a fucking text back would have helped,” Shane says. “You can be such a fucking—”

Ilya cuts him off by covering his mouth with his own, threading his fingers through the back of Shane’s hair to lock him into the kiss. Shane melts against him, but only partly; his hands find their way to Ilya’s chest, and then he uses them to push himself back.

“You owe me an apolo—

“I missed you,” Ilya says, the hand that isn’t curled into Shane’s hair sliding along his lower back.

Shane melts the rest of the way, knocking Ilya back against the door with the force of the kiss. Ilya turns them around, somehow, until Shane’s back is pressed against the door, and then he hooks his hands under Shane’s ass, lifting Shane’s legs off the ground as if he weighs nothing.

“Fuck,” Shane whines into his mouth, both hands knotted in Ilya’s hair. “Bed. Now.”

Ilya only manages to carry him halfway there before Shane struggles free, grabbing Ilya by the front of his t-shirt and dragging him the rest of the way. Ilya goes willingly when Shane shoves him onto the bed, grinning as Shane climbs up on top of him and crashes their mouths together again.

“Fuck, I missed you,” Shane murmurs into Ilya’s mouth, snaking one hand down Ilya’s stomach and into the waistband of his sweatpants. Ilya groans into his mouth, turning his head to gasp fresh air.

“I am sorry,” Ilya says, eyes rolling back in his head.

“For what?” Shane pushes, slowing the movement of his hand.

“For how fast I am going to come,” Ilya says breathlessly. “I have been waiting *months* for this.”

“Oh, fuck you,” Shane says, pulling his hand out of Ilya’s pants. “Is that seriously all you—”

“Shane,” Ilya whines, sitting up and holding Shane’s hips firmly, pressing himself up against him. “I am sorry,” he says, a little more earnestly this time, holding Shane’s gaze.

“For what?” Shane asks again.

“For keeping you waiting,” Ilya says. “For checking you into the boards during the game. Both times. And the time I tried to trip you.”

Shane raises his eyebrows. “And?”

“And for saying ‘I wish you were playing tonight’ after I scored,” Ilya says, like a scolded child. “Okay?”

“Suck my dick, Rozanov,” Shane says.

“Okay,” Ilya says.

Shane’s world tips upside down, and then he’s flat on his back on the bed, watching Ilya tug his sweatpants off and toss them to the floor. Shane moans loudly as Ilya does exactly as he was asked, grabbing a fistful of Ilya’s hair and tugging just hard enough to hurt. Ilya whimpers around him, and Shane moans again, squirming when Ilya uses both hands to hold his hips down.

It’s a long night. Shane can barely remember his own name by the end of it, clinging to Ilya’s sweaty skin when he finally collapses on top of him, pinning Shane to the mattress with his bodyweight. Shane remembers the feeling of being crushed between Ilya and the boards; this is better, so much better, especially as Ilya kisses down his neck like he just can’t get enough of him.

“Can you stay?” Shane mumbles, staring up at Ilya’s glassy eyes when Ilya pulls back to look at him.

“We have an early flight,” Ilya winces. He glances at the clock on Shane’s bedside table and tuts. “We board in five hours.”

Shane flops his head to the side to look at the clock, too; it’s just after one in the morning, but he’ll be damned if he doesn’t get every moment he can with Ilya.

“Do you have time for a shower?” he offers.

Ilya grins, biting gently at Shane’s neck. “You have not had enough, hm?”

“Never,” Shane hums.

The shower in Shane’s primary suite is plenty big enough for two, but Ilya keeps him crowded against the wall the whole time, doesn’t give him a moment to breathe, to think, only enough to feel. Shane gets down on his knees, after, and it’s hard to breathe with the water raining down on them, but Ilya sounds so pretty echoing around the tile walls. They dry each other off when they’re done, and then Shane pulls on a t-shirt and pajama pants while Ilya gets dressed in the clothes he left in a heap at the foot of Shane’s bed.

Shane follows Ilya out to the front door, waiting quietly while Ilya calls for a ride back to the hotel. He doesn't say anything while Ilya puts his shoes on, worried the lump in his throat will be audible in his voice.

"One month," Ilya says after he hangs up the phone, offering Shane a tight smile. "Bye."

"Bye," Shane says quietly, leaning against the wall next to the door to wait for his goodbye kiss. "I love you."

"Love you," Ilya says, and then glances down at his phone. He puts a hand on the doorknob, and Shane's heart falls into his stomach; he puts himself in Ilya's way before Ilya can get the door open, glaring at him in disbelief.

"Ilya," he says, raising his eyebrows at him.

"Sweetheart," Ilya says, wrapping his arms around Shane and kissing him sweetly. Shane almost relaxes into it, but he wants to cry when they break apart. Ilya strokes a thumb over Shane's cheek, kisses him three more times in quick succession, and then glances at his phone again. "I have to go," he whispers. "I am sorry."

Shane moves aside, and Ilya kisses him once more before he finally opens the door, and then he's gone. Shane drags himself back to his bedroom like he's physically injured, falling into bed and staring at the ceiling.

Ilya wasn't even going to kiss him goodbye. After all that, after the bullshit during the game, after the incredible night they had after, despite everything, Ilya wasn't even going to kiss him goodbye. Shane feels like shit, rolling over to grab his phone off the bedside table and plug it in. There are a few texts from Ilya, apparently from right after he left Shane's building.

Ilya: I love you.

Ilya: So much.

Ilya: I will text you when I land in Raleigh.

Ilya: I love you. Goodnight. Xxxxxx

Shane wants to throw his phone across the room. Something is going on, he knows it, he can feel it in his bones. The Ilya he knows and grew up loving would never have treated Shane the way he treated him during the game earlier tonight. That Ilya would never have forgotten to kiss him goodbye. That Ilya wouldn't have left Shane's apartment a moment before he had to, early flight or not. This Ilya is going through something, he's struggling deep within that thick skull of his, and Shane is dying because he cannot figure out what it is.

Shane: Love you.

December, 2010 — Boston, Massachusetts

The crowd is deafeningly loud, and obnoxiously rowdy, watching Shane and Ilya bend to take the second face-off of their careers against each other on the ice. Shane is nervous, his hands twitching around his stick, but Ilya's shit-eating grin can be seen all the way from the private boxes, even without the reflection of it on the jumbotron. Ilya knocks his stick against Shane's a few times, teasing, but Shane stays focused, eyes on the ice.

Irina sinks down in her seat almost imperceptibly, but her eyes stay on the ice. Yuna is all but pressed against the glass of their private box, but she can see the way Irina's foot is tapping anxiously beside her.

"He seems," Irina trails off, while Ilya continues to try to intimidate Shane on the ice. "Not good."

Yuna hums, tracking the puck as it falls. Ilya skates away with it immediately, and she can almost feel Shane's disappointment from here, watching him take off like a shot after Ilya. "What do you mean?"

"Ilya," Irina says quietly. "He is not himself."

"He does seem pretty intense," David says.

"That's Boston, not him," Yuna waves them both off. "It's an aggressive team, and they probably have him playing into all this rivalry nonsense. He's just doing what his coaches ask him to."

"Maybe," Irina says. On the ice, Ilya's shot has been blocked by the Montréal goalkeeper, and he is being held back by one of his teammates while he shouts at the goalkeeper. "I am worried."

"Have you talked to him?" Yuna asks. "Shane says that he's loving Boston, and he's having so much fun with Svetlana."

"Yes, both true," Irina nods. "But there is something— a mother knows, Yuna. A mother knows her son. He is not good."

Yuna turns to look at her, and Irina holds her gaze, though her eyes water. "You think...?"

"I do not know," Irina says. "He is so far away. He loves Sveta, but he loves Shane more, and Ottawa, and... This is everything he has ever wanted, I worry that he will not admit it to even himself if it is not what he expected it to be."

Yuna sits down in her seat next to Irina, taking her hand. "He will be okay," she says softly. "You've given him all the tools, and he is a smart kid. He tells you everything, doesn't he? He's never lied to you."

“He used to, yes, when he was small. This is different.”

“I’ll talk to Shane,” Yuna says. “Maybe he can talk to Ilya about—“

“No, no,” Irina says quickly. “No. Do not trouble Shane with this. As it is, I fear Shane is a victim of it, too.”

Yuna looks back down at the ice when Irina gestures; Ilya is taunting Shane from behind the boards, his shift having ended. Shane’s jaw is clenched, but he’s focused on his coach, listening to whatever he is being told, but Ilya doesn’t stop until a ref puts himself physically in front of Ilya to block him out. Ilya grins at him over the ref’s shoulder when Shane finally turns away from his coach and glances over at him. Shane skates away quickly, and Ilya keeps smiling after him, but Shane looks flustered as he rejoins his team.

It is two days until Christmas, the last game before the league takes a week off for the holidays. David, Yuna, and Irina are staying in a lovely hotel near Ilya’s apartment, where they all will be celebrating Christmas together; Irina and Ilya have taken to celebrating their Christmas with the Hollanders over the years, instead of the traditional Russian orthodox Christmas in early January— despite the chain Irina wears around her neck, they have had no problem integrating with the Hollanders’ traditions.

Shane and Ilya’s status as two of the biggest names in hockey this season make it difficult to go out for a nice dinner when the game ends, so David, Yuna, and Irina stop to pick up takeout on the way back to Ilya’s apartment. Shane and Ilya have already arrived by the time they get there, locked in a tense stare down across Ilya’s kitchen island when Yuna opens the door for David to carry the food in. They both recover quickly, turning to smile at their parents.

Shane rushes over to help David with the food, while Ilya comes to wrap Irina in a warm hug. Irina goes stiffly, offering Ilya a tight smile when he pulls away.

“Ilya, this place is gorgeous,” Yuna says, immediately walking to the window to look at the view. It is dark, but the harbor sparkles in the moonlight, and the city twinkles beyond.

“Thank you,” Ilya says. “Shane picked it out.”

“He does have great taste,” Yuna says.

“Anything to make him happy,” Ilya says with a wink and a smile. Shane scoffs from the kitchen, but only blushes at the bag he is unpacking when Yuna turns to look at him.

“That was a great game,” Yuna says. “You two really are very fun to watch.”

“Glad it’s fun for someone,” Shane mutters, at the same time Ilya says, “Yes, we put on a good show.”

“Is that what it is?” Shane says, looking up at Ilya quickly. “A show?”

“Yes, Holla— Shane,” Ilya says. “Is a show. For our fans. Is not that serious.”

The stare down from earlier resumes.

“Wow, that food smells good,” Yuna says, rushing to the island to put herself between Shane and Ilya, if only to interrupt their eye contact. “Ilya, have you tried this restaurant before?”

“Ilya, can I talk to you for a minute?” Shane says, voice low.

“We have company, Shane,” Ilya says.

“Ilya,” Shane says, like a warning.

“Excuse us,” Ilya smiles politely, and then allows Shane to drag him by the elbow to the bedroom. The door slams, but the walls are well insulated, and only a vague hint of their hushed voices carries through to the kitchen.

Irina rubs at her eyes. David focuses intently on plating everyone’s dinner. Yuna stares, worrying her bottom lip, at the closed bedroom door, until finally it cracks open again.

Shane emerges looking just as irritated as before, and Ilya follows him out looking thoroughly harrowed. David has the food plated and the table set, and everyone sits down wordlessly, besides, of course, Yuna.

“So, any New Years’ resolutions?” Yuna asks the table at large. “I think I’m going to try getting back into pilates. David, weren’t you saying you’d like to try cycling?”

“Sure,” David shrugs. “I don’t know if I’d call that a resolution.”

The topic dies as quickly as it was born. “You know,” Yuna tries next, “I read somewhere, I forget where, that Canada is looking at above average snowfall this year. As if we need more snow, you know?”

No one so much as looks up. Shane is picking mindlessly at his salad, and Ilya is shoveling his dinner into his mouth like he has never had pasta before. Irina’s eyes are locked on Ilya, a disapproving tilt to her mouth— whether because of Ilya’s eating habits or his behavior, Yuna can’t tell.

“Shane, do you think that—“

David touches her hand, giving her a weary glance when she looks up at him. Yuna nods and tries to eat quietly, but it only lasts a minute before the silence begins to get to her.

“Ilya, you’re enjoying Boston?”

Ilya looks spooked at the sound of his own name, but he nods and quickly swallows his mouthful of food. “Yes, very much. Is, ah, very different.”

“How so?”

Ilya breathes deeply, eyes flickering to Shane quickly before he looks back down at his plate. “Is bigger, busier than Ottawa. People are not as friendly. Not friendly at all, actually. People

keep to themselves. I have not met any of my neighbors,” he says.

His eyes flicker to Shane again, and Yuna follows his gaze, watching Shane sink a little lower in his seat.

“But you’re happy?”

“I like the team,” Ilya says. “I have friends, and Svetlana is here, and it is a beautiful city. I have nothing to complain about.”

“Are you homesick?”

Ilya’s eyes lock on Shane this time. “Yes,” he says quietly. “Constantly.”

Shane sinks even lower, somehow.

“And you are liking Montréal, *lapochka*?” Irina finally chimes in, smiling gently at Shane.

“Yeah, it’s great,” Shane says. “They love me there. I’ve made some friends on the team, too, so, it’s good.”

“You both have quite the fanbase back home,” Yuna says. “In Ottawa, I mean.”

Ilya fumbles his fork, and it clatters loudly to his plate. Shane jumps like a gun has gone off at the sound of it, and Ilya blushes furiously as he picks up the fork and cleans the slight food splatter with his napkin. “Sorry,” he says quietly.

“It’s nice that we all get to be together for Christmas,” David says. “I know Christmas in New York is the big thing in the movies, but Christmas in Boston is pretty beautiful, too.”

“I am glad you all can be here,” Ilya says, smiling gratefully at David.

“So are we,” David says, raising his glass to Ilya.

The rest of dinner passes quietly—awkwardly, but peacefully. Yuna does her damndest to overstay her welcome, but it’s quite late by the time they all finish picking at dessert, and David and Yuna all but drag her out of the apartment.

“Do you think they’ll be alright?” Yuna asks, in the elevator down from Ilya’s penthouse.

Irina mumbles something quietly in Russian, sighing at the floor.

“It’s Shane and Ilya,” David says, waving them both off. “They’ll be fine. They always are.”

Shane's hands are shaking while he works his way through the pile of dishes next to Ilya's kitchen sink, rinsing and loading each dish into the dishwasher like a machine. Ilya watches him for a few moments from his place near the door, where he has just finished locking up for the night, but he makes his way over to Shane slowly, silently. He creeps ever closer, waiting for Shane to stop him, yell at him, cuss him out, but Shane never does. Ilya snakes his hands around Shane's middle, pulling himself flush to Shane's back, and then begins to kiss at Shane's neck when Shane still does not stop him. Shane sighs quietly, shakily, and reaches out to turn the faucet off, tilting his head to give Ilya better access.

"I love you," Ilya murmurs, biting into Shane's neck a little; they have a whole week, they do not need to worry about marks.

"Love you, too," Shane says, sagging back against him.

"Leave the rest of the dishes," Ilya says against Shane's skin. "Come to bed."

Shane does not argue. He allows Ilya to take him by the hand, turning off lights as he goes, and lead him to bed, allows Ilya to kiss him sweetly once they get there, allows Ilya to ruck his shirt up and kiss down his stomach, allows Ilya to pull his pants down and off and take him into his mouth. He is beautiful, so beautiful all stretched out on Ilya's bed, moaning and panting and holding Ilya's head down while he comes, all sleepy and sated while Ilya kneels up and finishes himself over his stomach. He is quiet while Ilya cleans him up, while Ilya kisses him again, but he does not return Ilya's smiles, does not answer when Ilya nudges against his cheek and whispers, "okay?"

Ilya pulls back, watching Shane's face carefully. Shane looks like he is going to cry, but is trying very hard not to.

"*Moy lyubimyy*," Ilya says, stroking a hand over Shane's cheek.

"Are you okay?" Shane asks, finally, eyes wet.

"Yes," Ilya says, frowning slightly. "Are you—"

"You just—" Shane cuts himself off, sitting up and shifting back against the headboard. "You just don't seem like yourself."

Ilya sighs, sitting back on his knees. "What does that mean?"

"It means you almost fucking hurt me earlier, Ilya," Shane says, eyes dropping to the bed.

Ilya feels all the blood drain from his face. "What?" he says, aching to drag Shane into his arms, but unable to move. "When?"

"When you tried to fucking take me out on the ice," Shane says, bending his right knee to show Ilya the bruise beginning to blossom on the back of his thigh where Ilya did, indeed, try to take him down earlier.

"That is the game, Shane," Ilya says, his worry starting to mix with anger somewhere deep in his chest, a long-feared hollow that sometimes threatens to take over. "That is how it is

played.”

“Okay,” Shane says, lowering his leg.

Ilya pauses; he had expected an argument, some kind of rebuttal from Shane, but he gets none. “Okay?”

“Okay,” Shane says. “I’m not mad. I just want– I just want you to be okay.”

Ilya looks down, blindsided. He can handle arguing. He can handle fighting. He can handle roughing Shane up on the ice in the name of a good rivalry and then kissing him better afterwards. He is not sure how to handle Shane’s sympathy, his worry, his unconditional softness. “If I wanted to hurt you,” Ilya says lowly, “I would have.”

The quickest and easiest way, Ilya has found, to get Shane to drop something that Ilya does not want to talk about is to piss him off. This might cross a line, though; a range of emotions flashes across Shane’s face, but he settles on disgust. “Jesus, Ilya,” he breathes.

“I would never hurt you,” Ilya says. “Never, Shane.”

Shane watches him for a moment, as if deciding whether or not he wants to push. *Do it*, Ilya thinks. *Push. Let me prove it.*

“Okay,” Shane says eventually, crawling out of bed and grabbing his duffel bag on the way into the bathroom. Ilya stares at the wall until Shane comes back, teeth freshly brushed and dressed in his sleep clothes. Ilya feels weird, completely naked while Shane is dressed, so he pulls on a pair of boxers before he climbs under the covers with Shane.

Shane stretches up to turn the light off, and then curls up on the edge of the bed, as far from Ilya as he can get. Ilya’s heart physically aches in his chest, but he does not move to close the distance, he knows better.

“Goodnight,” Ilya whispers into the dark

“Night,” Shane mutters.

Two days later

By the time Christmas is over, Shane is ready to crawl out of his skin. Between his mother talking incessantly in an attempt to assuage the tension in the apartment, and Ilya not leaving his fucking side the entire day, Shane is beyond overstimulated, he’s fully on the verge of psychosis.

It wouldn't be so frustrating if he thought for a second that all of this attention and affection from Ilya was genuine, but he knows that it isn't. Ilya feels bad because Shane didn't yell at him the other night after the game. He feels bad because he knows he's been acting like a fucking dickhead lately, and he's sad because he thinks Shane is sad. And Shane *is* sad, but not in the way that constant cuddles and kisses and offers of sweets and snacks and food and drink and whatever else can fix. All he wants is for Ilya to talk to him, to tell him what's going on, why he's acting this way, what is so clearly bothering him, but that seems to be the one thing Ilya is not willing to offer him.

It continues well after David, Yuna, and Irina have left for the night, well after Shane sat down and turned on a movie just for a distraction, well after Shane has switched seats on the sofa *twice* to get some space from Ilya and his constantness, his hands on Shane's body, fingers in his hair, head on his shoulder, bare toes on Shane's socked feet, lips on his neck. Shane finally reaches a breaking point, shrugging Ilya out of his neck and turning to glare at him.

"Can you fuck off?" It comes out much harsher than anticipated, and Ilya looks crestfallen, eyes wide.

"*Moy lyubimyy?*" he says, reaching for Shane's hand.

"Fuck off!" Shane says again, batting Ilya's hand away. "Fuck!"

He is staying here for the whole break from the league, six more nights; a few weeks ago, that would have felt like a dream come true, all that time, uninterrupted, alone with Ilya. Right now, Shane wants to get up and run for it, run all the way back to Montréal. To Ottawa.

"What's wrong?" Ilya says, but the look on his face tells Shane he already knows.

"You are!" Shane says.

Ilya slumps back, putting as much space between himself and Shane as he can without leaving the sofa. He cannot meet Shane's eyes, staring at his lap, instead.

"I can't fucking keep up," Shane says. "One day you're trying to break my legs on the ice, and then you're up my fucking ass all day long. I have whiplash, Ilya."

Ilya clenches his jaw, rolling his eyes at Shane's lap. "I cannot fucking win," he mutters.

Shane wants to get up and scream, wants to collapse into Ilya's lap and cry. "Why don't you fucking talk to me?" he says, and it comes out like a whimper, and Ilya's body releases all of its tension. He looks devastated, unable to meet Shane's eyes, and Shane's blood starts to go cold.

"This is harder than I thought it would be," Ilya says, so quietly Shane almost doesn't even hear him.

God, Shane wishes he didn't hear him. His heart drops so suddenly he could be sick. "What is?"

“The distance,” Ilya says, still talking to Shane’s lap. “The time apart, the playing against each other, the having only scheduled time to be together... It is hard.”

“So, what are you saying?” Shane says, voice trembling.

“That I am struggling, Shane,” Ilya says, finally looking up at him.

“So you want to give up?” Shane says. Fuck. Fuck this.

“No,” Ilya says quickly, “I never said that. I just— I just need a little more patience from you,” he says.

Shane would laugh in his face, if he could ever remember how to laugh again. “Are you serious?” he bites.

“I know, I know,” Ilya says. “You have been patient. I have been awful. I am sorry. But I am trying. I know it is hard for you, too, and I am not making it any easier for you.”

“I just want you, Ilya,” Shane says, resigned. “I don’t want Ilya Rozanov of the Boston Bears. I want the guy who I’ve been in love with since I was twelve years old,” he says.

Ilya’s face pinches up at that, conflicted. “I will try.”

“So then *talk to me*,” Shane begs. “What is going on with you? Are you lonely? Are you homesick? Are you regretting all this? Are you— bored of me?”

“No,” Ilya says quickly, making to reach for Shane again, but stopping himself. “No, I love you. It is not you.”

“Then what?” Shane says, desperate.

Ilya considers telling him the truth, he really does, Shane can see it right there behind his teeth. He pussies out at the last second, though, and sighs. “I am lonely,” he says, not quite meeting Shane’s eyes. “I am homesick, and I miss you, and I am stressed about playing well, and it is making me mean. I will do better,” he says. “I promise.”

Shane loves him so much, enough to override the fact that he knows he’s being lied to. Maybe it’s not a lie, but it is definitely not the whole truth, Shane knows that much. “Okay,” he says, shifting to lay himself against Ilya’s chest. Ilya holds him just this side of too tight, but Shane allows it, because if he can’t fix this, he’s just going to have to wait and hope it goes away.

January, 2011

“You are *what*?”

“Going out,” Shane says, slowly and articulately, like he used to when Ilya’s English was worse than it is now.

“With *who*?”

“Hayden and JJ,” Shane says, rolling his eyes. “I just said it, Ilya. Do you want me to write you an email?”

Ilya bristles, glaring at his laptop screen. “No.”

“They’ve been begging for months,” Shane says nonchalantly, like him *going out* for a night on the town in Montréal is no big deal.

“You never go out with me,” Ilya says. “I beg, too, and, *no, Ilya, it is not my thing.*” He plugs his nose while imitating Shane, so his voice comes out all nasally and annoying.

“I don’t sound like that,” Shane grumbles. “And it’s not my thing. I don’t really wanna go, but they’re my only friends on the team, and I don’t want to keep pushing them off,” he shrugs.

“What are you wearing?” Ilya says, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning back against the sofa.

“Uh, this?” Shane says, stepping back from the laptop so Ilya can see his entire body. He is in a loose black t-shirt, a pair of well-tailored jeans, and a fleece. He looks adorable. Ilya crinkles his nose.

“No,” Ilya says. “You cannot wear that to the club.”

“Why not?”

“You look so boring.”

“Don’t you want me to look boring?” Shane says, frowning at the camera. “You want me to go out looking hot, without you?”

Ilya wants to fly to Montréal and fuck him in the bathroom of whatever club he is going to. “You always look hot, Shane. Hot and not-boring are different things.”

“Sorry, didn’t know you mastered the English language like that,” Shane deadpans. “What’s the difference, then?”

“Hot is a state of mind,” Ilya says. “Not-boring is not wearing a fucking *fleece* to the fucking *club*.”

“Well, I’ll take the fleece off when I get there,” Shane mumbles.

“No,” Ilya says. “We start from scratch. Get naked.”

Shane rolls his eyes, but obliges, shrugging the fleece off and then pulling his shirt off. Holy shit, Ilya did not think he would actually do it. “Even the jeans?” Shane asks.

“Yes,” Ilya says immediately. The jeans are fine. They are great, even, very nice jeans. Shane sighs and takes them off.

“Okay, now what?”

“Underwear, too,” Ilya says, just to push his luck.

“Oh, fuck you,” Shane says, reaching for his jeans, which he has neatly folded on the bed behind him. “You’re fucking with me. I have to leave in fifteen minutes, Ilya!”

“Fine, fine, keep the jeans,” Ilya says, grinning at his laptop. “But wear a tighter shirt. That one looks like you are going to grocery store.”

“Okay, fine,” Shane says. He allows Ilya to watch him button up his jeans before he leaves the frame of the camera, coming back with two different shirts. “Which one?” he says, holding both up for Ilya to see.

“Try them on,” Ilya says.

“I’m gonna be late, Ilya,” Shane complains.

“Then be late, but do not be boring,” Ilya says. “Blue one first.”

Shane throws the blue shirt over his head, tugging it down over his chest and stomach and spreading his arms to the camera.

Ilya hums and shakes his head. “No. White?”

Shane mutters something under his breath, pulling the blue shirt off and folding it before pulling on the white shirt. It is more fitted than the others; Ilya can see the outline of Shane’s abs through the fabric, even through the shitty quality of the webcam, and his mouth goes dry.

“You cannot wear that,” Ilya croaks.

“Ilya!” Shane huffs. “Why not?”

“You look way too hot,” Ilya says, waving his hand at his laptop. “Take it off. Something else.”

“No, fuck you,” Shane says, glancing at the clock on his bedside table. “I have to go. I’ll text you later, okay?”

“Shane,” Ilya says, before Shane can hang up on him.

“Yeah?” Shane says, irritated, finger already hovering over the button to end the call.

“Have fun,” Ilya says quietly. “I love you.”

Shane’s face softens. “I love you, too, Ilya.” And then he ends the call.

Things have been significantly better between them since Christmas. Still not great, still not the way they used to be before, but better. He knows that Shane knows that there is more going on than Ilya admitted. The truth is, Ilya is sick to his stomach day in and day out about Alexei, about his father, about being found and being watched and about Alexei having a direct line of contact to him. He is so ashamed at the impact Alexei’s words have had on him, and how drastically his behavior has changed since reading them.

He was not lying when he told Shane that he was homesick and struggling with the distance between them, but it is more than that. By making the world think that he hates Shane, he can make Papa and Alexei think that he hates Shane, and then Shane is safe. If Alexei decides to make good on his threat and come after Ilya, it is best that he does not know the things that Ilya holds nearest and dearest.

The downside is, in convincing the world that he hates Shane, he has also convinced Shane. He should tell Shane. He should tell him everything. But the fear, the shame... Shane would never think less of him for it, but he would not know what to do with it, would not know how to help, and it would kill him. Still, Ilya should tell him. Shane deserves to know how loved he is, even if the rest of the world cannot hear it.

Ilya wants to call him now, tell him everything, tell him how important he really is to Ilya, but he cannot. Shane is out, with friends Ilya does not know. Friends who probably are not fucking assholes to him, who probably do not make him feel confused and angry and unloved. Friends who probably treat him better than Ilya does. What if Shane likes these guys, Hayden and JJ, better than he likes Ilya? What if he realizes he never really liked Ilya at all? What happens to Ilya then?

He calls Svetlana. She answers immediately.

“Which club?” she asks.

“How did you know what I was going to ask?” Ilya says.

“Because it is nine o’clock on a weeknight and you do not have a game tomorrow,” Svetlana says. *“Some of my friends were talking about trying a new place. Want me to get a group?”*

“Yes,” Ilya says. *“Please.”*

“Okay,” Svetlana hums. *“I will text you.”*

It is a while before Svetlana texts him. He stares at the wall while he waits, thinking only of Shane, who still has not texted him either. He sighs and opens his text thread with Shane, typing and deleting several messages.

Ilya: Are you with your friends yet?

It is another ten minutes before Shane texts him.

Shane: I am now. They both were late >:(

Ilya grins at his phone. Serves Shane right for being so bitchy about being late himself.

Ilya: Have fun xx

Half an hour later, Svetlana texts him an address. Ilya peels himself off the couch, changes his sweatpants out for a tight pair of jeans, and leaves.

He makes it an hour into drinking and dancing with Svetlana's friends from her university before he excuses himself for a cigarette outside; he has been trying to quit, as the Bears requested, but sometimes he cannot help himself. He reaches mindlessly for his phone once on the sidewalk, lighting his cigarette and calling Shane.

He is not sure why he does it. Shane almost does not answer, but he picks up on the last ring, music growing quieter through the phone.

"Hey," Shane says, a little bit breathless. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," Ilya says; his voice comes accompanied by a little puff of smoke. "I am out with Sveta."

"Oh," Shane says. "Okay. Why'd you call?"

"Are you having fun?" Ilya asks.

"Uh, I guess," Shane says. "Still not really my thing, but, I don't know, Hayden and JJ are cool."

Ilya nods, gripping his phone a little too tight.

"Ilya?" Shane asks. "Why did you call?"

"I do not know," Ilya says.

"Are you drunk?"

"A little," Ilya says. "I am having fun too."

"Okay, uh, good," Shane says. He sounds hopelessly confused. "I'm glad."

"I am smoking," Ilya says. The music on Shane's end of the line has died completely, like he has gone outside, too.

"Gross," Shane says. "Don't tell me you've started again, Ilya, it's so bad for you—"

"Yes, yes, I know," Ilya says softly.

“Okay, well, if you just called to chat,” Shane says, voice trailing off. “I should probably get back in there. I kinda ran away from them when I saw you were calling.”

“Are they nice to you?” Ilya asks.

Shane is quiet for a moment. “Uh, yeah?” he says.

“Good,” Ilya says. “Okay. Bye.”

“Ilya—”

Ilya hangs up, puts out his cigarette, and throws it away in the bin outside of the club. He shoves his phone back into his pocket and makes his way back inside, finding Svetlana in the crowd and wrapping his arms around her sweetly. She dances with him for a while, keeps trying to shout things into his ear, but Ilya is so distracted, he barely notices.

“I am going for more drinks,” he announces to the group of Svetlana’s friends. He takes a few orders and promptly forgets them, walking over to the bar and then past it, heading to a slightly quieter corner of the room. He has his phone out before he even knows what he is doing, dialling Shane again.

Shane answers more quickly this time, and the music is loud. “Hello?”

“I love you,” Ilya says.

“Hold on, I can’t really hear you,” Shane says. There is some shuffling, muffled voices, and then the noise dies down. “Ilya?”

“Hi,” Ilya says.

“What’s wrong?”

“I am sorry,” Ilya says.

“For what?” Shane asks, voice low.

“For—” Ilya has no idea what he is doing. He might be a little more drunk than he realizes. “Smoking. And for— um.”

“How much have you had to drink?” Shane asks.

“A few,” Ilya says. “Drinks are good here. Not too much ice.”

“Right,” Shane says. “You’re kinda freaking me out.”

Ilya is ruining his night. Shane is out with his friends, and Ilya is freaking him out on the phone for no reason. He should get a grip, probably.

“Sorry,” Ilya says. “I miss you.”

“Is Svetlana there?” Shane asks. “Can I talk to her?”

“She is dancing,” Ilya says. “I will tell her you say hello. Go back to your friends. Sorry.”

He does not give Shane a chance to say anything else, hanging up and turning on his heel to go to the bar, for real this time. He orders vodka for everyone, and while he waits, his phone buzzes in his pocket.

Shane: Are you sure you’re okay?

He is not okay. He is the worst. He sends Shane a thumbs up, and then carries the drinks back to Svetlana’s friends.

He makes it another two hours, until well after midnight, and he can barely see straight. He finds himself in the bathroom, locked in a complicated staring contest with himself; he cannot call Shane again, but he has to know what Shane is doing, if he is still out, too, or if he has already called it a night, if he is home, safe in bed, hair damp from the shower he inevitably took before bed.

His phone somehow ends up pressed against his ear.

“What the fuck?” Shane answers. There is muffled music in the background, and Shane’s words are a little bit slurred. He is drunk. Ilya has never seen Shane properly drunk. Shane is getting drunk *without him*.

“Where are you?” Ilya asks.

“At a bar,” Shane says.

“Where?”

“Montréal?”

“Where in the *bar*.”

“The bathroom.”

Ilya grins at himself in the mirror. “Me too.”

“Cool,” Shane says, irritated. “Do you need something?”

“You,” Ilya says. Someone pounds on the bathroom door. Ilya does not have the capacity to care.

“Me?” Shane asks.

“Send me a picture,” Ilya says.

“No,” Shane says immediately.

“Please?”

“Fuck you.”

“I will send one first,” Ilya says, pulling his phone away from his ear, but he cannot figure out how to close out of the call without hanging up, and Shane is barking at him down the line. “What?”

“Do not send me a picture,” Shane hisses. “I am in public. And so are you.”

“So?” Ilya says. “Has not stopped us before.”

“Have you completely lost your mind?” Shane says. “Are you, like, completely off the rails?”

Maybe. It is possible. Probable. Ilya should tell him. Ilya should tell *someone*.

“I love you,” Ilya says. “Shane, I love you.”

“You’re scaring me,” Shane says. “Go get Svetlana. Now.”

“Say it back,” Ilya says quietly.

“I love you,” Shane says, voice hushed. “I love you so much, okay?”

“Okay,” Ilya smiles.

“Let me talk to Svetlana,” Shane says.

“No,” Ilya says. “You want to fuck her.”

“What?” Shane splutters, and then whispers furiously, “Ilya, I’m *gay*.”

“Can we have phone sex in the bathroom, then?” Ilya asks.

“Oh my god,” Shane says.

“Yes?”

“*No!*”

“Please?”

Shane hangs up on him. Ilya pouts, tries to call back, but Shane declines the call. Ilya goes back to staring at himself in the mirror, but the person outside bangs on the door again, and finally he straightens up, slinking out of the bathroom. He finds Svetlana, who is tapping furiously on her phone at the booth their group has claimed. Ilya drops into the booth next to her, draping himself over her shoulder.

“*Shanya is worried for you,*” Svetlana says. “*He says you are delirious.*”

“*Will you come home with me tonight?*” Ilya asks, wrapping his arms around her. “*Please?*”

Svetlana sighs, craning her neck to look out at the crowd on the dancefloor. “*But I have been flirting with the hottest man in Boston,*” she says.

"I am the hottest man in Boston," Ilya says.

"True," Svetlana says. "Fine. But you owe me another night out so I can actually pick up."

"Deal," Ilya says. "Can we go?"

Svetlana spends the entire cab ride on her phone. Ilya keeps trying to look at her screen, but she angles it away from him, shooting him dirty looks.

"I ruined his night," Ilya says miserably.

"He is still with his friends," Svetlana says.

"But he is angry with me," Ilya says.

"He told you that?" Svetlana says.

"No," Ilya says. "But it is true."

"Where are you guys from?" the cab driver asks, in a thick Boston accent. Ilya and Svetlana both ignore him.

"You called him three times?" Svetlana gasps. "Ilyusha, why?"

"I do not know," Ilya whines. "He is out without me. He is drunk without me. I miss him."

"He does not do that to you when you are out," Svetlana says. "You are so toxic."

"I know!" Ilya whines again.

Ilya tumbles out of the cab when they reach his building, and Svetlana follows him gracefully.

"He is not angry," Svetlana says over the top of her phone. "But he is worried."

"Tell him I am fine," Ilya says. "Tell him you are putting me to bed and leaving."

Svetlana shrugs, typing out the message and sending it.

"Stay, please," Ilya says, once they have made it into his apartment. "I cannot— I do not want to be alone."

"I need a shower," Svetlana says.

Ilya leads her to his ensuite bathroom, gives her a towel and a change of clothes, and then throws himself on his bed, digging his phone out of his pocket. There are a few notifications waiting for him.

Shane: I'm texting Svetlana.

Shane: Just let me know that you're okay and when you're home, please.

Shane: Love you.

Ilya: Are you still out?

Shane: Ugh yes. I'm never doing this again, so don't even ask. Fuck this.

Ilya smiles at his phone, and responds with a single red heart emoji. Shane sends one back, and Ilya smiles at it until another message comes through.

Shane: Is Svetlana gone?

Ilya: Yes.

He is not sure why he is lying, but it feels like the right thing to do. Shane probably would not be very happy to know that Ilya is about to beg Svetlana to sleep in his bed with him when she gets out of the shower. Shane would probably kill them both over it, actually.

Ilya: Text when you are home. Even if I am asleep.

Shane: Okay. Goodnight xx

Илья: Я тебя люблю.

Shane: I love you too xx

Svetlana comes out of the bathroom in Ilya's t-shirt, which fits her like a dress, and a pair of basketball shorts that she has tied so tight to fit her waist that they are almost folded in half. She sits criss-cross on the end of Ilya's bed, and flicks the bottom of his big toe until he sits up.

"Okay," Svetlana says. "Talk."

Ilya glares at her. *"I am tired."*

"Tough shit," Svetlana says. "Talk."

Ilya looks down, drawing his knees into his chest. *"I got an email. From Alexei."*

It should feel like a load off his shoulders to finally say it out loud, to tell someone. Ilya feels like shit.

If Svetlana is surprised, she does not show it. *"What did he want?"* she asks.

"To threaten me," Ilya says. "He called me names, said a bunch of shit. He asked how much money I am making—I expect he will contact me again to pay him off."

"He is such an asshole," Svetlana says.

"I have been out of my mind, Sveta," Ilya admits. "They know where I am, what I am doing, they can watch me live on TV— what if they come after me? What if they show up here? I do not think I can face them, Sveta, I—"

“Ilyusha,” Svetlana says, reaching out to rest her hand on Ilya’s knee. “Your brother is a fucking idiot. I mean it. He is mostly brain dead. I saw him last week, he could do nothing to you.”

Ilya’s heart stops beating. *“You saw him?”*

“Yes, Ilya,” Svetlana rolls her eyes. “I was home for Christmas. He also lives in Moscow. I did not speak to him, but you know my father still speaks to your father.”

Ilya feels the world shift on its axis. It never occurred to him that he has been one degree of separation from Moscow now that Svetlana is in his life again. Svetlana was in a room with his father and brother last week, and now she is in Ilya’s bed. It makes Papa and Alexei feel smaller in Ilya’s mind; they are just people, after all, not the massive, oppressive dark cloud Ilya has made them out to be.

Still, he feels like he cannot breathe, unable to meet Svetlana’s eyes.

“Come,” Svetlana says, shifting up the bed to draw Ilya into her arms. “Sleep. You are drunk, and it is late.”

Ilya curls up in her arms, but he does not close his eyes, staring at the wall while Svetlana cards her fingers through his hair.

“You are safe, Ilyusha,” Svetlana breathes. “Shane loves you, he is not mad at you. Your lovely mother is safe at home. I am here with you. Everything is okay.”

Ilya closes his eyes, but sleep does not come easily.

Chapter 13

Two weeks later – Boston, Massachusetts

“Hollander,” Hayden says, clapping a hand on Shane’s back. “You good?”

“Yeah, good,” Shane says, offering Hayden a tight smile.

“Hollander!” JJ shouts, jostling Shane by his shoulders. “If Rozanov fucks you tonight, I am going to fuck him back!”

Shane turns to look at JJ, eyes wide.

“Uh, I think you mean fucks *with* him,” Hayden laughs.

“I said what I said,” JJ shrugs, and turns back to his cubby.

It is their second to last regular matchup against the Bears for the season, and their last game in Boston. Shane has been fretting about this game even more than usual; he hasn’t seen Ilya since the tense week they spent together at Christmas, when Ilya acted for a week straight like Shane couldn’t tell that Ilya was keeping something from him. Between that, and all of the weird phone calls from that night a few weeks ago, Shane can’t help but feel like they’re reaching a point of no return, like the ice they are on is so thin it’s a wonder they haven’t fallen through yet, and physics is catching up.

Ilya has apologized for most of it, but he has not made any effort toward lasting change. They are arguing more than ever, lately, like Ilya *wants* Shane to be angry with him, but Shane can’t find it in himself. He knows Ilya is hurting, but if Ilya can’t communicate with him about it, Shane isn’t sure how much longer he can endure being the outlet for Ilya’s discomfort.

Ilya does not look at him throughout the entire game, as if he is not even there, besides one particularly rough shove between plays, and a rather uninspired chirp of, “you are playing like shit tonight, Hollander.”

Shane is playing like shit, is the thing. The Voyageurs are going to lose this game because of it, and Shane can’t even find it in himself to care, because all he can think about is being alone with Ilya in his apartment tonight, having to pretend he’s okay with all of this, having to smile and nod and act like he doesn’t want to throw himself out the penthouse window because he doesn’t understand Ilya and Ilya will not help him.

He is shaking by the time he makes it to the showers after the game. A couple of the other players notice, offer him words of encouragement, but he is not upset about losing the game. He cannot tell anyone what he is upset about, and that makes it even worse; he shrugs and

nods along to his teammates' encouragement, but he cannot hear a word they are saying, not over the roaring of blood in his ears.

Unfortunately, the only thing Shane wants is for Ilya to be here with him now. Ilya would pull him into a quiet space, give him time to breathe, and then wrap him in his arms and squeeze until the buzzing in Shane's bones has stopped. Though, right now, Shane is not sure Ilya would even notice Shane's mental state, let alone do anything to help him through it. Lately, even when Ilya is with him, it's like he isn't, like he left one day and was replaced with some crueler, colder, careless version.

Ilya claims it is an act, for the fans, for the hockey, but he has become downright *mean* since moving to Boston. His usual teasing, which Shane has grown to love since they were small, has transformed into something ugly, and it puts Shane on edge, makes him feel like he can never fully put his guard down around Ilya anymore. It's exhausting.

They are going to fight tonight. Shane has already decided. If he has to pin Ilya down and scream until Ilya tells him what's wrong, then that's what he'll do. And if Ilya still won't talk to him, well, Shane doesn't know what happens then.

He goes back to the hotel with the team, changes out of his suit in the room he's sharing with Hayden, pulls on his comfiest clothes and brushes his teeth—he isn't sure why, he just isn't ready to go yet, isn't ready to face Ilya.

"Come out with us tonight," Hayden says, when Shane leaves the bathroom.

"Sorry, I can't," Shane says, pulling his sneakers on.

"Why? Got a hot date?" Hayden teases.

"I'm hanging out with Ilya," Shane mutters.

"Oh," Hayden says, his face pinching up. "Got it. Ugh, it's still so weird that you guys are actually friends."

"Yeah," Shane says distantly. "I don't know."

"Well, have fun, I guess," Hayden says. "I might be out late."

"Yeah, same," Shane says. "Might just crash there. Maybe not. I don't know."

"Okay, well," Hayden gives him a look. "Bye."

Shane nods and turns to leave, walking down the hotel hallway like he is walking to his death. His hotel is on the opposite side of the city from Ilya's apartment, but he almost feels like walking the whole way there, anyway, just to give himself a little more time. He gets a cab, in the end, because it is ridiculous to walk all the way across Boston at this hour, and he doesn't need to give Ilya anything else to give him shit about tonight.

He feels out of his mind by the time he makes it to Ilya's neighborhood. The cab drops him off outside a bar down the street, and Shane walks the rest of the way, forcing himself to not

hold his breath while he rings the bell for Ilya's penthouse.

Ilya checks himself in the mirror one more time before Shane gets to his door, making sure his wet hair is perfectly smoothed away from his face, his bare chest still reddened from the second shower he took after getting home from the Garden. He has a lot to make up for tonight, he knows that, and he wants it to be perfect, wants to get Shane just the right amount of riled up for Ilya to completely ruin him, and then he wants to spend the rest of the night putting him back together and making sure that Shane knows how loved he really is. He needs Shane to see that it is just a game, an act— foreplay, at the very least.

He waits a few seconds when Shane knocks at the door. Not too long, but long enough that Shane will be starting to get annoyed. He rolls his shoulders back and pastes on his sexiest smirk, pulling the door open to find Shane already glaring at him in the hallway.

They stare at each other, wordlessly, for a moment. Shane already seems riled up, and Ilya did not even have to do or say anything yet. This is going to be easy.

"Hi," Shane says eventually, irritated. "Can I come in, or should I just go back to the hotel?"

Ilya grins, stepping aside to let Shane in. Shane crosses the threshold and then stops, turning to glare at Ilya from a new angle.

"Terrible game," Ilya says, pushing the door closed. "For you, anyway."

Shane breathes sharply and turns away, marching to Ilya's bedroom. Ilya follows with little urgency, leaning against the door frame to watch Shane cross to the other side of the bed, the side Ilya does not sleep on.

"Your place is a mess," Shane says, kicking a few discarded articles of clothing out his way. "Don't you have a cleaning service?"

"Just for kitchen and bathrooms," Ilya says. "I do not like them snooping around my bedroom."

Shane does not seem to hear him, eyes stuck on something on the floor. Ilya quirks an eyebrow at him, and Shane bends at the waist, coming back with a black sequin dress pinched between his thumb and forefinger. "Uh?"

Fuck. "Is Sveta's," Ilya says quickly, crossing the room to take the dress from Shane. He tosses it on top of the dresser, if only to get it away from Shane, and at Shane's continued glaring, Ilya adds, "she stayed over one night after the club."

"In your bed?" Shane asks.

“No,” Ilya lies. “She just showered.”

“The guest room has a shower,” Shane says, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Yeah, but mine is nicer,” Ilya says. “And there is nothing in the other shower to use.”

Shane nods, but he does not meet Ilya’s eye. He bends again and picks up one of Ilya’s shirts, folding it quickly and neatly. This is not off to a good start. Shane is pissed off, but not in the fun way, not in the way Ilya can work with.

“Come on, Hollander,” Ilya says, leaning back against the dresser. “Did you come over here to clean my apartment, or to get fucked?”

Shane swallows hard. “I think we should talk.”

No. Ilya cannot do talking. He can do fucking, he can do bickering, he can even do fighting, but he cannot do talking.

“I think we should fuck,” he says easily.

“Jesus Christ,” Shane mutters. “Do you ever take a fucking break?”

“Mm, no,” Ilya grins.

“Can you? For a fucking second?”

“Mm,” Ilya hums again. “No.”

Shane huffs, picks up another shirt, and then abandons folding it, crumpling it into a ball and throwing it back on the floor. “Do you even like me anymore?” Shane asks, his voice rough, but not broken.

Ilya could proceed in two ways: he could cave, give Shane the reassurance he seems to be seeking, kiss him and cuddle him and wait to be yelled at again for being closed off and avoidant about what has been wrong with him lately, or he could keep pushing, wait for Shane to snap, fuck the brains out of him, and deal with the rest of it after.

He chooses the latter.

“Less and less every minute you do not come over here and suck my dick,” Ilya says, raising his eyebrows expectantly.

It is not the right choice.

“Oh, fuck you, Ilya,” Shane spits. “You are unbelievable.”

Ilya smiles, shrugging one shoulder. He pushes himself up off the dresser and stalks toward Shane, walking him back against the wall with a hand on his stomach. Shane’s back hits the wall, and the world crumbles apart.

He notices the tears in Shane's eyes at the exact same moment that Shane shoves him away, both hands on Ilya's chest, so hard that Ilya stumbles back.

"Shane," he says, but Shane is already shouting over him.

"Fuck you!" Shane's voice is breaking now, really breaking, and the first few tears spill over his cheeks. "I think—"

"Shane," Ilya breathes.

"I think I fucking hate you."

Ilya blinks. The world drains away from him. All that exists, for a split second, are the tears on Shane's cheeks, the sound of Shane's ragged breathing, and the fissures in Ilya's heart finally overwhelming the weak, poisoned organ.

"Please," Ilya says. His mouth is so dry, his voice almost gets stuck in his throat. "Do not say that."

"I do," Shane spits. "I don't fucking know who you are anymore," he says. "You've beyond changed— you've fucking turned into the worst person I know."

"Shane," Ilya whimpers.

"Fuck you," Shane says, shoving past him and storming out of the room.

Ilya follows without making the decision to, his feet carrying him after Shane like they are hardwired to follow him wherever he goes. He cannot leave. Not like this. Fuck. Fuck this. This cannot be happening.

Shane makes it all the way to the front door, but Ilya is on his heels, reaching around Shane to hold the door closed when Shane tries to open it. He inadvertently cages Shane in, and Shane turns to glare at him again.

"Please," Ilya says, tears budding in his own eyes. "Please, do not leave. We can talk. Do not leave. Shane, do not leave me."

"I can't," Shane cries. "I can't do this, Ilya. I can't—"

"*Please*," Ilya sobs.

"I'm done," Shane says. "I have been fucking *dying*, Ilya. You've become a fucking monster."

He is not wrong. Ilya cannot even argue with him. In retrospect, it is a wonder Shane made it this long. Ilya has been taking things too far for a long time, expecting too much of Shane without giving anything in return— all of Shane's patience, all of Shane's forgiveness, all of Shane's love, Ilya thought it was unconditional, and maybe it could have been, if it was not entirely unreciprocated.

“I am sorry,” Ilya says, reaching for Shane’s face. Shane bats him away. “I am sorry, Shane. Shane—”

“No you’re not,” Shane says.

“I am,” Ilya says. “Shane.”

“You just want to get your dick wet,” Shane spits. “That’s all you care about anymore. We meet up, we don’t talk, you fuck me, I beg you for *anything*, any ounce of yourself, you give me nothing, we go about our lives. I’m done, Ilya.”

“Shane,” Ilya says.

“Let go of me,” Shane says firmly.

Ilya realizes his arms have closed around Shane, and he tries to let go, but his body will not let him. “Please,” he says again.

Shane shoves him. Ilya stumbles back, and then rushes forward again. Shane rips the door open before Ilya can get to him, and then he runs, like Ilya is going to hurt him. Like Ilya has already hurt him.

The door slams in Ilya’s face, and then there is silence. Ilya sinks to his knees, dropping his forehead against the door. He sobs so hard his throat twinges, clawing at the door like he can scratch his way through it to get to Shane.

This cannot be happening. This cannot be real.

He melts, bit by bit, until he is fully on the floor, pressing his face into the hardwood so hard it hurts. He cries until he cannot breathe, and then some, and only picks himself up to crawl to the bathroom and heave over the toilet. He stays there, after, curled up against the side of the bathtub, and replays in his mind the past five months, the past year and a half, the past eight years. Shane is the best thing that has ever happened to him. Shane is the best thing that ever will happen to him. Hockey, the Bears, Boston, Ottawa, Lanaudière, all of the best things in Ilya’s life, everything he has is because of Shane, and all pale in comparison to Shane. Ilya will never smile again. He will never laugh, he will never love, he will die. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but this will kill him, and he will let it, because he deserves it. He deserves all of it.

He makes it to his bed somehow, at some point, curls up in the center of it, and cries until his pillow is soaked through. He should call his mother, Svetlana, Yuna, someone, anyone, but he does not deserve comfort, he does not deserve gentle words or a pat on the head. He deserves this, to be alone, rotting away in his bed, unloved and unlovable, a coward, a pathetic piece of shit, a loser.

Maybe Alexei was right about him all along.

Shane walks all the way back to the hotel. It takes the better part of an hour, but Boston isn't that big, and there aren't too many people out and about at this hour on a Wednesday. He keeps his hood up, anyway; the cold still sinks deep into his bones, easing some of the fire coursing through him. By the time he gets back to the hotel, his shaking body is due mostly to the late January chill in the air, and he is numb, inside and out, completely unfeeling, unthinking.

Hayden is still out with the other guys. Shane has the room to himself. He locks the bathroom door, strips out of his clothes, and turns the shower on as hot as it will go. It hurts like he is being burned alive when he steps inside, scorching hot water meeting his frozen skin, but at least he can feel it. At least he can still feel anything.

He just broke up with Ilya. He just fucking *broke up with Ilya*.

He stares at the shower wall for some amount of time. He's not sure how long. He's not sure of anything.

He just broke up with Ilya.

He gets out of the shower, towels himself off, gets dressed in his sleep clothes, falls into bed.

He just broke up with Ilya.

He should call his mom. He should call Ilya's mom. He should call Svetlana. He should call Ilya. He cannot call Ilya.

He just fucking broke up with Ilya.

He is still staring at the ceiling when Hayden comes back to the room, several hours after midnight. He closes his eyes, pretends to be asleep. Hayden makes enough noise to wake the entire floor, but Shane continues pretending, and eventually Hayden falls into his bed and begins snoring immediately.

In the morning, they all convene in the hotel lobby. They all get on the bus and drive to the airport. They all fly to Philadelphia.

No one knows that he broke up with Ilya last night.

"Hey, man," Hayden says, nudging Shane with his elbow. He's wearing sunglasses on the plane, cradling a bottle of Gatorade to his chest like it is his child. "You good?"

"Mhm," Shane hums.

No one can know that he broke up with Ilya last night.

He turns his brain off as they exit the plane, and does not speak to anyone for the rest of the day. He does not score a single goal against Philadelphia that night, but Montréal still pulls

off a win. He shares a room with JJ that night, wakes up, flies to Florida. He thinks about nothing, processes nothing, feels nothing.

He knows, somewhere deep within himself, in some inaccessible cavern, that he fucked up. He was anxious, overstimulated, he acted on impulse. But... maybe this is a good thing. Maybe it will be a wake up call for Ilya, at the very least. He will call any minute now, apologize, and everything will go back to normal. Right?

Wrong. This is all wrong. Ilya enters his third day of staring at the wall beside his bed; he has not slept, has not eaten, has not showered since Shane left. He does not even know where his phone is, let alone if anyone has tried to contact him. He missed practice yesterday. He will miss his flight to Toronto later this morning, and the game tonight. He does not think of any of this. He only thinks of Shane.

I have been fucking dying. Ilya knew that. He knew, and he did nothing. He did worse than nothing. *You've become a fucking monster.*

If Ilya had the energy or the wherewithal to go find his phone, he would call Shane. Shane would not answer. Ilya would call one hundred times, one thousand, and leave a voicemail every time, apologize until his voice gave out. And when Shane inevitably blocked his number to stop him from calling, Ilya would write to him. Emails, letters, billboards, skywriters. He would call the press, ask them to put him on the six o'clock news, broadcast his apologies to the whole continent. He would fly to Montréal and be in Shane's apartment when Shane gets home from wherever he is now, if only for Shane to push him around again, yell at him, say more words that will haunt Ilya until the day he dies.

The sun has been up for a few hours when someone begins pounding on his front door. Ilya ignores it, stuffs his head under his pillow, but he jumps and startles upright when the pillow is ripped from him.

"Oh, thank fuck," Svetlana sighs, sitting down heavily on the edge of his bed. *"I thought you were dead. Jesus fucking Christ, Ilya."*

Ilya snatches his pillow back, turns over and presses his face into it.

"What is wrong with you?" Svetlana asks, poking his back. *"Are you sick?"*

Ilya does not answer her. He does not move at all.

"Ilya?" Svetlana asks, her voice a little softer, and a lot more concerned. *"Ilyusha?"*

Ilya sobs into his pillow.

"Oh, Ilyusha," Svetlana gasps, pushing at his shoulder until he turns over. Ilya sobs again, and Svetlana hurriedly pulls him into her lap. *"Hush. What happened?"*

"My life is over," Ilya cries, digging his face into Svetlana's slender thigh. She is so boney. Shane is so solid and dense with muscle. Ilya wants him. Ilya wants him so bad it breaks his heart all over again.

Svetlana cards her fingers through his hair, but it feels so wrong that Ilya jerks away unintentionally. Svetlana gasps again, grabbing his face to force him to look at her.

"Ilyusha," she says. *"What is going on?"*

"My Shane," Ilya sniffles, and then sobs again. *"He left."*

Svetlana blinks. *"Yes,"* she frowns. *"He is playing tonight in Tampa."*

"He left me," Ilya says through his teeth. *"He hates me. He never wants to see me again."*

It is painfully quiet for some time. *"What?"* she asks eventually; Svetlana is the smartest person Ilya has ever known. She is always three steps ahead of everyone, knows the answer to every question, every situation, every problem. This blindsides her. Ilya whimpers.

"I went too far," Ilya says miserably. *"I pushed too hard. I am awful, and he finally realized it."*

"No," Svetlana says. *"That is not true."*

"He ran away, Sveta," Ilya grits out. *"Literally. He ran like he was afraid of me."*

"Ilyusha..."

"He says I am a fucking monster," Ilya says. *"And he is right."*

"What did you do?" Svetlana asks.

"I have been so mean to him," Ilya says, with a fresh wave of tears. *"He was so scared, after the draft, that we would grow apart, the rivalry thing would come between us, and the distance, and the time apart. He was terrified. And I knew that. And I used it against him. I made all of his fears come true. Every single one. And I did it to protect him, to protect us, but he does not know that. He is hurt because I took it too far. I hurt him because I cannot love him the way he deserves."*

"You need to apologize," Svetlana says, dragging her long nails down his arm lightly. It feels nice. Ilya does not deserve nice, gentle touches. *"You need to make this right. You have to tell him what has been going on."*

"I cannot," Ilya says, *"because he is right. I am toxic. I am horrible. He is too good for me, and always has been, and I fucked it all up. He will never love me again."*

"Ilyusha," Svetlana breathes.

“You did not see him, Sveta,” Ilya whimpers. “He was so hateful.”

Svetlana shushes him, burying her perfect hand in his filthy hair again. Ilya’s eyes flutter closed, pushing out a few more tears.

“Your team is very worried about you,” she says. “They called your mother when you missed practice. She called me when she could not reach you. She is out of her mind.”

Ilya groans. *“I cannot face her.”*

“I will call her,” Svetlana says. “But you need to call her, too.”

Ilya crumbles back to a puddle of tears. *“Sveta,”* he cries.

“Sleep, Ilyusha,” Svetlana says, settling back against his headboard and pulling his head into her lap. She plays with his hair, trails her nails over the back of his neck and bare shoulders, and Ilya cries himself to sleep eventually.

While he sleeps, Svetlana calls his coaches to tell them he has the flu, calls his mother to let her know that he is alive but falling apart, and calls Shane, who does not answer.

Four days later – Montréal, Québec

Shane’s apartment is exactly as empty, quiet, and static as it always is when he finally arrives home, almost one full week since he walked out on Ilya.

All things considered, nothing has really been different for Shane, except for having to swallow all of the things he would normally tell Ilya on the phone at the end of each day, and dutifully ignoring every phone call he receives from Yuna, David, Irina, and Svetlana. He cannot face any of them, yet, because the second he does, this becomes real, and then he has to process it, accept it. It’s much easier to just keep living in some kind of purgatory state between life with Ilya and life post-Ilya.

He carries his bags to his bedroom, unpacks, sorts his dirty laundry and gets a load started. He stows his suitcase and his duffel away in the closet, pulls his phone out of his pocket, and sits down on the edge of his bed. There is a text from Hayden, another text from Hayden in a group chat with JJ, and nine missed calls from his mother from the past few hours. He locks his phone and places it face down on his bedside table, walking to the kitchen in a trance.

It is so quiet here. Ilya never really spent a lot of time here, in the grand scheme of things, but somehow everything reminds Shane of him, or rather, of his absence. There is a bag of chips in the pantry that Shane would never dream of touching, there’s most of a six-pack of Coke in

the fridge, there's a pair of Ilya's sneakers by the door that he forgot last time he was here, there's a photo of them as children framed on the wall, smiling and carefree, in their matching hockey uniforms.

Shane is shaking so badly he can barely keep himself standing. He should eat. He hasn't really eaten much in the past week; he grew accustomed, at some point, to only really eating with Ilya, whether in person or on the phone. It does not feel important when he is alone. Ilya always made it fun, less of a chore, with good food and good conversation and a charming smile to distract Shane from what he was putting in his body. Without Ilya, eating has felt like a truly unnecessary task.

He makes himself a protein shake, trembling like he is outside in the cold. His breathing is coming in short puffs, his chest tight, his vision swimming. Is he having a heart attack? No, he's just overhungry. He just needs some protein, maybe some water.

He forces himself to drink the entire shake in under a minute. He stands, hands braced on the kitchen island, and waits for it to fix him, grunting and whimpering as his body tries to accept it. In the end, it fails, and he rushes to the sink, vomiting up every ounce that he just put into his stomach.

Fuck. His head is pounding. He needs to sleep; he hasn't done a lot of that, either, this week. He is too wound up to sleep now, though, so he drags himself through the apartment to his spare bedroom, which he has turned into a makeshift gym.

He gets up on the stationary bike, puts his head down, and pedals as fast as he can. He makes it approximately five minutes before his vision starts to cloud over, his mind going dark.

He comes to on the floor, groaning as he sits up. Luckily, he fell away from the wall; he is not injured, just sore, and he picks himself up with great effort, holding onto the wall as he drags himself back to his bedroom. He is still shaking, worse now, and his head is throbbing, and his chest is so tight he could scream. He falls into bed, moaning and crying out, curling up on his side and waiting for it all to pass.

He drifts in and out of consciousness, but never really sleeps. When he is awake, his mind wanders, drifts back to Boston, back to that night, which he has not allowed himself to think about even once.

This is Ilya's fault. This is all Ilya's fault. Shane is broken, cannot manage simple survival tasks like eating and sleeping. He is ruined, thoroughly and completely, and to make matters worse, all he can think to do now that he is alone and otherwise unoccupied, is call Ilya.

He cannot call Ilya. Ilya did this to him. Ilya was his whole world, Shane would have done anything to help him, to fix whatever was wrong with him. But Ilya didn't want that. Ilya didn't want to let him in. Ilya pushed him away, kept pushing until Shane couldn't take it anymore, until Shane broke under the pressure. Maybe Shane should have tried harder, should have pushed back more. He should have asked more questions, started more fights, wore Ilya down until Ilya deemed him worthy of talking to about anything except sex and hockey. More than anything, Shane is disgusted with himself for not being good enough, for

being someone Ilya had to take his frustrations out on rather than trusting him enough to allow Shane to help him through it.

When Shane has been home for a little over two hours, he hears the faint sound of a key in his front door. The door opens quietly, but Shane does not panic; he can tell by the gait of the careful footsteps coming through the living room and down the hallway that it is only Yuna. He closes his eyes, braces for impact, and his bedroom door cracks open.

“Shane?”

Shane does not answer, presses his face into his pillow, and holds his breath.

“Oh, honey.”

Shane sobs, curling tighter into himself. Yuna is there in a heartbeat, stroking his hair, down his back, peppering kisses to his head and shoulder and the side of his face. Shane cries so hard he starts to black out again, and Yuna holds him, squeezing just tight enough, but still, it takes Shane the better part of half an hour to calm down.

He is barely inside of his own body and mind when he turns to look at Yuna over his shoulder. “How did you know?” he asks miserably.

“You’ve been ignoring everyone’s calls for a week,” Yuna says. “And so has— *he*. Irina finally called me the other day, and told me what happened, and I just... my god, Shane, you’ve been dealing with this all on your own?”

“He told Irina?” he asks.

“Svetlana called her,” Yuna says, wincing. Shane clenches his jaw. “None of us know... anything. Shane, what happened?”

Shane puts his head back down, closing his eyes tight.

“Shane?”

“He got so mean, mom,” Shane breathes. “He’s so mean, and so awful, and I can’t fucking take it anymore.”

“Mean?” Yuna asks.

“Yes,” Shane says through his teeth. “He is a monster. I just wanted to talk to him, and he kept belittling me, and ignoring me, and being an asshole, and I freaked out and he just sat there and stared at me.”

Yuna tuts, petting at his hair. “Honey...”

“He didn’t even apologize until I was leaving,” Shane says, voice shaking. “He didn’t even think to say sorry until he was trying to force the door closed to keep me in the apartment, and he didn’t even mean it, I don’t think.”

“Jesus,” Yuna mutters.

“I think I hate him, Mom,” Shane says, and promptly dissolves into tears again. “I hate him, I fucking hate him so much.”

Yuna holds him, shushing him gently until Shane gags, vision swimming again.

“Okay,” Yuna says, sitting up and forcing Shane up with her. Shane sways dangerously, and Yuna carefully props him up against the headboard. “I’m going to make you something to eat, and then you’re going to sleep, and when you wake up, we can talk about it,” she says, watching Shane’s face closely. “Okay?”

“Okay,” Shane mutters, pulling his knees into his chest and burying his face between them as Yuna climbs off the bed and hurries to the kitchen.

Some time passes, it’s hard to say for sure how much, but Yuna returns with a plate of crackers, a banana, and a ginger ale. She sits with him, rubs his back while he chokes down the banana, half of the crackers, and a few sips of ginger ale. He gags and heaves and hiccups and cries, but he manages to keep it all down, and then Yuna takes his leftovers away and guides him back down to his pillow. She tucks him in, kisses his head, and smooths his hair out of his face.

“I’ll be in the living room,” she whispers, offering him a small smile. “Sleep, honey. You’ll be okay.”

Shane is crying again before she’s even left the room, but quietly this time, resigned. He feels sad all the way down to his bones, deeply and consumptively. He wants to sleep. He wants to scream. He wants his Ilya back.

He wants his Ilya back. Fuck. He wants Ilya more than he’s ever wanted anything in his life, wants him to curl up behind him, kiss behind his ear and whisper apologies until Shane believes them, or until Ilya means them, whichever happens first.

The next day – Boston, Massachusetts

“Let’s go, Roz!”

Ilya forces a smile, bowing his head to the chorus of cheers when he enters the locker room. He holds his hands up bashfully, fielding a few high fives and pats on the back as he makes his way to his cubby.

“Hell of a flu, huh, brother?” Marlow says, punching lightly at Ilya’s upper arm. “Took you down for a whole week.”

“Yes,” Ilya nods, not looking up from his cubby. “I thought I was dying.” It is not a lie.

“Glad you’re back, man,” Marlow says. “Although, you sure you’re good to be here? Don’t take this the wrong way, but you look like shit.”

Ilya knows what he looks like. He knows he is gaunt, his skin pale and dry, face swollen. He has never needed a haircut so desperately in his life, and his stomach is still in shambles with grief. Svetlana personally dragged him out of his apartment for practice today, though, said he cannot spend another day moping in bed, so here he is.

“I will make it,” Ilya says. *Or so I am told.*

As soon as his skates touch the ice, everything else goes away. He is no longer Ilya from Ottawa, who is in love with Shane Hollander and always will be. He is Rozanov, number 81, a Boston Bear, the Russian beast. He releases every bit of pent up anger during practice, beats the hell out of the ice, the puck, even some of his teammates. He is met with cheers and encouragement which grow in volume with each new degree of cruelty he reaches, and it helps, in some sick, twisted way.

He does not need to be Ilya. He has not been Ilya for a long time; he lost Shane over it already, he might as well commit to this, to Rozanov, to the Bears, to Boston. If this is all he has left, he will be exactly who he needs to be to keep it.

He carries on like that through their home game the following night, and brings it along with him on the road trip that takes him out of Boston for two weeks. It feels good to take his frustrations out on other players from other teams, feels good to sit and stew in the penalty box, feels good to be awarded a game misconduct and still be treated like a hero by his loyal fans. He is not a hero, he is a monster, but he can pretend, they can all pretend.

He is a legend in the locker room after every single game. He always comes out with more goals than penalties, always plays a key part in helping his team win. His teammates spoil him, take him out after every game, get him drunk and celebrate him as if he is their captain, as if he is the best thing that ever happened to them. It is addictive, the praise, the honor, the adoration. Maybe he does not need Shane, after all. Maybe all he needs is this. Maybe this is who he was always meant to be.

It is in a hotel room in New Jersey that reality creeps back in. They have a stupidly early flight in the morning, so there is no night out, and Marlow is already snoring loudly in the bed beside him when Ilya, restless and too tired to sleep, checks his phone to find an email notification waiting for him.

From: Alexei Rozanov

Subject: ОТВЕЧАТЬ

You think you are tough now, yes? You think you play hockey like a Russian on an American team and it makes you good enough? You are nothing. You play like shit. It is good you play in America. Russia would never have you. You do not deserve this fame and respect, nor the money.

I want \$20,000 or I go to the press. I tell them that you are pathetic little baby, that you ran away and abandoned your family because you are too weak to be among us. You have one month. Do not test me.

Do you know your address is public information on the internet? I wonder how the view of the harbor is from your penthouse? There are direct flights from Moscow to Boston. I think you and Mama would love to see us, yes?

Ilya's blood is ice in his veins, but by the time he reaches the end of the email, where Alexei has attached his bank information, he feels feverish, burning all over. How fucking *dare* Alexei be so brazen. Ilya had been expecting threats from him, and had honestly been expecting worse than this, but seeing it now, he is so angry he could book a flight to Moscow just to take care of it all in person himself.

He deletes the email, rolls over, and stares at the wall. Mama is safe. She is in Ottawa, and Alexei does not know that, or he would have said. Alexei assumes she is in Boston, with him. He will have to see about taking his address down from wherever it is listed on the internet, but it is too late for that now. He will give a picture of Alexei to his doorman when he gets home, ensure that Alexei will be stopped if he ever decides he is stupid enough to try and show up there.

He does not sleep a wink. He gets out of bed in the morning, flies to Nashville with his team, beats the Nashville team to a bloody pulp, and is celebrated like a king in the locker room. He is so tired.

He is dragged to Broadway after the game. He loves Broadway; Carmichael gives him a cowboy hat, which turns him into a hot commodity in Honky Tonk Central, and before long, he is too drunk to care when a hand slides down his back. Ilya straightens up, turning to lock eyes with a beautiful, scantily clad woman with a sultry grin on her face.

"Hi, cowboy," she says, batting her eyelashes at him.

Ilya is no stranger to being approached by women. He has no problem brushing them off, refusing photos lest they get back to Shane, but— but Shane is not his anymore. Ilya is not Shane's. Ilya can do whatever he wants. Does he want this?

"Hi," he says, watching the woman sweep her eyes over his body. He is in a tight pair of jeans and a tank top, his jacket long lost to the wilderness of Broadway. He looks good. The woman agrees.

"Wanna get a better view?" the woman says. Ilya realizes he is staring at her chest. It is a good chest, but mostly it is right there, and he has trouble dragging his eyes back up to her face. "I have a hotel room."

Oh. Well, that's— probably a good idea. Ilya was planning to jerk off in the shower later in the hotel room he is sharing with Carmichael, but this beautiful woman's hotel room is probably a much better place to get off. With this woman. Who is not Shane. Ilya feels dizzy.

“Okay,” he says. The woman takes his hand, leads him away from the bar, and out onto the busy street.

Ilya does not get her name. He does not even speak as he is led through a hotel lobby and into an elevator, watching over the woman’s shoulder as her chest jiggles while she walks. Her boobs are enormous, her waist tiny, her hair long and blonde and wavy like she has just come from the beach. She is different from Shane in every single way. Ilya feels absolutely nothing beyond the anticipation of getting off. She seems to feel the same way.

She pushes him down on the bed in her hotel room, pulls her shirt off over her head, and crawls on top of him. Ilya watches, mesmerized, as she works open the button on his jeans; he is already half hard just from watching her walk, but she wastes no time in getting him the rest of the way there.

It is nothing like it is with Shane. When he is with Shane, he spends the whole event pinching himself, breathing deep, steadying breaths, trying to make it last. He makes this woman come twice without even trying, before he has even gotten close. It is good, it is really good, to watch her face as she falls apart, to know that Ilya is the one making her feel so good, to know that Ilya is still capable of making people feel good, to know that he is capable of making people feel things other than pain and suffering.

She kicks him out after, as if he did not just give her the time of her life. Ilya stands in the hallway, hat askew on his head, for quite some time, trying to remember which way to the elevator. He feels absolutely disgusting by the time he makes it to the lobby, and even worse when he gets back to his own hotel. He felt so good in that bed, finally felt a little like himself again, but the second that door closed in his face, he was right back to where he was the last time a door slammed in his face, when Shane was the one slamming it.

They fly to Columbus in the morning, wipe the ice with them, and go out in search of a party afterward. Columbus is no Nashville, that is for sure, but Ilya leaves the bar within the first hour with the first girl who approaches him. He is on top of the world for about forty-five minutes, and then it all comes crashing down around him again in a different hotel hallway. He goes back to the bar. He has a few more drinks. He finds another girl, follows her back to her apartment like a dog. He is a king. He is kicked out. He is a fucking loser.

It is a vicious cycle.

He remembers, as he is laying in his bed in a hotel room in Columbus well after four in the morning, when his mother sat him down and asked him to promise to tell her if he ever felt like this. Like he needed a way out. Like the tiny hollow in his heart had grown big enough to swallow him whole. Like he would never be okay again.

He cannot tell her, just like he cannot admit to her that Shane has left him. Svetlana has spoken with her, Ilya knows that, but he does not know how much Svetlana told her, how much Irina knows. Ilya is so ashamed, so completely and utterly humiliated, he cannot bear the thought of having to tell her that he fucked up so badly that he thinks he should die over it.

The girls, though. The girls help. The girls help now like they did back before Shane was his, when Ilya wanted him as badly as he does now, and could not have him, just like he cannot have him now. He finds a girl in every city, sometimes two, and it helps, while it lasts. The relief is fleeting, momentary, but real all the same. It is unsustainable, but so is everything else, so he chooses not to think too much about it, to take each day, each city, each girl as they come, and not to think too hard about the rest.

March, 2011 – Montréal, Québec

Shane's hands shake while he meticulously measures out his protein powder, dumping a little on the counter in the process of tipping it into the blender bottle. He curses at himself, wipes it up, and very carefully measures out the amount he lost. He braces himself on the counter while the blender screeches and grinds so loud it hurts his ears, and as soon as his smoothie is done, he takes a very delicate sip of it, closing his eyes as it slides down his throat, imagining he can feel the nutrition seeping into his body.

He's been on this insane performance diet for a little over two weeks now. He has lost most of his baby fat, replaced it with lean, solid muscle, and he is getting stronger every day. He feels like absolute shit, and it's damn near impossible to find anything to eat on road trips, but he's been playing well, so it's all worth it. He has been training harder than ever, giving absolutely everything he has to his game, and he is nothing short of a god in Montréal these days, quite possibly the most beloved member of the team, despite having not even played a full season yet.

It's good to be loved. It's good to feel worthy of love, even if he doesn't always believe that he is. He is Montréal's golden boy, everyone's favorite player, but then he comes home to this apartment, this empty, silent apartment, and he is so lonely, so sad, so exhausted that he doesn't know what to do with all of it.

He has been dreading tonight's game since the last time he was in Boston, a month and a half ago, but at least he is in Montréal this time, can just come home afterwards, lock himself in this beautiful prison without having to dodge Hayden in a hotel room, and lick his wounds. He doesn't doubt that there will be wounds.

At least he is eating— well, drinking— before this game; he almost went down on the ice last week in Ottawa, and earned himself a ration of shit from his mother about it. He will be strong for this game. He will be strong enough to play, that is. He is not yet sure whether or not he will be strong enough to look Ilya in the eyes, to take a face-off against him, to take a check from him without just dissolving into nothing right there on the ice.

He cannot finish his protein shake. He gets almost all of it down, but he starts gagging with each sip toward the end, and the last thing he needs is to throw up everything he did manage to get down, so he decides to cut his losses and dump the rest into the sink. He will be fine, he's played with less in his system than this, and it's probably better to quit while he's ahead, anyway, lest he risk blowing chunks out on the ice.

His nerves only amplify as he heads to the arena, but as soon as he gets on the ice, it all fades away. He plays the best hockey of his life, quite possibly, focused on nothing but the game, not the crowd, not the other team, and certainly not one player in particular. Shane doesn't even know if he's here, he has not laid eyes on him even once because he hasn't even considered letting himself try.

Montréal wins by a fucking landslide. Shane finishes the game with a hat trick and four assists; he participated in every single goal scored tonight, and he is dogpiled by his team when the final buzzer sounds.

It isn't until he's being helped up off the ice after, laughing dully, that he looks up and finally catches sight of Ilya on the visitor's bench. He looks awful, and Shane feels the smile slide off his face, eyes stuck on Ilya.

Ilya is staring somewhere to Shane's right, probably unable to watch Shane be celebrated like this. That's fair enough. It wasn't even two months ago that Shane shattered Ilya's heart so thoroughly that Ilya was not seen or heard from for a week after— he heard about that from his mother well after the fact, but it has been haunting him ever since Yuna told him that, as of last week, Irina still hadn't even talked to Ilya personally.

Shane cannot take his eyes off of him. Ilya is gaunt and pale, his eyes sunken and heavy. He looks like he has not slept in ages, and his jaw is set tight, angry, anxious. Shane is still staring when Ilya's eyes eventually flicker over to him, cold, hard, and hateful.

Shane feels bile rise in his throat. He whimpers out loud, looking down quickly, grateful for the fact that his teammates are still surrounding him, mostly shrouding him from the crowd and the cameras. Someone claps a hand on his back and he turns, finding Hayden grinning at him, but his eyes are concerned.

"You all good, buddy?" Hayden asks.

"Yeah, just hiccuped weird," Shane lies. "Sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry," Hayden laughs, slapping his back again before skating away.

Shane looks back over at Ilya, finding his back, instead, *Rozanov 81*, while Ilya pushes through his teammates to get off the bench and disappear into the tunnel.

Yes. Yes he does have to be sorry.

The team insists that Shane join them for a night out after the game— Shane would like nothing more than to go home and sob into his pillow for the rest of the night, but it means a lot to the other guys to be able to buy Shane a couple of drinks that he doesn't want, so he obliges out of the kindness of his heart.

One hour. He can survive one hour of this. He can have a drink and force himself to smile and laugh with his teammates, and then he can slip out the door and go home and hide from the world. The problem is, he's only had most of a protein shake today; his first drink hits him like a train, and he's too far gone after the first hour to notice when another drink is placed into his hand, and he's laughing like he's having the time of his life, but he's hoping his teammates can't tell what's really going through his mind.

His eyes have been glued to the door since they got here. He is well aware of Ilya's extracurricular activities after games lately, he's seen the pictures of Ilya making out with gorgeous women in clubs, being led by gorgeous women out of bars, climbing into the backs of cabs with gorgeous women in every city he's been to recently. This is dangerous, this is unmarked territory, running into Ilya in a club. He doesn't know what he'll do, what Ilya will do, and now that Shane's been handed a third drink, he definitely cannot be held accountable for whatever his reaction will be if and when Ilya Rozanov slinks through that door.

It's hour two, drink four, when it finally happens. Shane feels like he's watching a movie rather than watching it play out in front of him. Ilya comes in alone, his eyes sweep the room, and then he makes his way through the crowd to the dancefloor. Shane watches him openly, throwing back the rest of his drink and setting the glass down a little too hard on the table he's sharing with Hayden, JJ, some of the other guys, and some girl Hayden met tonight.

"Hey, man," Hayden says, and Shane looks up. Oh. All eyes are on him. "You good?"

"Great," Shane says. Oh, god, he sounds drunk even to his own ears.

"Oh, shit," JJ says, following Shane's line of vision to the dance floor. "Rozanov."

Shane picks up his glass again, frowns when he finds it empty, and then reaches for JJ's instead. JJ protests, but Shane gulps down the rest of his drink, and then stands. "I'm going to the bar," he announces to the table.

"Atta boy, Hollander," JJ grins.

"—like, total enemies," Hayden is saying lowly to the girl on his lap. "They used to be friends, no one really knows what happened."

Shane turns on his heel and marches away, pushing his way rather gracelessly through the dancefloor to get to the bar. He doesn't make it very far before he freezes in his tracks— he'd know the curve of the back in front of him anywhere, even in the dark, the familiar hunch of the shoulders and slim waist, the muscles that ripple even under a t-shirt. Ilya is pressed up against some woman, kissing his way down her neck, arms wrapped around her with both hands on her tiny waist. Shane could be sick.

He doesn't think about it. He shoves forward, knocking his shoulder hard into Ilya's back, but he stumbles a little as he does it, and can't get away quick enough after. Ilya turns on him like a storm, grabbing him by one shoulder and raising his other hand like he's going to hit Shane in self-defense. Shane locks eyes with him, and Ilya startles away like he's been burned, both hands dropping to his sides.

Fuck this. Shane turns on his heel, marching a little further onto the dancefloor. Fuck this. Fuck him. He can do that, too, he can kiss a girl and take her home and sleep with her. Nevermind that he's gay. Nevermind that the only person he has ever been with in any capacity is Ilya. Nevermind. Fuck this.

It isn't terribly hard to find a girl interested in kissing him. All he has to do is make eye contact, smile, and she does the rest, moving against him like the music is within her, so natural and effortless and beautiful. Shane's hands rest stiffly against her hips, his body only swaying enough to accommodate her movements. This is fine. He can do this. Is Ilya watching?

"Come home with me," Shane murmurs into the girl's mouth. She pulls back, flashes an overexcited grin, and Shane determinedly doesn't think, grabbing her hand and pulling her toward the exit.

It happens in blurs and jumps. Shane manages to hail a cab, manages to survive the drive back to his apartment while this girl attaches herself to his neck, manages to get her upstairs, get his clothes off, and fall into bed. He doesn't manage a whole lot after that; after half an hour, the girl sits back on her knees, glaring at him.

"Are you, like, totally wasted?" she bites. "Or gay?"

"Uh," Shane says, his head swimming when he looks down at himself, completely soft and uninterested. "Wasted. Sorry."

"Whatever," the girl huffs, getting up and snatching her dress off the floor. She disappears into Shane's bathroom, and Shane drops his head back against the bed, willing himself to drop dead before she comes back.

It doesn't work. She emerges from the bathroom fully dressed, with a fresh coat of lipstick. "I'm going back to the club," she mutters. "Fucking Jackie, she's probably gonna actually get some with a hot hockey player tonight. I can't believe I'm in Shane Hollander's fucking apartment and he couldn't get it up." She's talking to herself, but Shane hears every word, up until she slams the door on the way out.

Well, this is probably very, very bad. Shane's mother is probably going to receive an email for an erectile dysfunction medication sponsorship tomorrow. The hockey world is going to have a field day with this.

He rolls on his side, presses his face into his pillow, and sobs until his throat hurts, until he can't breathe, until he has to scramble to his feet and run for the bathroom to be sick. He sleeps with his head on the toilet seat, completely naked, undoubtedly at rock bottom.

It is late. Very late. Ilya has been wandering Montréal all night long, but the sun will be up soon, and he is not even drunk.

He visited every goddamn club in Montréal tonight, twice. Shane Hollander is not known for his partying, but after a game like he played tonight, he was sure to be roped into going out for a few drinks with the team. Ilya searched high and low, just for a glimpse, just for a chance to run into Shane on neutral ground and, fuck, did that backfire.

He is not entirely sure what he was hoping would happen. Would he beg Shane to talk to him, take him back, love him again? Would he be awful to Shane, like he is so excellent at doing? Would Shane even speak to him, or would he just run away again, leave Ilya gasping for breath in his absence once again?

Of all the possible scenarios, Ilya never could have predicted having to come face to face with Shane like that, having to watch him storm away, having to watch him pick up a girl and lead her out of the building.

He did not follow them home, not exactly. He did not stay at the club very long; the entire Montréal team was glaring at him from the back booths, the girl he had been dancing with was just performing for her cuckold boyfriend, and Ilya could barely keep himself upright anyway, so he sulked out a few minutes after Shane left, and has been wandering Montréal on foot ever since. He did not mean to end up here, but here he is, across the street from Shane's building with tears drying on his cheeks and his phone clutched in his hand.

He cannot call Shane. Shane is in there with some girl, probably treating her so well, the way he used to treat Ilya. He will probably wake up early tomorrow, cook her breakfast, and in a few short months they will be married, pregnant, with a beautiful house outside of the city. Ilya should be happy for him. It will be a perfect life, exactly what Shane deserves. Shane deserves everything he wants in the world. Ilya wants him to have it.

More than anything, finally seeing Shane tonight, in person, for the first time since January, has only reinforced how deeply, completely fucked up everything is. This is *Shane*—Ilya's Shane, the Shane he has loved since he was a child, the Shane he has never spent more than half a summer away from. *Shane*.

He should not be here. He should call someone, get a ride back to his hotel, go to sleep, and pretend none of this ever happened. He will be so, so fucked if anyone spots him here.

He sits down hard on the front steps of the building opposite Shane's. He looks down at his phone, scrolling through his contacts until he finds the one he needs.

The phone only rings once. "*Ilyusha?*"

Ilya sobs into the phone, burying his face between his knees. *"Mama."*

"Oh, solnyshko," Irina sighs. *"Moy lyubimyy, Ilyusha..."*

"I do not know what to do, Mama," Ilya whimpers. *"Help. Help me, please."*

"Where are you, Ilyusha?" Irina asks. *"Is anyone there with you?"*

"I am at Shane's."

There is a moment's pause. *"Shane's?"*

"Yes," Ilya says miserably. He sits up, looking up at what he knows to be Shane's kitchen window. *"His apartment. I am across the street, just sitting here."*

"Oh, Ilyusha," Irina breathes. *"Does he know you are there?"*

"No," Ilya says. *"I should leave."*

"You should ring the bell," Irina counters.

Ilya blinks. *"What?"*

"Ring the bell," Irina repeats. *"Or call him. Let him know you are there. Talk to him, Ilyusha. Fix this."*

"I cannot fix it, Mama," Ilya says. *"He hates me."*

"He told you that?" Irina says doubtfully.

"Yes," Ilya bites. *"Several times."*

Irina gasps quietly. *"Ilya,"* she says. *"What happened?"*

"I was awful to him," Ilya says. *"I was horrible, and he did not deserve any of it, and he tried, he tried so hard, Mama, but I took it too far. I hurt him."*

Irina says nothing for a long, painful moment. *"You... hurt him?"*

"I broke his heart," Ilya says. *"I did not lay a finger on him, Mama. I swear. Not off the ice."*

Irina sighs a breath of relief. *"Call him, Ilya."*

"No," Ilya says. *"I do not deserve him."*

"But he deserves you," Irina says. *"He deserves for the boy he has loved all his life to show up for him, make an effort for him, fix it for him. He deserves you, Ilyusha. Your heart. Your soul."*

"I am not that boy!" Ilya raises his voice, for the first time in his life, at his mother. *"I am not him! I have changed and I do not know how to go back!"*

"Ilya," Irina says sharply.

"Sorry," Ilya says immediately. *"I am sorry, Mama. I do not know what to do."*

"You are out of control," Irina says. *"What has happened to you?"*

Ilya crumples forward into his own lap again, sobbing into the phone. *"I hate myself, Mama. I hate my life."*

Irina is silent.

"Mama?"

"I am sorry," Irina breathes. *"I thought— you were happy."*

"I was," Ilya sobs. *"But I— Mama, it hurts. Everything, since I moved to Boston, it hurts so much, it is so hard, Mama, I want to go back—"*

"You should come home," Irina says.

"I cannot," Ilya says. *"I worked so hard for this, we both did—"*

"But if you are miserable—"

"Mama, I cannot."

"Then fix it," Irina says. *"Call him. Talk to him. Fix it with him."*

"He does not want to talk to me, Mama," Ilya says. *"It is so late, and he is— not alone. He does not need me like I need him."*

"He is miserable, Ilyusha," Irina says. *"I have spoken to Yuna, she is— very worried."*

Ilya sits up straight. *"Why?"*

"Call him," Irina says again. *"In the morning, if not now. Fix it. Fix yourself. Get yourself together, figure it out. You are the only person who can do it."*

Ilya shakes his head, but he says, *"okay."*

"What are you going to do now?" she asks.

"I am going to call my captain," Ilya says, standing up from the steps and turning his back to Shane's apartment. *"I am going to get a ride back to my hotel, and go to sleep."*

"I love you, Ilyusha," Irina says. *"You are so, so loved. Your heart is so good, solnyshko."*

Ilya could be sick. He starts walking, putting some distance between himself and Shane's building. *"I love you, Mama."*

“Call me tomorrow,” Irina says. “And stop ignoring everyone’s calls. You are going to put your dear Mama into an early grave, Ilysuha.”

“Sorry, Mama,” Ilya says lowly. “I will call you in the morning.”

“Okay,” Irina says. “Good luck, moy lyubimyy.”

He walks for half an hour away from Shane’s apartment before he takes his phone back out, dialing his captain; it is nearly four in the morning, but he answers, only gives Ilya a little bit of a hard time, and sends a driver for him.

He is sharing a hotel room with a player he barely knows, some other European who hardly speaks any languages in common with Ilya. He only glares and grunts when Ilya lets himself into the room, and Ilya does his best to be absolutely silent as he changes and crawls into bed.

He does not sleep, spends the whole night staring at the ceiling, rehearsing a phone conversation with Shane which he knows will never actually happen. Still, somehow, it helps.

The sun rises over Montréal, and Ilya gets on a plane and flies back to Boston. He takes a long, hot shower once he gets back to his apartment, makes himself something to eat, and then drops himself onto the sofa with his phone in hand.

Irina answers on the first ring, yet again. *“Ilyusha,”* she greets him.

“I am back in Boston,” Ilya says.

“Did you talk to him?”

“No.”

“Are you going to?”

“...No.”

“Ilya.”

“Mama.”

“Why?” Irina sighs.

“Alexei has been emailing me,” Ilya says, before he has really decided whether he should.

There is a crash on the other end of the line, and Irina yelps quietly. *“Alexei?”* she hisses. *“Your brother?”*

“Yes,” Ilya says. “He has been— threatening me. He wants money, or he will try to ruin my career.”

“Ilya,” Irina says, like an accusation. “How long has this been going on?”

“Since September,” Ilya says. “There have only been two messages, the second one a few weeks ago. He insults me, slanders me, and then demands money. He says he will go to the press about why we left Russia, to embarrass me. He knows where I live, Mama.”

Irina swears quietly, and then sighs. “Ilya,” she says, “you are so much more powerful than him. You are brave, and you are strong, and you have a good, pure heart. Do not let him scare you. Oh, Ilyusha, is this— is this why you have been acting so strange?”

“I feel like they are watching me,” Ilya whispers. “They know where I am, what I do, and they are still disgusted by me. I cannot let them think that I am weak. So I have turned myself into a monster; I have made strangers out of my loved ones, and I have hurt you all in my effort to protect you. I am sorry, Mama, for the way I have been. I am— I am scared.”

“I cannot believe you did not tell me any of this,” Irina says. “Does Shane know?”

“No,” Ilya says quickly, “and I do not want him to know. It is not an excuse. I should have told him straight away, but I was ashamed. I am still ashamed.”

“Ilya,” Irina says.

“I know,” Ilya says. “But, Mama—”

“You have nothing to be afraid of, Ilyusha,” Irina says. “Alexei cannot and will not hurt you. Shane will love you no matter what, if you tell him the truth and apologize. He will forgive you.”

No, he will not. And he should not. “I should go, Mama,” he says quietly. “I am exhausted.”

“Sleep, moy lyubimyy,” Irina says softly. “Come home soon. I miss you.”

Ilya squeezes his eyes shut, swallows the lump in his throat. “I miss you, Mama.”

“I love you, Ilyusha. I am so proud of you.”

Ilya stretches out on the sofa after he has hung up the phone, and stares at the ceiling, drenched in late morning sun. He feels lighter, like a weight has been lifted from his chest, if only to ease a little bit of pressure.

He sleeps a bit, napping on and off through the afternoon, and then finally peels himself off of the sofa around dinnertime to make himself something to eat before he crawls into his bed. He sets a frozen meal in the microwave and grabs his phone from the sofa to scroll through his notifications while he waits, heart sinking at the cruel divine timing of the email that came through while he was asleep.

From: Alexei Rozanov

Subject: Срок истёк.

I told you one month. I have received no money. Do you doubt me? Do you think I will not ruin you?

Send the money. If it is not in my account by the end of the week I will go to the press. This is your last warning.

Ilya's finger hovers over the delete button, but he feels empowered, after talking to his mother. He does doubt that Alexei will go to the press, or that the press will really be able to do much damage to his career; it would not be ideal to have his private business discussed in the tabloids, but it probably would not be very detrimental to his hockey career. Still, Ilya would quite like to avoid it, and would also quite like to stop hearing from his brother, so instead of deleting the email, he taps the button to reply.

Reply to: Alexei Rozanov

Subject: Re: Срок истёк.

I will send you nothing. You will never, ever contact me again. I will use every piece of my fame and money and notoriety to make sure that you cannot show your fucking face in public without someone wanting to break it open. I am not afraid of you. I owe you nothing.

He does not feel better once it is sent. His hands shake, his stomach turns, and he loses all interest in his microwave dinner, making his way back to the sofa to stare at the email thread, as if daring Alexei to write back.

Alexei does not write back. Ilya does not sleep for days.

Three weeks later – Cancún, Mexico

Shane probably should not be here. After his brief encounter with his personal all-time low a few weeks ago, he definitely should not be in Mexico, with a frozen skinny margarita in his hand, stretched out on a lounge chair on the beach with several of his teammates. But. Here he is.

It's an impromptu trip, planned only yesterday. They arrived this morning, they'll be leaving the day after tomorrow, and they'll be back on the ice the day after that. Shane was invited as an olive branch, he's sure; he's been rather down in the dumps lately, and his teammates have definitely noticed, but the emotional intelligence of a whole bunch of straight hockey players in their twenties doesn't allow for much other than a spontaneous trip to Mexico.

He has been doing better. Sort of. He's gotten the whole performance diet thing under control; he's still operating on a calorie deficit, still restricting himself to only food groups he's not even sure they have here in Cancún, but it's been a while since he's almost passed out on the ice. He has been playing well, training hard, staying busy outside of both of those things, and going out of his way to avoid any kind of press reports about Ilya Rozanov. He's been fine.

He's had a lot of time to think since January, since Ilya drove him to his breaking point. Ilya is all Shane has ever known. Ilya is the only person Shane has ever kissed, ever had sex with, ever loved. It was good, when it was good, but that can't be it. There has to be more out there, more for Shane to discover, more for him to fall in love with; not women, probably, but Shane is hot, kind, and rich. He can definitely find someone else to take Ilya's place.

He decides, by the end of his first day in Mexico, to test the waters here, where it's less likely that anyone knows who he is. They're at a bar near the resort, and it doesn't take long for Shane to be left to his own devices; Hayden brought his new girlfriend along, and they disappeared ages ago, JJ is wrapped around some beautiful woman out on the patio space, and everyone else is in similar positions here and there, none of them paying much attention to Shane.

He leaves the bar, just to be safe. He walks the boardwalk until he finds another bar, one that seems more, uh, well-suited for his needs. He sits down at the corner of the bar, orders a beer, and before it even arrives, a man slides into the seat next to him.

Shane looks up, finding the man looking him over hungrily. Okay. That was easy. Shane offers the man what he hopes is a sultry smile, and the man grins like a wolf. He says something in Spanish, pressing close so that Shane can hear him over the music, like that would make a difference.

"Uh, no hablo espanol," Shane says haltingly.

The man winks. "American?" he says, with a heavy accent.

Shane thinks about correcting him, but if he's meant to be incognito, he can be American. "Yeah," he says sheepishly.

"You like?" the man asks, gesturing toward himself.

Shane feels himself flush. "Uh, yeah," he laughs nervously, nodding once. "Yes."

The man grins, eyes sweeping over Shane again. There's something about him that reminds Shane of Ilya; maybe it's the way he smiles, the shameless way he keeps looking at Shane's lap, the sheer mass of his chest and shoulders. There's something a little bit sick and twisted about it, but there's no harm in having a type, right?

Shane's beer arrives. The man leans over the bar, hands the bartender a bit of cash, and then winks at Shane. Shane flushes a little more, tipping his beer in thanks before he takes a long, much needed sip. The man watches his mouth, and then his throat when he swallows. Shane

feels entirely out of his depth, but his body seems to be intrigued, his breath catching when the man leans close again.

“Luis,” he says, trailing his fingers down Shane’s inner arm until he can grasp Shane’s hand.

“Shane,” Shane says dumbly, before he can think of a fake name to give. Oh well. He can be Shane from America.

“Come?” Luis asks, eyes dark and twinkling when Shane looks at him.

“I’d like to,” Shane smiles.

Luis smiles back, nodding toward Shane’s beer. Shane drinks the rest of it too quickly, has to suppress a belch when Luis immediately uses his grip on Shane’s hand to tug him out of his seat and right out of the bar.

It’s fine. Luis’s room isn’t as nice as Shane’s room, but it’s fine. Luis is hot, very good with his hands, but there’s something— Shane can’t place it, but there’s something missing. He is very gentle, generous, gets Shane off and then finishes over his stomach, cleans him up after, kisses Shane’s neck so nicely while Shane catches his breath, but...

But he’s not Ilya. When Shane closes his eyes and stops listening, he could be Ilya. He’s got Ilya’s build, Ilya’s soft, short curls, Ilya’s sharp teeth. But he kisses wrong, when he makes his way back to Shane’s mouth, and he sounds wrong when he moans into Shane’s ear, and his face is all wrong when he finally pulls back to smile down at Shane.

“Good?” Luis asks, looking smug about the way Shane is completely boneless beneath him.

“Yeah, really good,” Shane says, turning his head when Luis ducks down to kiss him again. “Uh, I should— I have to go.”

Luis shrugs, rolling off of Shane and getting up off the bed. Shane sits up, reaching for his pants and watching discretely as Luis walks to the dresser, bends at the waist, and snorts something off the surface of it.

Oh. Okay. Shane gets dressed in record time, smiling politely when Luis turns around and offers some of whatever he just did. “Thanks,” Shane says, checking for his phone and his wallet and gesturing to the door. “That was— okay, bye.”

What the fuck is he doing? Why the fuck did he think this was a good idea? He all but runs back to his own hotel, only stopping to think once he’s reached the safety of his own room. Fuck.

He feels disgusting. He strips out of his clothes as quickly as he put them on in Luis’s room, turns the shower on hot, and scrubs himself until his skin hurts. Who does he think he is? This isn’t him. He doesn’t hook up with random guys in hotels. Especially not guys who do coke and can barely communicate with him.

All he wants is Ilya. It hits him there, in the shower, with a cheap pink loofa in his hand. He wants Ilya. He only wants Ilya. He has always, always wanted Ilya, the old Ilya, the Ilya who

loved Shane like he was some precious thing, the Ilya who had never stepped foot in Boston. Shane will never love anyone else like that. He will never feel that way again, and, honestly, he doesn't really want to. What he and Ilya had, before it all went to shit, it was so special, so unique, and it'll never be like that with anyone else.

It's fine. Shane doesn't need to have that again. He's already had his one great love, it happened, and it's over, and he can make do with the memory of it forever. He cannot even fathom ever wanting anyone else like that.

So, it's fine. He'll just be single forever. He'll focus on hockey, on himself, on his career, and that will have to be enough for him. If someone else comes along someday, then, great, but Shane doesn't need anyone. He has to commit to loving hockey more than he ever loved Ilya, because that is the choice he has made, apparently. He might be getting ahead of himself.

He dries off, does not look at himself in the mirror, and climbs into bed. There is the urge—ever-present, but currently more intense than usual—to call Ilya. To tell Ilya what he's just done. To tell Ilya what he's decided to do from here on out. For so long, almost half his life now, Shane has told Ilya his every waking thought, gave Ilya access to his consciousness, more or less. It's reflexive, this feeling, to want to call Ilya and tell him about his night. It's not out of cruelty. Really, it's not.

Except. Would it feel good? Would it make Shane feel better to call Ilya, tell him that he let someone else fuck him, someone that wasn't him? Would it make him feel good to listen to Ilya's breath catch in surprise, in horror? Would Ilya be angry? Would he be jealous? Would he be sad? Would he yell, or cry? Would he apologize, finally, and mean it?

God, Shane is becoming as cruel as Ilya. He turns his phone off, just so he won't be tempted to call Ilya and find out what his reaction would be, and then rolls over, shoves his head into his pillow, and counts the hours until he can get back on the ice.

June, 2011 – Las Vegas

“And your 2011 Rookie of the Year is... Shane Hollander!”

Shane is bashful as he accepts the award, thanks his parents, his fans, and the league, speaks briefly about how important hockey is to him, and then gracefully exits the stage, the picture of humility and professionalism. He keeps his eyes down while he comes back to his seat, but David is less diplomatic, his eyes locked on Ilya across the room where he is sitting with his mother.

Ilya's eyes are locked on Shane's back, cold and emotionless. David has a hard time believing that he is looking at the same kid he has known for the past eight years. He looks like Ilya, for the most part, but his features are sharper, now, his eyes darker, his body bigger and more intimidating in his suit. He looks mean, face twitching as he watches Shane, but as soon as he glances over at David, he drops his eyes, and David catches a glimpse behind the mask; Ilya is completely heartbroken.

Anyone who truly knows Ilya, who has ever truly known Ilya, would be able to see just how badly he's hurting, how much he is struggling even to just stay in his chair and not flee the ballroom. David can't take his eyes off of him; Ilya shifts to turn away, back to his table, but David can see the tension in his shoulders, the shallowness of his breath. The poor kid. He's never been able to catch a goddamn break.

It would be easy to blame Shane for this, for walking away, for giving up. David is Shane's father, he loves Shane more than anything in the world, but even he can see how big of an impact Shane's leaving has had on Ilya. At the same time, though, Shane was hurting, too, and David will never be anything but proud of his boy for having enough courage and self-respect to leave when he felt like he had to. It's complicated— David feels for them both, but sitting here now, all he can think is that Ilya Rozanov really, really needs a hug.

Yuna would eviscerate him for even thinking such a thing, he's sure. She has been so supportive of Shane, almost to a fault— she is so angry with Ilya, so disgusted with the way he treated her only son, so hurt by the way Shane has been hurting. Against their best efforts, it has come between them and Irina.

Irina has become a shell of herself over the past few months. She has been so affected by Ilya's choices, his actions, his attitude; she seems so sad, so ashamed, and it didn't take long before she stopped coming around for dinner so often, stopped answering the phone most of the time, if only to avoid any mention of the boys after they had broken up. Yuna tried, she really did try, to stay close with Irina, but after finally talking to Shane about what had happened, Yuna decided to let Irina have her distance. It was harder for David; he and Irina have always been close, ever since they mastered the skill of cooking together, and it has been difficult to watch her shut herself off from them, but now, watching from across the ballroom, David thinks that Irina Rozanova also looks like she really, really needs a hug.

She is watching Ilya, too, quiet sadness written all over her face, and not just out of sympathy for his losing the award to Shane. She glances over at Shane every few seconds, like she can't help herself, but eventually she catches David's eye, inhales sharply, and turns her body away fully.

Irina has always loved Shane. She has made them all well aware, over the years, of how grateful she is to Shane for all he has done for Ilya, for all of Shane's support of Ilya in the early years, for giving him an opportunity to play hockey, for pushing him to be the best version of himself, for playing a major role in giving Ilya a life he loved so completely, a life he never could have had in Moscow. That has been the hardest part of this, for all of them; the boys were so inseparable when they were younger, so determined to live life side by side, hand in hand, always Shane and Ilya, Hollander and Rozanov, through thick and thin, through anything.

It was a lot of pressure on Shane, the role he played in changing Ilya's life, but as far as any of them could tell, he never seemed affected by it, never even seemed to notice it. He was always so in love with Ilya, even from the very beginning, he would have done anything to ensure Ilya could have been right there with him. That pressure became too much once they reached the NHL, once they both moved so far away, once Ilya started going through—whatever it is he's going through. No one can blame Shane for getting overwhelmed. But, still, no one can believe that he actually walked away.

“Dad?”

David turns quickly, finding Shane looking at him expectantly. “Sorry. What?”

Shane frowns, turning to look in the direction David had been looking. His face falls when he finds Ilya and Irina, and he looks down quickly, regaining his composure in record time.

“Um, I asked if you were going to come to the afterparty?”

Yes, the afterparty. There is always an afterparty with these things. Shane is one of the biggest players in the NHL right now, he is the Rookie of the Year, everyone's favorite player, but David can see it in his eyes, he doesn't want to go alone. Even with all this, after everything he's done, he still needs his mom and dad with him at the afterparty.

“Of course,” David says.

Yuna squeezes his arm gratefully, and David smiles at her, and then looks back at Shane to watch him watch the last few awards of the evening.

David has never not been proud of Shane. There is nothing that Shane has ever done or could ever do that would make David feel any less proud of him than he is right now.

The Voyageurs and the Bears both made it to the playoffs this season, but both were eliminated in the first round. Regardless, Shane and Ilya both had legendary rookie seasons, they both have made history with their performance this year, and they both have reached levels of fame and success that make David's head spin a little bit if he thinks too hard about it. He's so proud of both of them.

He glances at Yuna, hoping, not for the first time in his life, that she cannot read his mind. He is proud of Ilya, all things considered. It's hard to separate Ilya in his mind from the kid he used to be, the same way it's hard to separate him from Shane. They may not speak anymore, but they will always be linked together, and that is something they are all going to have to learn how to deal with. Maybe someday, they'll come back to each other, work it all out, find a way to be in each other's lives again, but for now, David thinks he can feel proud of both of them without having to pick and choose between them.

The afterparty is dull. Shane is quickly whisked away by some of the older players, and David sticks close to Yuna's side, smiling and nodding politely as she takes each and every opportunity to make new connections for Shane. He scans the room over and over, but there is no sign of Ilya, no sign of Irina, and, eventually, no sign of Shane, either.

Shane doesn't even like drinking, he doesn't know how this keeps happening. Scott Hunter just kept buying him shots and, like, it's Scott Hunter, what is Shane gonna say, *no*? Shane has respect for his elders— not that Scott Hunter is that old, he's only a couple years older than Shane, but he's kind of a big deal in the hockey world and anyway Shane isn't *drunk*, really, but he's definitely not sober and he definitely has to pee.

He keeps his head down on the way to the bathroom, desperately trying not to make eye contact with anyone. He would quite like this night to be over. He hates these things, honestly, and he hates that Ilya just had to watch him win Rookie of the Year. It's a massive honor, obviously, and he's so proud of himself, but even after a whole season of it, he hates competing with Ilya. He can't imagine how Ilya must be feeling right now; Shane would be devastated, if Ilya was the one to win it, and he almost feels guilty for having gotten it, which — which is *absurd*, he should be over the moon, and he *is*. Fuck Ilya.

He nearly collapses when he pushes his way into the bathroom, coming face to face with Ilya himself. Ilya is leaning against the wall near the sinks, arm hooked over the paper towel dispenser, one foot propped up on the wall, the picture of coolness, casual confidence. Shane can see in his eyes, though, those eyes that he knows so well, that Ilya is upset. Shane stops in his tracks, the bathroom door swinging closed loudly behind him, and Ilya stares back at him.

For a moment, Shane thinks they're going to fight. He thinks Ilya is going to push off the wall, walk over, and knock Shane on his ass. He thinks Ilya is going to start shouting, holding Shane by the lapels of his suit coat, and scream in his face until someone hears the commotion and comes running in to help. He thinks Ilya is just going to start crying, drop to his knees and beg for forgiveness.

Ilya sniffs, looks down. "Sorry," he says, his voice sending shivers down Shane's spine. "I will go."

"You— uh," Shane stutters; his face is already flushed from the alcohol, but he's sure he's blushing even more now. "It's fine. You don't have to."

Ilya hesitates, and then nods. Shane tears his eyes away from him and makes his way to the urinals, forcing his mind blank while he empties his bladder, determinedly not thinking about the man behind him. He finishes up, walks back to the sinks, and Ilya watches him all the while, eyes locked on Shane's face in the mirror.

"Congratulations," Ilya says, so quietly that Shane almost doesn't hear him over the sound of the sink. Almost. He definitely hears him.

"Thank you," Shane says, glancing over at him. It's too much. He looks back to the mirror, instead, so he can look at Ilya's reflection instead of at Ilya himself. Fuck. Fucking Scott Hunter. Shane is fucking drunk.

“Are you drunk?” Ilya says.

“No,” Shane says quickly.

Ilya smiles. “Yes, you are.” Ilya has never seen him drunk, not like this. Not for longer than it took for Shane to shove him in a nightclub. “Good for you. Big night for you.”

Shane wants to fucking die. He eyes the paper towel holder, which Ilya is still leaning on, and Ilya gets the hint, moving aside so that they won’t be so close when Shane reaches for a paper towel to dry his hands. He doesn’t go far, though, and Shane retreats as soon as he has what he needs, walking to the trash can near the door.

“Are you going home after this?” Ilya says, quickly, like he doesn’t want Shane to leave yet.

“Uh, to my hotel,” Shane says.

“I meant Ottawa.”

“Oh,” Shane flushes again. “Uh, back to Montréal for a few days, and then, yeah, Ottawa for a day or two, and then we’re leaving for, uh,” he feels even more awkward, suddenly, at the idea of telling Ilya that he’s going to the cottage without him. Of course Ilya knows he isn’t invited. Still, Shane doesn’t finish his sentence.

Ilya looks devastated. “Ah,” he says, with a forced smile. “Have fun.”

“How about you?” Shane asks, just to be polite. He should leave the bathroom, probably. He should leave this party. He can’t stop looking at Ilya in the mirror.

“Back to Boston for a week or so,” Ilya shrugs. “Then home.”

Shane nods, throws his paper towel away, and then turns to face Ilya fully. He extends a hand, watches Ilya’s eyes drift down to it, and says, “see you next season.”

Ilya crosses the room after a moment of hesitation, taking Shane’s hand and standing just a little bit too close. He doesn’t shake Shane’s hand, not really, just uses it as leverage to stand right inside Shane’s bubble of personal space, his perfect blue eyes boring a hole through Shane’s.

Ilya is going to kiss him. Shane wants him to. So bad. So, so bad. Ilya’s mind is racing, Shane can see it behind his eyes; Shane knows him so well, knows every single minute nuance in his expression, so he braces for impact, tipping his chin up slightly.

Ilya startles back, inhaling sharply and dropping Shane’s hand. Shane might faint.

“Sorry,” Ilya says, so quietly Shane barely hears him over the roaring in his ears.

Shane looks down at his hand, still hanging limply in front of him, right where Ilya dropped it. He doesn’t look back up at Ilya. He turns slowly, pushes through the door and out of the bathroom, and does not look back.

Fuck. Shane needs to get out of here. Out of this ballroom, out of this hotel, out of Las Vegas, out of the United States. He needs to get as far from Ilya Rozanov as he can get. He needs to flee the planet.

Shane hates him. Shane is so hurt, so irreparably damaged, and it's all Ilya's fault. Shane *hates* him. Shane left him because he hates him, because Ilya is awful, because Ilya is an asshole, because Ilya is not who he used to be. Shane hates him. Shane has never loved anyone or anything so fucking much, and he never will.

He doesn't look for his parents, doesn't stop to talk to anyone on his way out of the ballroom. He doesn't stop walking until he gets outside, wrestling with the revolving door at the front of the hotel and stumbling out onto the sidewalk to come face to face with none other than Irina Rozanova, eyes wide as saucers, a cigarette in her hand. She blinks at him, caught off guard, and Shane backs away, turning on his heel and marching to the edge of the street. He hails a cab, jumps in before Irina can stop him, and pulls out his phone.

Shane: I'm going back to the hotel. Not feeling well.

David: Ok, we're right behind you. Can we bring you anything?

Yuna: Did you eat?

Shane: I'm good just wanna go to bed. Love you.

Yuna: Ok, love you honey.

David: Love you kiddo. We're so proud of you.

Shane tips his head back against the seat in the back of the cab, watching the lights of Las Vegas pass by outside his window. He doesn't let himself think about it until he's safely back in his hotel room, but he can't stop himself once he's alone in the suffocating silence.

He loves Ilya. He loves him and he wants him so badly, so much it makes his chest hurt and his eyes burn. He wants Ilya to be here with him, wants to go to wherever Ilya is, wants to kiss him and touch him and fall asleep with him and wake up with him. He wants Ilya to apologize so that Shane can forgive him, and then he wants Ilya to pin him down and make him forget about the last six months entirely.

He stares at his phone, willing it to light up with Ilya's name. It does not. He thinks about being the one to call, to ask Ilya to meet up to talk, or maybe to not talk, maybe just to spend one night together and pretend, just for a few hours, that everything is okay.

He can't do it, in the end. He should hate Ilya. He should, and wants to, and he *does*, but not to the extent that Ilya deserves, and Shane needs to try harder.

But... maybe Ilya has changed in the past six months. Maybe he's had some kind of awakening since Shane left; Ilya told him congratulations, after all, didn't he? He made polite small talk, he wasn't rude to Shane at all, didn't cross any boundaries, was respectful and kind and courteous there were so many things he could have been an asshole about, so many

things he could have thrown in Shane's face in that moment, but he didn't, didn't even tease him for being drunk. Maybe watching Shane leave made him realize how awful he was, how far gone he was, and he decided to try to turn back. Maybe he's going to turn over a new leaf, become a better version of himself, the version Shane fell in love with, or at least a version Shane could maybe fall in love with again. Shane can forgive him, and they can start over, or they can pick up where they left off.

It's not likely, though. Ilya had ample opportunity to apologize to him tonight, or to at least ask for an opportunity to apologize outside of that bathroom, but he didn't. Shane isn't sure what he would have done if Ilya had tried, and he's almost grateful that he didn't. Shane probably would have shut him down, told him that it wasn't the time or place, and walked out again. But Ilya could have tried. And he didn't.

Shane does deserve an apology from Ilya, whether he ever gets one or not. He has to remind himself of that in moments like these, when crawling back to Ilya seems too tempting to resist. He cannot let himself get that close to Ilya again without receiving an apology first, but, *god fucking damnit* Shane wants him *so* fucking bad.

Shane reaches his phone, gets as far as scrolling to Ilya's contact, and then stops himself. He can't call Ilya. Ilya is going to have to come to him, if he ever feels so inclined. Shane will not go begging for an apology, for basic human decency. Nope. He won't do it.

Someone laughs loudly in the hallway. Most of the players present at the ceremony tonight are probably staying in this hotel, too. Shane wonders where Ilya is staying. He reaches for his phone again. No. He drops it on the bed.

He goes to the bathroom, strips out of his suit, and gets into the shower. He stays in the shower far too long, and when he finally goes back to the bed, he has a few notifications waiting for him.

Rose: HOLY SHIT!!!! CONGRATS!!!!

Rose: so soso proud of you

Rose: Hope you're celebrating!!!

Shane: ❤️

Fuck this. Shane should be celebrating. He should be even drunker than he is now, he should be out all night long, he should be partying like the NHL star he is. He should not be sitting here, scrolling back to Ilya's contact. He should not be opening it, staring at Ilya's contact photo, thumb hovering over the call button.

He turns his phone off, buries it in his carry-on bag on the desk, and climbs into bed.

Chapter 14

One week later – Somewhere between Boston and Ottawa

There is a screaming baby in the row behind Ilya. It has been screaming since the moment the plane boarded, and its mother is beside herself, plum out of tricks to shut it up. Ilya's headphones do not stand a chance against the shrill, piercing cries. The baby's mother keeps apologizing to everyone around her, desperately trying to soothe her precious little air raid siren, but nothing works.

It is a good distraction, if nothing else. Ilya has thought of nothing but how fucking awful that noise is the entire flight. He has not thought at all about Shane, about how badly Ilya misses him, how badly he wants him, how desperate he is to apologize and fix things. He has not thought at all about how depressed he is, how much he is dreading spending the summer at home in Ottawa with no one but his mother to keep him company. He has not thought at all about how this is the first summer since leaving Russia that he will not get to spend time at the Hollanders' cottage, go swimming in the lake, play soccer with Shane in the yard, hear any loons, fall asleep every night wrapped around Shane, sun-drunk and soft and exhausted. He has not thought about any of that. Really.

Except that it is all he has thought about for the entire week since the awards ceremony. He has picked up his phone to call Shane at least once a day, if not more, and pussyed out every time. Ilya does not deserve the chance to apologize to Shane. Shane deserves so much better than Ilya, and he will find it, if Ilya lets him go and gives him the space to look for it. Ilya wanted to kiss him so badly in that bathroom at the afterparty, wanted to wrap his arms around him and crawl inside his skin and beg Shane to forgive him, beg Shane to let him explain, beg Shane to stop looking so goddamn afraid to even be near him.

That's the worst part of it all. Shane looked horrified when he came through that door and saw Ilya. He looked genuinely afraid, with the alcohol in his blood inhibiting his ability to mask his emotions. He was nervous around Ilya, nervous about what Ilya would do, nervous about what Ilya would say. He had every right to be nervous; Ilya cannot remember the last time he spoke to Shane without tearing him down, pissing him off, hurting his feelings, and he is sure that Shane cannot remember, either. Ilya tried so hard, *so hard* to be kind, to be gentle, and Shane still ran away. Ilya should have stopped him, should have gone after him and begged to talk, but he could not do it. Shane is better off without him. He does not need Ilya. Not the way Ilya needs him.

Going home is going to be miserable. Ilya loves his mother, loves her to pieces, but lately she has been so... sad. It is Ilya's fault, he knows that much; he broke her heart when he moved to Boston, broke it again when he ruined things with Shane, and has been steadily breaking it each and every day as he turns into his father.

The closer he gets to Ottawa, the more he can see what has truly happened. In his effort to become the person he thought he needed to be, he has simply turned into his father. He is disgusted with himself, as disgusted as he knows everyone else is. He yelled at his mother on the phone the other night, on his birthday. Shane was right, Ilya is a monster. He owes everyone an apology. He does not deserve their forgiveness.

He tried to be good, in the beginning. He tried to take care of his mother, got her a brand new apartment in a nicer part of town, a two bedroom with a beautiful kitchen, closer to her work, had it fully furnished and hired movers to carefully pack and transport all of Irina's treasures she has accumulated over the years. He tried to take care of Shane, tried to continue loving him in a way that felt safe, in a way that felt less dangerous. All of his efforts have been for naught. Everyone he loves is miserable, all because of him.

Alexei has not written again since Ilya's email, in early March. After all of that trouble, all of the worrying and cruelty and anguish that Alexei caused, one little email brought it all to a halt. Ilya feels foolish for having let Alexei's messages cause so much damage. Alexei was completely harmless after all, able to be brought down with one simple counterthreat. Ilya is so ashamed of himself, so embarrassed that he allowed Alexei to fuck up so much of his life without even lifting a finger.

The baby reaches new levels of ear-splitting as the plane begins to descend over Ottawa. Ilya thinks it must be cathartic, screaming so much, so long. He thinks he could really benefit from something like that.

The peace of Ottawa International Airport is unlike anything Ilya has ever experienced. The baby stops crying almost the instant its mother carries it out of the jetbridge, and Ilya moves his headphones to his neck, enjoying the low chatter of the gate around him. He ends up next to the mother and now babbling baby at baggage claim, and he cannot help himself, pulling faces at the baby until it smiles and reaches for him.

"You are a wonderful mother," Ilya tells the young woman, probably only a few years older than Ilya.

She looks shocked, and then touched, her eyes filling with tears. "Thank you," she says quietly.

Ilya offers her a smile, grabs his suitcase, and sets off for the taxi pickup area. He tries to turn his brain off while he rides through the familiar streets of Ottawa, but the near-silence of the taxi does nothing to support his cause.

There is not a single street in Ottawa, not a nook or cranny or crevice in the whole city, which does not remind Ilya of Shane. Shane is not even in Ottawa, is probably already in Lanaudière for the summer, and still he haunts every street corner, every alleyway, every shop window the taxi passes by. Ilya has to call him. He is going to call him. As soon as he gets home, he will drop his bags, greet his mother, and call Shane. He will explain everything, tell Shane every detail that he kept from him when it really mattered, he will apologize and make sure that Shane understands, even if he never forgives him, that none of this was Shane's fault, Shane has always been the best thing in Ilya's life, and Ilya hates himself for ever making him think differently.

He floats out of the taxi when he arrives at his mother's building, mind made up. He is going to call Shane. And if Shane does not answer, Ilya will call again. He will leave a voicemail, he will drive all the way to Lanaudière if he has to, but he will talk to Shane, he will fix this, if it is the last thing he ever does.

He cannot wait to tell his mother. He all but sprints from the elevator down the hallway to the apartment door. He has not spent a lot of time in this apartment, but Irina has a way of making every new space they have moved into feel like home, and this is no different. Ilya feels himself relax, like he has finally returned to real life. He was not expecting to be so happy to be back in Ottawa, but now that he is here, he is flooded with relief, like he can finally breathe again.

The apartment is messy, cluttered, dim with the blinds pulled in the late afternoon light, but it is exactly as Ilya expects it to be; it is home, because his sweet mother has made it so. Ilya drops his suitcase inside the door and calls, "*Mama!*"

There is no answer. Ilya peeks into the kitchen, but finds it empty. "*Mama,*" he calls again, "*I am home!*"

Irina's bedroom is at the back of the apartment, down a short hallway off the living room. The door is closed. Ilya bounds to it, does not bother knocking, throws the door open and grins.

"*Mama!*" he says, loud enough to wake her. She is in her bed, one delicate hand dangling over the side, and Ilya goes to her, sits down next to her. She does not budge.

"*Mama?*"

Chapter 15

December, 2002 – Moscow, Russia

The door slams hard enough to rattle the frame, and not a moment too soon, because Grigory's body weight slams against it from the other side less than a second later, his drunken shouting bleeding through the cracks and chips in the door, the evidence of all the times they have danced this dance before. Irina does not even know what set him off this time; it could not have been dinner, she had not even finished cooking yet and was on track to have it finished early, and it could not have been the boys, because Ilya had only just come home from hockey practice and had gone to his room to change, and Alexei— well, Alexei can do no wrong, as far as Grigory is concerned.

Irina locks the door just in time, as it jiggles nearly out of its frame at the force of Grigory trying to rip it open. One of these days, he will take the whole door off the hinges in his blind, baseless rage. Irina just hopes that day is not today.

There is blood on her hands, but she has not had a chance to take inventory yet to find out where it is coming from. She backs away from the door and breathes in deep, because if Grigory hears her crying, he really will beat the door down. She turns to face the mirror, hands coming up to inspect the afternoon's damage to her face.

Her lip is split open, bleeding profusely down her chin and into her long, sandy blonde curls, and then seeping into her blouse. She has a bruise blossoming on her cheek, as well, just below her eye, which is throbbing now that she is aware of it. Her shaking hands fetch a towel from under the sink and press it against her lip to slow the bleeding, but her brain scolds her for it. Grigory will be upset that she has bled on one of the towels, she should have used paper; she will have to bury this towel in the bottom of the bin and replace it before he notices.

Or. There is another option. She could bleed on anything she likes, she could trash this entire bathroom, if she wanted, and then she could take the easy way out, the way she has been dreaming of for years now. She could end this, if she really wanted to. God help her, she wants to.

She reaches for her own face in the mirror, but she cannot make eye contact with herself when she slides her hand to the edge of the frame, pulling open the medicine cabinet hidden behind it. It is messy and disorganized, filled with bottles prescribed to every member of the family, most of them out of date by now, but she does not have to search for the one she is after. Her hands know exactly where to find it, how to twist it open, to pour its entire contents into her palm.

It is an option. Fuck it, it is the only option.

Her hands shake so severely that she sends a few pills scattering to the counter when she closes her fist around them, but she cannot risk losing any, cannot risk not being able to finish the job. She frantically reaches for the runaways, trapping them on the counter before they can fall down the sink drain, and in her panic, knocks over several other items on the counter.

She picks everything up, mostly out of habit, because Grigory will be upset if things are out of place. Grigory probably will not be upset that his wife is dead in the bathtub.

She chokes down another sob as she rights the hand soap, the mouthwash, and Ilya's toothbrush—*Ilya*. She freezes, one hand full of pills, the other hand clutching Ilya's gray and red toothbrush like it is a magic wand, or a knife, or a tether to reality. It mostly serves as the latter.

"Open the fucking door, you useless bitch!" Grigory's muffled voice bellows from the hallway. *"You cannot fucking hide in there forever!"*

No, Irina supposes, she cannot. She has two options now. They both suck. Well, one of them sucks much less than the other, when she thinks about it, but it is going to be so, so much harder.

She looks up at herself in the mirror, making eye contact with her reflection for the first time today. She looks harrowed, tired, bleeding and bruised. There are tears streaming steadily down her cheeks, her blue eyes gone dark and red, sunken and hollow, the skin around them swollen from either the crying or the hit she took just a few minutes ago in the kitchen, she is not sure which. The thing about her eyes, she realizes with a whimper and a poorly restrained hiccup, is that they are not only her eyes. They are Ilya's eyes. If she dies, he will die too. That much she knows for sure.

She moves from the sink to the toilet, releasing the handful of pills she has been clutching into the bowl. Before she can lap them back up like a dog, she presses down on the handle and watches them swirl away.

Grigory's hollering outside stops for a fraction of a second and then resumes, but at a distance. Irina tracks him down the hallway, but she doesn't need to imagine the map of the house to know whose door he is screaming at now.

Ilya, bless his sweet, perfect little heart, screams back. Irina wishes she knew how to scream back, but it would not do much good beyond the catharsis. Ilya is the one who made the discovery for all of them that screaming back makes the abuse so much worse. Ilya is crying, his screams thick with tears, which means he is already hurt— Ilya only cries when Grigory is hurting him, and Grigory only hurts him more when he cries.

Irina is out of the bathroom before she has made the conscious decision to be, her heart leading more so than her feet. It is not until she is reaching out to shove Grigory away from where he has just struck Ilya across the face that she realizes she is still clutching Ilya's toothbrush in her fist.

Grigory is back on her in a second, pinning her down on the hallway floor just to pick her up by her shoulders and slam her back down. Her head knocks painfully against the floor, but

the ragged carpet protects from any real damage. Ilya is screaming even louder now, Irina thinks, but it is background noise to Grigory's wretched voice in her ears.

"Stupid woman!" he is shouting, foul breath in her face. *"Useless, stupid, awful bitch!"*

Irina manages to look over Grigory's shoulder when he lifts her again, locking eyes with Ilya. His sweet little face is red and flushed from anger, fear, wet with tears, a small cut on his cheekbone weeping blood down his perfect little cheek. She finds Alexei standing half in front of Ilya, not to protect him, not to shield him from what their father is doing to their mother, but to hold him back from attempting to stop it. Alexei's mouth is twisted into this sick little smirk of satisfaction, filing every move Grigory makes away in his brain to use later on, Irina has no doubt. He is the spitting image of his father, in every fucked up, terrible way.

Ilya manages to shove past Alexei just long enough to land a foot in Grigory's side, dislodging him enough to allow Irina to shove him the rest of the way onto his back, his drunken state massively supporting her effort. Alexei is shoving Ilya against the wall, holding him by his hair, but Irina knows that Ilya can hold his own against his brother. Ilya has been a natural athlete since he could crawl, has been interested in hockey since even before that, and Alexei is just a big kid with no real coordination or finesse when it comes to fighting, just aiming to cause as much damage as possible, his father's son through and through.

Alexei throws Ilya to the floor, but Ilya is back on his feet in a second, reaching down for Irina. Irina reaches for him in return, and Ilya hauls her up, somehow, dragging her along to her bedroom. Irina manages to get her feet back under her just in time to turn and slam the door once they are safely in the room, turning the lock and pressing her back to the doorjamb.

Ilya is still crying, but it is sadder now than it was before, less angry and more pitiful. Irina floats to him and wraps him in her arms, covering his delicate ears while his father and brother join forces in the hallway to make sure they both know exactly how stupid, useless, and weak they both are. Irina guides Ilya to the bed, hands still over his ears, though they both know it is doing nothing to shield him from the abuse.

"Beautiful boy," Irina whispers softly to him. *"My sweet little love. You are my heart, do you know? Do you know how much I love you?"*

Ilya curls into her chest, his cries subsiding with the adrenaline. *"I know, Mama,"* he whispers back. *"I love you, too."*

"You do not know what love is, solnyshko," Irina whispers wistfully. *"And I did not until I knew you."*

Ilya snuffles, and Irina kisses the tears from his cheeks. *"Are you badly hurt?"* he asks, eyeing her lip.

"I will be okay, little one," Irina says, offering him a soft smile. She hopes he cannot see how much it pains her.

Grigory and Alexei give up eventually, most likely having realized that they all will go to bed hungry now that they've driven Irina to her room for the night. As much as she would like to hope that the hunger hurts them as much as she is hurt, she cannot feel anything besides sorrow and disappointment for having failed, yet again, at being an adequate wife and mother.

"Sleep, *moy lyubimyy*," Irina tells Ilya, stroking her fingers lightly over his eyes to close them, if only so that he will not see the tears budding in hers.

Ilya, the perfect boy that he is, opens his eyes as soon as Irina's fingers have trailed down to his cheeks. He studies her face, and then sits up to pull his sweater off over his head. He touches Irina's face gently, more gently than anyone has ever touched Irina before, but not less so than Ilya ever has. She turns her head just enough to reveal it from the pillow, and Ilya uses the hem of his sweater to carefully clean around her lips and chin until the blood drying there is gone. The tears in Irina's eyes spill over, against her every effort to restrain them, and Ilya uses a clean edge of his sweater to wipe those away, too, and then throws his sweater to the floor and curls back into Irina's chest in just his t-shirt and pajama pants. Irina drags the blankets up and over both of them, rubbing soothing circles into Ilya's back until he finally drifts to sleep.

Irina does not sleep. She lies awake, watching Ilya's face swell where Grigory hit him, and alternates between pressing her fingers against the glass of the window behind the bed, cold from the early winter night, and then pressing her chilled fingers against Ilya's cheekbone, wincing at the quiet snuffle he makes in his sleep each and every time.

And all the while, she plans.

The television is on downstairs, but Grigory was far too drunk earlier to still be awake at this hour. Irina can hear Alexei snoring through the wall between her bedroom and the room the boys share. There is a suitcase under her bed, which she will have to take out very carefully, because she does not want to wake anyone, especially Ilya, until everything is ready to go.

Getting out of the bed alone takes just short of an act of God, and Irina waits until Ilya has stopped stirring before she kneels beside the bed and begins pulling the suitcase, inch by inch, out from under it.

Packing the suitcase is a beast of its own. She only grabs the most essential items she can think of: a few changes of clothes, scarves and hats to obscure their battered faces, the photograph on the dresser of Ilya as an infant, and the one of him and his best friend, Svetlana. She has mastered the art of moving soundlessly over the course of her marriage to Grigory, and the talent serves her well when it comes time to creep into Alexei and Ilya's room, taking the essentials she can manage to scrounge up from there, as well. Ilya's ice skates take up more room in the suitcase than they can really afford, but Irina cannot imagine him without them.

She takes a moment to pause before she leaves the room, watching Alexei sleep in his bed against the window. He will be fifteen in the summer, but he could very easily pass for eighteen, and often does, when there is alcohol to be had. He is all Grigory; straight, dark hair, round features, big-boned and thick-skulled. Irina creeps closer to the bed, weighing her

options with him, but she knows she does not have any. Alexei would never go with her and, soul crushingly, Irina does not want him. Looking at him like this, knowing it could very well be the last time she will ever see her first born son, she feels absolutely nothing maternal towards him.

Alexei will be fine. He idolizes his father, and is the sole pride and joy of Grigory's life. Ilya was an accident, a consequence, and by Grigory's standards, a mistake, but Alexei is the only thing in this world that Irina can say with any confidence that Grigory has ever loved. Maybe this will be a lesson to Alexei, that the way Grigory treats his family is unacceptable, unsustainable, and despicable. Or maybe it will not. Irina cannot find it in herself to care what happens between these walls once she gets herself and Ilya out of them.

The noise from the television masks the soft creaks of the stairs as Irina sneaks down them, and Grigory is, as expected, snoring loudly on the sofa. She goes to the front hall closet, pushing aside a few boxes and fallen coats to get to the safe which Grigory thinks she does not know the code to open. From the safe she retrieves as much cash as she dares steal, Ilya's passport, her own passport, and, as an afterthought, Grigory and Alexei's passports, too, just to slow them down if they should think to come after them. Just before she closes the safe, Irina decides to reach for the gun Grigory keeps inside, emptying the ammunition from it and stuffing it into her pocket. Just in case.

She floats back up the stairs and into her bedroom to organize her spoils in the suitcase, making it all fit and then zipping it closed. She has no idea where they are going to end up, but she has tried to pack thoughtfully to fit mostly any climate, and once they get on their feet wherever they land, she will make it work. For Ilya, she will make it work.

Ilya. He is still sleeping fitfully in Irina's bed, face crumpled and lips turned down. Irina leans over him and presses a single kiss to the crease between his eyebrows, and then leans back just enough to watch Ilya's big, blue eyes blink open at her.

She holds a finger against her lips, waiting until Ilya nods before she straightens up and beckons him to get out of bed. When Ilya is standing, Irina helps him into a clean sweater, his coat, scarf, and hat. Ilya looks terribly confused, but allows himself to be dressed like a toddler, watching his mother curiously but without question. He is twelve years old, certainly old enough to dress himself, and maybe Grigory has a point when he insists that Irina coddles Ilya too much, but, good heavens, that face, how could she not?

It is not until Ilya notices the suitcase by the bedroom door that his expression changes. His eyes darken at first, and then his face screws up minutely, looking at Irina with thinly veiled horror.

"Be completely silent, solnyshko," Irina breathes. *"We have to go."*

Ilya has a thousand questions, Irina can see each one of them in his eyes, but he just presses his mouth closed, swallows, and nods.

Ilya carries the suitcase down the stairs; at twelve years old, he is already stronger than Irina has ever been, will ever be. Irina does not pause in the living room, heads straight for the

front door, but when she gets there and turns around, Ilya is frozen in place, standing over his father on the sofa.

For a split second, fear flashes in Irina's mind that Ilya is going to wake his father, or kill him, or something even worse. Ilya looks up at Irina with fresh tears on his cheeks, and the fear melts out of her immediately. Her sweet boy, how could she even begin to think him capable of such things?

Irina cocks her head at him, questioning, and Ilya shakes his head. He picks up the suitcase, which he set down on the floor beside him when he stopped, and walks toward the front door with his eyes locked on Irina.

There is a flight to Ottawa, Ontario which leaves only an hour from the time Irina and Ilya arrive at the airport in Moscow. Irina uses the cash she took from the safe and buys the last two seats on the aircraft for herself and Ilya.

Irina has never even heard of Ottawa, but she is quite sure Grigory will not have heard of it, either, and that is good enough for her. She's only mostly sure that they speak English in Canada, and Ilya has been studying English at school for years; he promises to teach her everything he knows once they board the plane which, he admits, really is not much.

The flight is long. Ilya, for his part, really does attempt to teach Irina some English in the air, but all he can really recall are phrases like "My name is," and "May I please have," and "Where is bathroom?"

Irina's heart sinks lower and lower the further they get from Russia. Is she crazy? Why has she done this? What is she thinking? This is never going to work, she is going to have to crawl back home with her tail between her legs and beg Grigory not to kill Ilya after he kills her.

But Ilya does not seem to share her fears. There is a light in his eyes that Irina has never seen off the ice, and a warmth in his smile that she is sure she has never seen at all before. He makes her repeat the phrases she has learned over and over for the first hour of the flight, and then he is dead to the world, sound asleep on her shoulder; Irina has never seen him more relaxed in his life.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

fun fact: this is the first chapter i wrote of this fic :)

i fear there is literally nothing else fun about this chapter

June, 2011 – Lanaudière, Québec

The two hour drive from the airport in Ottawa to his parents' cottage in Lanaudière makes Shane feel like he's been transported back in time to childhood, in the backseat of David's Volvo, Yuna chattering on in the passenger seat about the last game of Shane's season. Montréal is going all the way next year, according to Yuna, but, damnit, Boston's got a good thing going on down there, too, and they're going to be stiff competition if they keep on the way they were headed this past season, and Shane should really be watching some more clips and games in his downtime because that damn Ilya Rozanov is really going to give him a run for his money, *god*, he's become *such* a fucking asshole—

Shane tunes her out, eventually, really immersing himself in the experience of having time traveled back to childhood. It'd be easy to spiral, to think about what's missing from this trip that would really make it feel as though he's gone back in time, but he determinedly does not think about that. He has had a lot of time to think since that night in Vegas, and he has decided to continue trying to move on from Ilya. If Ilya calls, if Ilya apologizes, well, he'll cross that bridge then, but Shane is done waiting and wishing for things that are almost definitely never going to happen.

They arrive at the cottage a little after seven in the evening, the sun just beginning its slow descent over the lake and bathing everything in a warm, golden glow. Shane carries everyone's bags inside, Yuna opens a bottle of wine for the three of them, and David sets off to the kitchen, pulling out a package of fish from the fridge he stocked at some point before Shane came home.

It's nice, being back here with his parents, but in a way, it does feel a bit too much like being a child again. Shane has grown and changed in ways he can never get back over the past year, and he feels almost out of place at this kitchen table, tripping over his answers to his mother's questions about his goals and plans for next season.

"Jesus, Yuna, let the boy breathe," David says lightheartedly. "He's just finished his first season in the NHL, can we celebrate a little before we go diving into the next one?"

Yuna looks perplexed, blinking at Shane over the top of her wine glass. “I thought that’s what we were doing?”

Shane laughs, and David and Yuna keep at it, bickering playfully about what actually constitutes as celebration. Shane’s phone begins to ring in his pocket, but cuts itself off before he can pull it out. He’s still laughing at Yuna’s indignation over David’s accusation that she is incapable of relaxing, but the laughter turns hollow when he sees the notification on his lock screen.

Missed Call – Ilya Rozanov

He doesn’t have time to process before his phone flickers and blurs into another incoming call. He actively chooses not to process as he stands up and leaves the room, swiping his thumb across the screen to accept the call while he steps out onto the back deck, closing the sliding door behind him a little too forcefully.

“Ilya?”

There’s a deafening silence across the line.

“Ilya?” he asks again. “Did you mean to call me?”

“Did you mean to pick up?”

Shane’s blood goes fuzzy at the sound of Ilya’s voice. He has been trying very hard for the past few days to convince himself that their conversation in the bathroom in Vegas was a dream, but hearing Ilya speak to him again now brings it all back.

“Yes,” he says quietly.

“Yes,” Ilya echoes, and he’s not right in Shane’s ear anymore, he’s a hundred miles away, maybe more.

“Is everything okay?” Shane asks.

Ilya is quiet for a beat too long. “No.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Where are you?” Ilya asks, like Shane said nothing.

“At the cottage, with my parents,” Shane says. “What’s wrong?”

“I am—“ Ilya’s voice sounds tight. He clears his throat. “I am in Ottawa.”

“Ilya,” Shane says lowly, jaw clenched. “What is wrong?”

“Everything,” Ilya whispers.

Shane feels the floor shift under his feet, like he’s sinking. Ilya is crying.

“You’re scaring the fuck out of me, dude,” Shane says dumbly.

“She— Shane, she is—“

“What? Who?”

Ilya hiccups, muttering in Russian before breathing loudly into the phone. “I just got home, I do not know when she— I found her, in her bed. Her sleeping pills—“

If the floor shifted a moment ago, it gives out completely now. Shane reaches for the back of the patio sofa, mind reeling. “Jesus, Ilya,” Shane breathes. “Your mom? She’s...?”

“Not yet,” Ilya says. He sounds like a child, small and scared and heartbroken.

Ilya was never any of those things as a child, not for as long as Shane knew him. He was happy, carefree, and loved his mother enough to undo all the damage his father did to her, all the damage he did to them both, and she loved him back to the same degree. They were inseparable, Ilya and Irina, in ways Shane never really quite understood, even after learning what they had been through together. The bond between them is unlike anything Shane could ever comprehend, and Shane cannot imagine what is going through Ilya’s head now.

“Not— yet?” Shane questions haltingly.

“They are doing everything they can,” Ilya says, carefully measured, like he’s mocking whichever doctor must have told him that. “But it is— she—“

“Ilya,” Shane says, because he doesn’t know what else to say.

“Shane,” Ilya hiccups again, and then sobs, but it’s a muffled sound, like he’s trying to hide it. “I am—“

“I know,” Shane says. “I know.”

“I need—“

“I’m on my way,” Shane says, already halfway back inside. He marches into the kitchen, reaches around David’s shoulder and turns the oven off.

“Hey—“ David starts to complain.

“What hospital?” Shane says into the phone.

That gets everyone moving. Yuna has the keys to the Volvo before Ilya has even finished replying, and David doesn’t bother rewinding the fish he’d taken out, just dumps it directly into the garbage. They’re out the door like a small team of firefighters, unthinkingly jumping into action, and Shane’s parents don’t even know who he’s talking to.

“Two hours,” Shane says into the phone. “Do you want to stay on the phone until we get there?”

“No,” Ilya says quickly. And then, “Maybe. Probably yes.”

“Okay,” Shane says. “Are you—“

“You do not have to,” Ilya says.

“Yes,” Shane scoffs. “Ilya—“

Yuna’s jaw drops, and her head whips around the headrest in front of Shane, but Shane just looks down, locked into the way Ilya whimpers through the phone.

“I did not know who else to call,” Ilya says miserably. “I do not— I have no one.”

“You have me,” Shane says decisively. “We’ll be there soon, we’ll stay with you, whatever you need, Ilya, seriously.”

“I am sorry,” Ilya cries quietly. “Shane, I am so—“

“Don’t,” Shane says. And then, “Me too. I’m so fucking sorry.”

“I miss you,” Ilya says. Shane squeezes his eyes closed, and Yuna places a firm hand on his knee. “Shane, if she—“

“She won’t,” Shane interrupts. “They’re going to bring her back, you found her in time, you saved her, Ilya, she’s going to—“

“The doctor is coming,” Ilya says quickly, sniffing loudly and then going silent as he pulls himself together. “They need to talk to me.”

“Okay,” Shane says, heart sinking. “Do you want—“

“I will keep you updated,” Ilya says.

The line goes dead.

Shane keeps the phone pressed to his ear, like he can will the satellites to pick up whatever conversation is being had in the emergency department waiting room in Ottawa. The satellites do not bend to will, unfortunately, and Shane lowers the phone to his lap with a shaky exhale.

“Shane?” Yuna says gently.

“Irina,” Shane says. It should be alarming, probably, how fast he dissolves into tears now that he doesn’t have to be strong for Ilya. Now that his mother’s gentle voice and hand on his knee provide him the comfort he needs to fall apart. God, his mother. He loves her so much. What must Ilya be fucking going through right now—

“What happened?” Yuna asks. “Is she alright?”

“No,” Shane says bitterly. “She— well, I don’t know. Ilya just said he found her, and they’re doing everything they can.”

Yuna, uncharacteristically, goes silent.

“She’s gonna be okay,” Shane says, more of a whimper than anything, swiping harshly at his face. “Right? She’s going to be okay, right?”

Yuna swallows hard, glancing up at David, who is worrying his bottom lip between his thumb and forefinger, his other hand tight around the steering wheel.

“Mom.”

“Shane, honey,” Yuna says, chewing the inside of her cheek for only a second or two. “Irina is... well, I’ve known her a long time, and early on in our friendship, when you boys were young, she... confided in me,” she admits.

“She has depression,” Shane says. “I know. Sometimes Ilya—“ he stops himself, childishly, from betraying Ilya’s trust. Ilya never said it out loud, not really, but Shane has long been familiar with the darkness that hides within Ilya.

“Yes,” Yuna says. “She has been through a lot, they both have.”

“I know,” Shane says through gritted teeth. He knows, he knows everything about Ilya. Ilya is his best fucking friend. Is? Was?

“I shouldn’t have let everything come between us,” Yuna says, turning back to the dashboard and slumping in her seat. “I should have been there for her, I should have—“

“This is not your fault, Yuna,” David says, his voice rough and low.

“I know that,” Yuna tuts. “But I could have done more, I could have tried harder—“

“We did try,” David says. “You can’t help someone who won’t accept it.”

They go back and forth in a similar manner until they make it to the highway, but Shane tunes them out, checking his phone every few seconds for an update from Ilya. Nothing comes, and then nothing still, and Shane’s going to drain his entire battery before they make it back to Ottawa but he keeps checking the phone just to make sure, just to check one more time, one more time, maybe this time, now, now, now...?

It’s a little over an hour into the drive when finally Shane’s phone lights up on its own. He scrambles to pick it up so fast he sends it clattering to the floor under Yuna’s seat, and after a bit of struggle and, shamefully, a bit of yelling, he digs it out and unlocks it.

Ilya: Nothing yet.

Shane blows out a frustrated breath, relaying the message to his parents. He’s bombarded with questions from both of them, but he ignores them in favor of asking the one question he cares about most.

Shane: Are you okay?

Ilya opens it a few minutes after Shane hits send, but doesn't answer until almost ten full minutes later.

Ilya: How long until you are here?

Shane: Like 40 minutes.

Shane: Do you need anything? We can stop somewhere and bring you whatever you want.

Shane: Are you hungry? Do you have a phone charger? Water?

Ilya: I am fine. Thank you.

Shane: Are you sure?

Ilya: Yes.

Ilya: Actually phone charger would be good.

Shane: You got it.

Shane: Are you okay? You didn't answer that question

Shane: Ilya?

It's radio silence for a bit, but Ilya reads the message a few minutes before David is going to get off the highway in Ottawa. As soon as Shane sees the read receipt, he sends another.

Shane: We're about ten minutes away. What floor?

Ilya: 3

Shane: Okay. How are you?

Ilya reads the message right away, but doesn't answer. Shane wants to throw his phone out the window. He knows Ilya is not okay, how could he be, Shane would be in the psychiatric ward by now if he was in Ilya's shoes. But just a little reassurance, just a little thumbs up emoji, for crying out loud, to put Shane's mind at ease, so he could stop worrying about Ilya trying to follow his mother down before Shane can—

He slams his phone down on the seat beside him, startling his poor mother. She turns around to face him, and he shouldn't be shocked to find her eyes red and heavy looking, but she hasn't turned around since nearly the beginning of the trip, and it's jarring to see his strong, fearless mother looking so scared and so deeply sad.

"He won't say anything," Shane says, as a way of justifying his phone slamming. "He just asked for a phone charger and won't fucking tell me if he's okay or not."

“Shane,” Yuna says softly, like he’s stupid. Remarkably, she doesn’t scold him for his language. “Do you really think—“

“I know he’s not okay,” Shane bites. “But I just— he won’t talk to me.”

“We’ll be with him soon,” Yuna says. “Do you have a phone charger for him?”

“No,” Shane realizes. “Oh, fuck—“

“I’ll drop you off,” David says. “I’ll go get him a phone charger, find a place to park, and come find you.”

As long as the car ride felt in Shane’s panic and frustration, it seems like all too soon that they’re pulling up to the entrance of the hospital, Yuna flying out of the car before David’s even put it in park. Shane tumbles out after her in a fog, eyes glued to her back as she weaves through the few people in the lobby and jams her finger into the elevator button.

“What floor?” she asks, all business, but Shane can see the way she’s shaking. Shane wishes he could comfort her, but he’s shaking even more than she is.

“Three,” Shane says quietly, voice tight.

The elevator doors open with an obnoxiously loud ding, and neither of them move for almost too long. The doors start to close again, and Shane shoves an arm out between them, forcing it back open again and forcing himself inside. Yuna scurries in after him, jams her shaking finger against the button marked 3, and then the doors close with another ding.

It could be a few seconds, it could be a lifetime, but eventually the doors open again, the ding piercing Shane’s spine and irritating him to his core. He shoves his way out of the elevator just to get away from it, but then he’s confronted with the sight of Ilya Rozanov, and he almost wants the ding back.

He looks terrible. His hair is all greasy and flat, his face puffy and splotchy. He’s in a pair of loose black basketball shorts and a tight fitting black t-shirt, black socks and sneakers, like he showed up ready for a funeral. He’s already looking at Shane when Shane looks up to find him in the waiting room chair he’s camped out in, but he makes no move to get up, just staring at Shane with this awful, resigned look in his eyes. Shane freezes under the weight of that look, and for all he’s been practicing and scripting this moment in his head during the drive, he has absolutely nothing to say now that Ilya is close enough to touch.

Yuna shoves past him, nearly knocks him over in her haste to get to Ilya. Ilya has just barely started to lift himself out of his chair when Yuna yanks him the rest of the way up, wrapping him in her arms and squeezing so tight it must hurt.

Ilya relaxes against her, blinking long and slow and pressing his mouth against her shoulder. His eyes do not leave Shane’s, not for the entire, too-long hug, not even while he nods and snuffles at whatever Yuna is murmuring into his ear.

When Yuna finally releases him, Ilya straightens up and finally drops his gaze to the floor. Yuna turns to look back at Shane, but Shane doesn't spare her even a thought of a glance, finally closing the distance between himself and Ilya and reaching, alarmingly, for Ilya's face.

He comes in too hot, squishes Ilya's cheeks together in a way that would be comical anywhere on Earth except here, and forces Ilya to look back up at him. He almost expects Ilya's eyes to be full of tears when he meets Shane's gaze again, but they're not even damp, just a little hazy and a lot heavy.

"Ilya," Shane says, eyes raking over Ilya's face.

It feels like it's been a year since Shane has seen him. It hasn't been; Shane was this close to him just a week ago, staring down the barrel of those gorgeous eyes in that stupid bathroom in Las Vegas, but this is not that same Ilya. Right now, like this, Shane could swear this is *Ilya*, as in *his* Ilya, the Ilya he has loved all his life. Right now, Shane's chest is burning with so many things, but rage is not among them, hatred is not among them. This is not the asshole Shane left in that penthouse in Boston. It's *Ilya*.

Right now, all that exists is Ilya's eyes, Ilya's mouth, turned down into a devastated frown. All that exists is the pulse in Ilya's ears under Shane's fingertips, the bob of his throat when he swallows hard, the flare of his nostrils as he fights to keep his breathing even. All that exists is Shane's hands on him, dragging him in, closer, not close enough, Ilya's head tucking under Shane's chin while Shane crushes him to his chest.

"You are here," Ilya says, pathetic. Like a child. Like a little boy who's lost his mama.

"I'm here," Shane says, one hand in Ilya's hair, the other curled into the back of Ilya's t-shirt.

It's cold in the hallway, and Shane can feel that Ilya's skin is cool through the fabric of his t-shirt. He takes his face out of the curls at the crown of Ilya's head to glance over at his mother. She's crying again, wiping quickly at her eyes when Shane looks at her.

"Text Dad," he says to her. "Tell him to pick up a sweatshirt, too." Ilya makes a quiet noise of protest against his chest. "And a bottle of Coke."

Ilya tries to pull away, but Shane doesn't let him go far, and Ilya tightens his arms around Shane's middle in response. Shane presses his face back into Ilya's hair, and Ilya sags against him, like he's realized he's safe, he doesn't have to hold himself up anymore now that Shane is here.

Shane holds him up as easily as he holds himself up; Ilya is big, bigger than he's ever been, but Shane is strong enough to support him. Ilya isn't the only one who's changed over the past year.

I love you, Shane wants to tell him. *I love you* and *I'm sorry* and *Please forgive me* and *Please be okay*.

“Thank you for coming,” Ilya says, getting his feet back under him and straightening up out of Shane’s hold. Shane sways minutely toward him as he goes, like his center of balance has pulled away from him.

“Of course,” Yuna says. “You’re important to us, Ilya, and your mother, too, even if we haven’t...” she trails off, gesturing vaguely with her hand.

“You are important to me, too,” Ilya says to her, and then glances briefly at Shane. They are still standing so close together. “You all are.” God, Shane has missed him.

“What’s the status?” Yuna asks. “Have you heard anything yet?”

Shane can’t fucking take his eyes off of Ilya, even though Ilya doesn’t look back at him again.

“No,” Ilya says, “not since a while ago. There was no change, then, she was still— they are still waiting,” he says lowly.

His jaw is so tight, but his shoulders are slumped forward, curled in on himself. Ilya is the strongest, bravest, most confident person Shane has ever known, but right now he looks like a gust of wind could blow him over, and he’d just crumble at the force of it.

“I’m going to track someone down, get some answers,” Yuna says, her eyes dry now, back to business. “Stay here, try to relax. I’ll come back once I’ve found anything out.”

With that, she’s gone, leaving Shane alone with the left side of Ilya. Ilya sniffs and looks down, like he’s not ready to see Shane again just yet. Shane gives him time, doesn’t move a muscle, except to keep sweeping his eyes over Ilya’s entire being to check for signs of impending collapse.

Finally, Ilya turns his miserable gaze to Shane, offering him something like a sad smile. Shane reaches for him again, and Ilya allows it for a moment before he slumps back down into his chair.

Shane sits down beside him, even though he feels like he could run a marathon up and down this hallway with all the nerves and anxiety in his veins. Without Yuna there to fill the silence with facts and game plans and logic, Shane struggles to find any words to offer Ilya, so he settles on the desperate question he’s been attempting to have answered for hours now.

“Are you okay?”

Ilya scoffs, turning away from Shane to glance down the hallway, as if someone might be there to tell Shane how fucking stupid he is so that Ilya won’t have to do it himself.

“Ilya,” Shane says.

“No,” Ilya says, his voice breaking right down the middle, face still turned away from Shane. “I am not.”

Shane knew that, he really did. But knowing it and hearing it in Ilya's shaking, teary voice, are two very different things. Neither of them says another word for a long, tense moment, Shane's mind reeling with impossible responses he couldn't give.

Out of desperation, he reaches for Ilya's hand. Out of desperation, Ilya lets him.

The elevator sings its insufferable note and the doors slide open, and Ilya tries to drop Shane's hand, but Shane clings tight. It's stupid, he should let go, too, they do both still have careers and appearances to uphold, but this seems like maybe it transcends the NHL.

Luckily, the only person who rounds the corner from the elevator is David. Ilya relaxes at the sight of him, not bothering to even glance at the objects David is hurriedly and awkwardly pulling from the shopping bag in his hand.

"I didn't know what phone charger you needed, so I got one of every kind," David is saying, presenting Ilya with a wide array of various cords. "I got you a Coke, too, well, a couple of them, and some different flavors, I wasn't sure— Oh, here, a sweatshirt," he winces, pulling a bright red hoodie from the bag. "This was all they had."

Ilya extends the hand that isn't wrapped up in Shane's to accept the sweatshirt, not even bothering to look at what is on it as he tugs it over his head. He drops Shane's hand only to find his way out of the hoodie, a small, sad smile gracing his lips when he finally looks down.

"You two loved the Centaurs, back in the day," David says weakly.

"Thank you," Ilya says, standing to wrap David in his arms. David hugs him hard enough to crease his brand new hoodie.

"I'm so sorry, Ilya," David says.

"She will be okay," Ilya says, but he doesn't sound like he really means it, really believes it. He sinks back into his chair as soon as David releases him, and Shane offers his hand again, but Ilya pretends not to notice. "Yuna is somewhere, yelling at doctors, or something."

"I expect nothing less," David says, fishing through his little bag of treasures again and handing Ilya a bottle of Coke. Ilya accepts it with a nod, cracks it open, and takes barely a sip, probably just to appease David.

David, appeased, sets the bag down on the chair to Ilya's left and then sits down in the chair to Shane's right, dedicating himself to studying the floor of the hallway. Shane leaves his hand over the armrest of Ilya's chair as an offering, but Ilya seems fascinated with the bottle in his hands, turning it around and around, twisting the cap off, and on, and off, and on.

Yuna reappears in front of the harrowed audience, her face bright. She had to knock a few heads, but she was able to talk to one of Irina's nurses who told her that Irina is stable, but not out of the woods. The doctors are worried about brain damage, but as soon as she's awake, Ilya can see her. She'll be admitted to a mandatory inpatient program as soon as she is discharged from the hospital, but if she does well, she'll be released back into Ilya's care by

the end of the month. She'll have frequent mandated therapy and psychiatric appointments, and will be placed on a national list to be refused narcotics, but she'll be alive, and that's all anyone can ask for.

Ilya looks equal parts relieved and devastated by the news. A little color has returned to his cheeks, but his eyes remain sunken, not quite landing on anything beyond the middle distance.

"She'll get through this," Yuna says, placing a firm hand on Ilya's shoulder. Ilya's entire body sags under the pressure of the gesture. "And so will you."

"Thank you, Yuna," Ilya says quietly.

"And we'll be here to help," David chimes in. "I know you'll have to go back to Boston in the fall, and that's ages away, but you can have peace of mind knowing that we will be here for her even when you can't be."

Ilya snuffles and nods, eyes completely unfocused and staring blankly ahead. "Thank you."

"We're glad you called, kiddo," David says, reaching over Shane to ruffle Ilya's hair. Ilya's entire head bobbles with the movement. "I know things haven't been—"

"We're always here," Yuna says, cutting David off at the knees for good reason. "No matter what."

Shane can't take his eyes off of Ilya, can't think of a single word to say. Ilya looks like a shell of himself, like he's retreated somewhere none of them can reach him until they all get bored and leave him be. Shane tries to convey this to his mother telepathically, but she seems to already be on the same page.

"David, let's go find the cafeteria," Yuna says, giving Shane a pointed look as she pulls David gently from his chair by the hand. "I'm sure we could all use something to eat."

Shane sinks back against his chair as soon as the elevator announces its departure, finally making to remove his hand from Ilya's space. Ilya latches on at the last second, tugging Shane's hand into his lap, but does not otherwise change anything about his posture or demeanor.

Shane is itching to ask him something, tell him something, do something, but he has no idea what. Ilya squeezes his hand, like he can hear Shane thinking, can feel it, and the simple squeeze tells Shane everything he needs to know; there is nothing to ask or say, nothing to do except this, be here. Shane can be here. That much he can do.

The Hollanders are nothing if not completely, overbearingly helpful, and as much as Ilya knows he should be thankful for it, all he wants to do is melt into the floor and cease to exist.

Yuna and David take it in shifts, one of them guarding the armchair Ilya has made a home in while the other goes on a food run, or a coffee run, or harasses the doctors, though the last job is typically reserved for Yuna. It is sweet, the way they never even hint at wanting to leave and get back to their cottage, their precious alone time with their precious son.

Their precious son, for his part, has only left Ilya's side twice in the past eight hours; once to pee, and once to drag his mother away from the poor receptionist during hour seven. He keeps his hand draped over the arm of Ilya's chair at all times, whether or not Ilya chooses to hold it, a constant reminder that Ilya is not alone in this, even if he feels like he is, even if he deserves to be.

That is what makes this even harder than it has to be: he does not deserve any of them. He deserves to be here, he deserves every ounce of pain in his chest and his head and his stomach, and he deserves to be completely and utterly alone with it. He does not deserve Shane, beautiful, sleepy, clueless Shane, fingers twitching against Ilya's outer thigh every time his head droops down and snaps back up.

"Sleep," Ilya tells him eventually, after Shane has snapped awake for the third time in less than ten minutes. Shane hums and sits up a little straighter, turning to face him.

"I'm fine," Shane says, voice gravelly and tired. "You should sleep."

"I am fine," Ilya lies. His brain feels like mush, and he can barely register his lower extremities, but sleep is so far out of the question it almost seems like a ridiculous suggestion. "I could not sleep if I wanted to."

"What's your favorite city you got to play in this season?" Shane asks, voice low. David is snoring quietly in the chair to Shane's right.

Ilya does not answer for a moment, closing his eyes to subdue the urge to attempt to kill Shane with them.

"I like playing in Ottawa," Shane says. "Feels like, I don't know, kinda what we imagined it'd be like, when we were kids."

Ilya was never a kid. He has never felt further from the version of himself who was ever a child.

"Yes, same," he says eventually. "Florida is fun. New York, because, is New York. They fucking hate me there," he murmurs.

"They hate you everywhere," Shane chuckles. "Because you're the best in the goddamn game."

Ilya cannot help the smile that pulls at his lips. "One of the best," he says.

“Thanks,” Shane smiles. It is a real, genuine smile, the likes of which Ilya has not seen in person in so, so long. It scares him enough that he has to kill it.

“Not you,” Ilya says, but there is not nearly as much coolness in it as he intends.

“Right,” Shane says, and his smile does not fade, but it does turn into something softer, more knowing. He is looking right into Ilya’s soul, and it makes Ilya squirm.

“Congratulations on your season, by the way,” Ilya says quietly, almost to himself. “Really impressive.”

“Thank you,” Shane says earnestly. “You too. You played an incredible season. I wonder which one of us will win a cup first?”

“Me,” Ilya says automatically. He never wants to touch a fucking hockey stick again, never wants to see ice for the rest of his life. “Obviously.”

“Okay,” Shane laughs quietly. “We’ll see.”

“Mr. Rozanov?” a nurse asks the hallway at large, and Ilya is standing before he even registers it as his own name, head spinning a little. Shane is standing too, behind him and two inches to his right, Ilya can feel him there.

“Yes,” Ilya says. Every muscle in his body is on fire. Shane smooths a hand privately down the curve of his spine, and Ilya steps forward sharply.

“Your mother is awake,” the nurse says, somehow managing to make it sound like bad news. “If you’d like to see her.”

If he would like to see her? As if he has not been sitting in this goddamn chair for over ten hours now, waiting, asking for updates— via Yuna— every thirty minutes on the dot? If he would like to fucking see her?

He has never wanted anything less in his life. He has never needed something quite so badly.

Because he is a fucking piece of shit, he does not so much as throw a glance in Shane’s direction as he ambles after the nurse down the hall. His mother is awake, she is alive. Shane is here, Shane cares about him still, after everything, after all Ilya has put him through. His mother is awake. She is alive.

It is dark in the room when the nurse opens the door. Ilya has absolutely no idea what time of day it even is, but it is dark outside, and the room is illuminated by a heart rate monitor at Irina’s bedside, and one dimmed overhead light. Irina is reclined, one hand cuffed to the bed, the other attached at several junctions to various machines. A precaution, the nurse says of the cuff, a simple protocol for patients on suicide watch.

No one speaks until the nurse leaves the room. Ilya’s eyes are locked on Irina’s. Irina’s eyes are unfocused somewhere around Ilya’s chest, maybe his neck.

“*Mama*,” he says, voice broken and wavering.

Irina squeezes her eyes shut. She cannot bear to look at him. God, Ilya hates himself.

"Ilyusha," she says finally, her voice thick and heavy with impending tears. *"Oh, solnyshko."*

"Mama," Ilya says again, his face crumbling as the first tears fall. *"Mama."*

"Forgive me, please," Irina whimpers, finally opening her eyes. *"Oh, Ilyusha, forgive me."*

"Forgive me," Ilya insists, stepping close enough to touch his mother's cuffed hand. She latches on, and Ilya resists the urge to squeeze. He knows it is an illusion, a trick of the light, but his strong, beautiful, resilient mother seems so very fragile. *"I have been a disgrace of a son, I let you down, I am so sorry, Mama, forgive me, forgive me—"*

"Hush, Ilyusha," Irina gasps. *"This is so far from the truth."*

"I tried, Mama, I tried not to be like him," Ilya cries. *"I tried, Mama, I'm sorry."*

"Ilya," Irina says, in the cadence only a mother can master to silence a blubbering fool she must call a son. *"You perfect boy, what are you talking about?"*

"I have hurt everyone," Ilya says, eyes wild. *"I have hurt you, I have hurt Shane, I have—"*

"Hush," Irina says again. *"Oh, Ilyusha, this is not your fault."*

"Then what?" Ilya cries, pitiful now, sinking to his elbows on the bed and pressing his face to his mother's hip. *"Why, Mama, why?"*

"It was an accident," Irina says, raking her fingers through his hair to the best of her ability with her wrist restrained. She stifles a sob, but Ilya sobs freely, pressing into her touch. *"Oh, my sweet Ilyusha, what have I done?"*

Ilya snuffles miserably and lifts his head to look at her, not bothering to wipe his tears away. Irina tries to do it herself, but the cuff only allows her to stroke a finger along the edge of Ilya's jaw.

"I am sick, Ilyusha," she says quietly. *"I have always known this about myself. I thought there was nothing here for me, in this life. And then you came along, solnyshko, and gave me a reason to be. All I have ever cared about, all I have ever wanted, all I have ever lived for is you, your happiness. You, Ilyusha, are the best thing in my life. I have tried to find my way, to make a life worth living, to give you a life worth living, and sometimes I think I have done well, but other times—"* she pauses, turns away from Ilya for a moment to collect herself. *"I have so many regrets,"* she whispers. *"I wish I never met your father. I wish I did not have a hand in creating your brother. I wish I had taken you away from there much sooner than I did. I have so much guilt."*

Irina's sandy blonde curls are braided against the pillow behind her head, tinged now with barely-there silver streaks. Ilya traces a finger along the twists in her hair, blinking another round of tears out of his eyes. *"You are perfect,"* he whispers.

“Far from it, my love,” Irina smiles sadly. “I did not mean for any of this. I have pushed everyone away, I have stopped leaving the house, I have been drinking— They call it depression, this illness. I have been suffering for a long, long time.”

Ilya wipes at his face, shaking his head. *“I should never have left you,”* he says. *“I should have done better, I should have been stronger, I—”*

“This is not your fault, solnyshko,” Irina says. *“It is a problem that lives within me. I should not drink, and I know that, but I did. I was— some days are hard. Bad. I made a mistake. I drank too much, and I— oh, Ilyusha, I am so sorry you had to see me like that. Thank you, for not letting me go,”* she says, tears spilling over her own cheeks. *“I knew as soon as I had done it, I had done the wrong thing. I have waited my entire life for it to be over, and when I finally made the choice, I regretted it. But it was too late.”*

“I love you,” Ilya says desperately. *“I do, Mama, I need you always. I cannot lose you.”*

“I am going to get better, Ilyusha,” Irina says, firmly, as if she is trying to convince them both. *“I am. There are things I can do, medications I can take. I am going to get better. I wish I had tried before.”*

Ilya is not sure how long he’s allowed to stay here with his mother, but he has absolutely no intention of leaving her side without being dragged away. He pulls the chair from the corner of the room closer to her bedside and sits, resting his cheek against the mattress beside her hip and gazing up at her.

As hard as he tries, Ilya cannot stop his mind from wandering as silence settles over the room, Irina’s heavy eyes fluttering closed. He wonders what it must have felt like for his sweet mother, drunk and alone, deciding it was time to go. He wonders if she felt excited for the relief, or scared of the end. He wonders if he will ever reach that point. He wonders if he will regret it, too.

Irina naps off and on, and Ilya fades here and there, as well, but never enough to be restful. He is in a dark period when Irina’s hand combs through his hair again, and his eyes flutter open.

“Shane is here,” he says, before his brain has caught up. Irina’s eyebrows raise, and her fingers stutter.

“He is?” she breathes.

“David and Yuna, too,” Ilya nods. *“They were in Lanaudière, they came all the way back.”*

“Oh, Ilyusha,” Irina whispers. *“You are so loved.”*

“You are,” Ilya says. *“I am awful. I do not deserve them.”*

“You are flawed,” Irina says. *“You do deserve them. More than you know.”*

“I have been terrible to him,” Ilya says. *“I have so many regrets, but I do not deserve his forgiveness, Mama. I do not deserve him.”*

“Darling, he is here,” Irina says thoughtfully. “You called, and he came. He has already forgiven you.”

“He should not,” Ilya says. “I have not forgiven myself.”

“That is a much harder task,” Irina nods.

“Mama, I—“

“I know, solnyshko.”

“I love him.”

“Tell him,” Irina says. “Ilyusha, you have never been happier in your whole life than when you are with him. Not hockey, not Sveta, not me, nothing has ever made you glow the way he does.”

“Everything I do hurts him,” Ilya says. “I cannot even protect him without breaking his heart. And yet he always comes back for more.”

“That is love, little one,” Irina says. “Or so I am told. You are far luckier than I ever was.”

“It is torture,” Ilya says. “I want him more than anything in the world, more than Boston, more than hockey, more than air, but I cannot have him, even if he wanted me.”

“Says who?” Irina says doubtfully.

“The world,” Ilya scoffs. “The NHL, at least.”

“Ah, the NHL is the whole world now?” Irina says. “How long was I out?”

“You know what I mean,” Ilya says. “It is not possible.”

“Nonsense, Ilyusha,” Irina hushes him. “Nothing in your life has been possible, but look at you,” she says, tracing her finger down his cheek.

“I missed you, Mama,” Ilya says.

“I missed you more than you will ever know,” Irina says. “You are my whole world, my boy.”

Hours pass, more dozing, and delicate conversations in between. More than once, Ilya considers what his life would be like if he had not come home when he did, if he never got any more moments like these with his Mama. He can hardly bear the thought. Irina snaps him out of it each time with gentle fingers on his face, in his hair, tracing the shell of his ear or the curve of his eyebrow.

Ilya considers putting up a fight when the nurses come to kick him out, but Irina plants a kiss to his forehead and tells him to go, find Shane, make things right. She has some work to do to make things right for herself, and when they meet again soon, she expects leaps and bounds in the way of their collective happiness.

It has been a number of hours, Ilya could not manage even an estimate of how many, since he went into Irina's room, but all three Hollanders are just where he left them in the hallway. David is fast asleep on the sofa opposite the armchairs, Yuna slumped on his shoulder with her legs draped over his lap, ever the perfect, inseparable match. Shane is slouched so far in his own armchair that he is nearly lying down, but he is still fighting sleep, the stubborn asshole, and his eyes flutter all the way open at the sight of Ilya rounding the corner.

"Hey," Shane says, scrambling to get up from the chair. His legs must be asleep, or his ass, or something, because he stumbles a little bit upon standing, and then limps the three or four steps it takes to close the distance between himself and Ilya. "How are you?"

Me, Ilya thinks, searching Shane's exhausted, hopeful eyes for any hint of resentment— there is none. *After all these hours, after all this time spent worrying about my mother, he is worried about me.*

"I am okay," Ilya says, and for the first time in, well, maybe longer than he thought, he means it. "She is okay. She is—" the exhaustion and lingering emotion make English incredibly difficult. "She seems— better."

"Better," Shane echoes, smiling that beautiful, boyish smile. "Better is good." Ilya loves him so fucking much.

"Better is good," Ilya agrees. "What time is it?"

Shane digs his phone out of his pocket. "Almost noon."

Ilya swears under his breath, taking Shane by the shoulders and guiding him back to the chairs. "Have you slept?"

"Kinda," Shane shrugs. "I wasn't sure when you would come back, and I wanted to be awake when you did, in case you needed—" he very nearly does not stop himself from saying *me*. "Anything."

Ilya crushes him into his chest, wringing a grunt of surprise from Shane's throat. Shane hugs him back just as fiercely as soon as he gains the faculty to do so, and Ilya presses his face into Shane's neck.

"Thank you," Ilya whispers. "For— I do not deserve you."

"You don't deserve a lot of things in your life," Shane murmurs. "I'm hardly the worst of them."

It startles a chuckle out of Ilya, and he pulls away smiling. "We should get them to bed," he says, nodding over Shane's shoulder to Yuna and David.

Shane glances over confusedly, like he forgot they were there, and then nods. "Bed," he says, stifling a yawn. "Yeah."

Chapter 17

The Same Day – Ottawa, Ontario

It takes some time to convince Ilya to leave the hospital with them, but eventually, the four of them pile into David's Volvo. Once Ilya is trapped within the confines of the car, Yuna pushes it, as Yuna does.

"Ilya," she says seriously, turning around in her seat almost entirely to look at Ilya in the backseat. "I think you should come with us to the cottage. Your mother will be away for a while, you shouldn't be alone here in Ottawa, and you always loved the cottage so much," she says, as though she is presenting her case.

"No, thank you," Ilya says quietly. "I appreciate that, Yuna, but no. I cannot be that far from her."

"I understand that you feel that way," Yuna says, "but there is nothing for you to do here, Ilya. Come on, come up with us, just for a week. I bet it will help."

Ilya looks tortured when Shane manages to glance over at him. "Maybe," he says, finally. "I, ah, I do not— think I should be alone," he says, his voice so quiet it's almost like a secret.

Shane wants to reach for him, wants to hold his hand, his face, wrap his arms around him and hold him together the way he knows, from experience, that he can't. He'd like to try, though. He'd like to try again.

"I think it'll be good for you," Yuna says. "Some fresh air, some privacy."

"Yes," Ilya agrees. He sounds so miserable, so defeated.

"Let's not drive up tonight," Shane says, watching the side of Ilya's face. "Let's get some sleep, drive up in the morning."

"I second that," David yawns. "Ilya, should we swing by your mom's so you can pack?"

Ilya looks like he's going to be sick. Shane could be sick for him.

"I'll do it," Shane says quietly, just for Ilya. "If you don't wanna go in, I'll just grab—"

"I can do it," Ilya tells him. "Yes, thank you, David."

"Do you want— um, I can come?" Shane offers.

Ilya looks at him for the first time since leaving the hospital. He looks somehow both twelve again and like he's aged thirty years, his eyes heavy and swollen. "Please," he whispers.

Shane nods, unable to look away now that Ilya has met his eye. Ilya's lip trembles a little as he slides his hand along the seat, reaching for Shane, like he just can't help it. Shane latches onto his hand instantaneously, squeezing tight when Ilya looks away and breathes deep.

Shane has never been to this apartment before. Ilya leads him and, after some deliberation, Yuna and David, to the elevators and up to the apartment. His hands tremble as he unlocks the door, keeping his eyes down while he enters.

His suitcase is sitting there, just inside the door. He grabs it like he's mad at it, and starts shuffling through the living room. "I will only be a minute," he says over his shoulder. "Just need to change some things out."

Yuna hurries after him, anyway. Ilya probably doesn't need help repacking his suitcase, but Yuna will end up doing it for him, anyway. David busies himself examining some of the photographs and art Irina has hung up on the walls, and Shane's eyes dart around the room. The kitchen is beautiful, spacious, a true master chef's kitchen for a true master chef. It is all white and clean lines, modern and tasteful, but Irina has made it feel cozy and quaint, with all of her soft lamps and earthy colors. There is an empty bottle of wine open on the island, and Shane's heart sinks at the sight of it.

He doesn't make the conscious decision to wander, but his feet take him further into the living room. There are blankets strewn over the sofa like the remnants of some kind of nest, a half eaten plate of food on the coffee table.

It isn't long before he finds himself in Irina's bedroom. There is a wine glass on its side on the floor, a bit of wine dried and crusted inside the glass, the rest of it long dried into the carpet. The sheets on Irina's bed are in disarray, which is not unusual for her, but they are pulled so far to the left, like they were dragged, like she was— *oh, god*.

The pills are nowhere to be found, at least upon an initial sweep of the eyes, but Shane is sure if he checked the bathroom, there would be an empty bottle on the sink, maybe in the trash. She probably took the bottle out of the medicine cabinet, swallowed as many pills as she could with her wine, and then got into bed and waited to die. For as long as Shane has known her, he has never seen Irina consume a drop of alcohol, except when trying to appease Yuna in the early days. She clung to that wine glass, though, until she thought she was at the end, when her world went dark and the glass slipped from her hand. The room becomes very blurry, and then Shane feels the tears spill over his cheeks, and he's frozen in the doorway.

There's a hand on his shoulder, and he turns to find David looking more somber than Shane has ever seen him. "Jesus," David breathes, glancing into the bedroom. Shane wipes quickly at his cheeks, and David looks down. "Come on, don't let him see this."

He holds himself together, somehow, for Ilya, who is just a door away in his bedroom with Yuna. Shane wipes the last of the tears from his face and picks up the plate from the coffee table, brings it to the kitchen, cleans it, and finds its home. He corks the wine bottle, drops it into the trash, and cleans up the few little droplets dried on the white marble counter. He goes back to the living room and folds all the blankets on the sofa, arranging them neatly and fluffing the cushions, while he's at it. He opens the blinds, the afternoon sunshine flooding in, and uses his hand to sweep some of the dust off of the furniture. The least he can do for Ilya

is make this look more like home and less like a crime scene, even if Ilya has never really actually lived in this apartment.

Ilya emerges from the bedroom eventually with freshly reddened eyes, a significantly lighter suitcase, and Yuna, who is wiping at her face discreetly. Ilya immediately seems to notice that Shane has cleaned up, and he offers him the tiniest smile and a nod. Shane shrugs, *it was all I could do*, but Ilya only nods again in appreciation.

“Are we ready?” David says.

Shane, having managed to wrestle it out of Ilya’s hand, carries his suitcase back down to the Volvo, and stows it carefully in the trunk. The drive back to David and Yuna’s house is longer than it used to be; this apartment is so much further away, in the up-and-coming part of the city, far outside of David and Yuna’s neighborhood.

Yuna rushes off to set up the guest room for Ilya when they arrive home, and Shane carries Ilya’s suitcase inside and up the stairs. Ilya is not thrilled about it, but he doesn’t argue, graciously, like he understands that Shane has absolutely no idea what to do except anything that might be considered helpful.

David sets about whipping up a meal, because no one has eaten today. It is a quiet, sleepy meal, and it is only mid-afternoon by the time they’re finished, but everyone shuffles off to bed, anyway.

Shane watches from the doorway of his childhood bedroom as Ilya walks to the guest room, his feet heavy, head down. “Ilya?” he calls softly.

Ilya looks back at him, holding onto the doorframe of the guest bedroom.

“Goodnight,” Shane says, offering Ilya a gentle smile.

“Goodnight, Shane,” Ilya says, and then he closes himself in the guest room. Shane leaves his own door open— an invitation— and falls into his bed.

Ilya stares at the ceiling of the guest bedroom for what could be minutes, or hours, possibly even days. He has slept at this house before, so many times, but never like this, never in the guest room, like a fucking *guest*. He feels like even less than a guest, like a total fucking stranger, heavy eyes tracing the unfamiliar ceiling of the room. Shane’s ceiling glows red in the daylight because of all the stupid fucking Centaurs paraphernalia. Ilya should transfer to the Centaurs, probably. He wonders if Boston will let him out of his contract for a family emergency.

It has gotten dark, at some point, properly nighttime, and the house has been quiet as long as Ilya has been here. He jumps when the guest room door cracks open, creaking lightly on its

mostly unused hinges. Ilya lifts only his head, meeting Shane's eyes in the darkness.

"Have you slept at all?" Shane whispers.

Ilya shakes his head.

"Me either," Shane says, stepping fully into the room and closing the door behind himself. Ilya stares at him, trying to will him into the bed with him. It works; Shane nods to the empty space beside Ilya. "Can I...?"

Ilya nods, and puts his head back down. The bed dips as Shane crawls in next to him, and then Shane hesitates before wrapping himself fully around Ilya, as best as he can manage. Ilya's eyes fall closed, and Shane is a still, steady weight on his chest, but after a while, Shane's breathing has not evened out, either.

"Can we go to your bed?" Ilya asks, only peeling his eyes open when Shane looks up at him and nods.

Shane's bed is the most comfortable bed in the whole world, and it always has been, for as long as Ilya can remember. He waits for Shane to lie down first and then crawls on top of him, slotting himself over Shane's chest and between all of his limbs like he was built to fit there, which, maybe he was. Shane holds him, and if Ilya is crushing him, he does not complain about it.

Shane's fingers are in his hair, tracing up and down his spine through his t-shirt, and Ilya is asleep in minutes.

Irina does not make it through the night. It is a very confusing phone call, but Ilya understands the gist of it, understands the gravity of it. He is back at the apartment, all alone, but it is the wrong apartment, it is the old apartment, and Irina's pull-out sofa bed is soaked with blood, and so, Ilya realizes, are his own hands.

"Ilya," a voice sings, somewhere in the distance. Ilya blinks his eyes open.

"Mama?"

"It's Shane," Shane says, like he regrets it. Ilya does not regret it, not for a second. "You were dreaming."

Ilya presses his face into Shane's chest. It was a brief, plotless nightmare, but the fear and distress are still real. "I woke you? Sorry."

"It's okay," Shane breathes, fingernails scratching lightly over Ilya's scalp. Ilya's eyes droop. "Go back to sleep."

“Ya tebya lyublyu,” Ilya mutters unintelligibly, voice muffled into Shane’s neck.

“What?” Shane asks, but Ilya is gone, snoring quietly against Shane’s skin.

The next time Ilya stirs, Shane is sound asleep under him, his lips parted slightly, fingers still buried in Ilya’s hair. The arm Shane has wrapped around Ilya’s waist tightens when Ilya shifts.

Ilya presses a kiss to Shane’s chest, just below his clavicle, puts his head back down, and drifts back to sleep.

It takes a moment, in the morning, to remember why Ilya Rozanov is sound asleep on top of him, but not a terribly long one. Shane cards his fingers through Ilya’s hair, brushing it back from his forehead and craning his neck to see Ilya’s face. Ilya is dead to the world, mouth hanging open, drooling all over Shane’s t-shirt.

It isn’t long before Ilya begins to stir, waking himself up with a snuffle and a groan. He picks his head up, smacking his lips a few times to restore the moisture in his mouth, and looks up at Shane. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Shane says, pulling his fingers out of Ilya’s hair. “How are you?”

“Oh, peachy,” Ilya says, rolling off of Shane and landing on his side on the mattress. “Forgot how comfortable your bed is.”

“Yeah,” Shane says, stretching out a little. “I should bring it with me back to Montréal, probably. I sleep like shit there.”

Ilya stares very intently at Shane’s armpit.

“Probably I will not go back to Boston,” Ilya says.

“Well, yeah, you should stay with your mom for a little while when she gets released,” Shane says. “You don’t have to be back until next season, right?”

“I mean ever,” Ilya says. “I will transfer. Or quit.”

Shane is stunned into silence. “Ilya—”

“I will not leave her,” Ilya says quietly. “I cannot.”

“She won’t want you to do that,” Shane says.

“I do not care,” Ilya says. “I do not give a fuck.”

“Fair enough,” Shane says. “Let’s not talk about this now. C’mon, let’s get some breakfast.”

There isn’t much food in the house, given that the Hollanders are meant to be at the cottage for the summer, but David has laid out a selection of cereal boxes on the kitchen counter. Ilya chooses one without fuss, and Shane takes a seat at the island, watching Ilya’s back as he pours himself a bowl.

If Shane didn’t know any better, he’d swear Ilya told him that he loved him in Russian last night. It has been a while, but Shane has heard those words before, many times, in many contexts, has said them himself just as many times. Ilya was half asleep, and was speaking directly into Shane’s chest, so it’s hard to say for sure, but Shane knows he said something about love, at least.

He wants to ask, but he knows better. It’s not a can of worms that needs to be opened right now. It’s a can of worms that can remain sealed and locked in a drawer for a little while, at least. The can probably should just be thrown out; it’s way past its best by date. The worms are, like, super dead, probably.

There is a brief discussion after breakfast about the best course of action for the drive up to the cottage later this morning. It is agreed upon that they will take two cars, just in case anything happens, and Ilya needs to get back to Ottawa quickly. David and Yuna settle into the Volvo, and Shane transfers Ilya’s suitcase to the trunk of his own Land Rover, and that’s that, they’re off to the cottage once more.

At sixteen, spending two hours alone in the car with Ilya Rozanov would have been Shane Hollander’s wet dream. All that time, uninterrupted, nothing to do but talk and laugh and dream out loud about the future. Now, spending two hours alone in the car with Ilya Rozanov seems a very daunting task, especially when Ilya sinks into the passenger seat and turns almost fully toward the window, blocking Shane out entirely.

Shane leaves the music off, in case Ilya wants to talk, but the silence quickly becomes painfully, excruciatingly awkward. He taps the back of Ilya’s arm to get his attention, and hands over the aux cord wordlessly. Ilya takes the cord, stares at it for a long moment, and then digs his phone out of his back pocket to plug it in.

Shane regrets it immediately. Ilya puts on the worst music Shane has ever heard, loud and obnoxious and quick, something they play at nightclubs. He bites his tongue and focuses on the road, doesn’t say a word about Ilya’s terrible music, because if Ilya likes it, he can have it. Shane would give him anything in the world right now if it would make him feel even a little bit better.

They make it through three bass thumping, ear splitting songs before Ilya starts to laugh. Shane glances over at him, quirking an eyebrow. “What?”

“I cannot believe you are allowing this music,” Ilya says, amused.

“Oh,” Shane nods. “Okay, so you *are* fucking with me.”

Ilya laughs brightly, which, *yes, good, more of that, please.*

“This is garbage, Ilya,” he says, shaking his head.

“I actually do like it,” Ilya shrugs. *Oh, fuck.* “But I know your ears must be bleeding.”

“I mean, it’s not really that bad,” Shane says quickly. “I think I could get into it.”

“Shane,” Ilya says, deadpan. “I know you. You hate this.”

Shane could argue, could concede, could do anything, but he can’t quite find the words. Yeah, Ilya does know him. Ilya knows him better than anyone in the world knows him. Shane doesn’t even know what kind of music Ilya likes, doesn’t know a goddamn thing about him, not anymore. Ilya didn’t listen to this shit before Boston; he has changed so much, everything has changed so much.

Ilya reaches over the center console and pulls Shane’s right hand away from two o’clock, pulling it toward himself like he’s going to kiss the back of it, but aborting at the last second. He holds Shane’s hand in his lap, instead, and Shane tightens his left hand around ten o’clock, clenching his jaw as another completely awful song comes on.

Ilya turns the music off, suddenly, plunging them into silence. Shane immediately wants the music back. This is worse, actually, sitting here with his hand in Ilya Rozanov’s lap and absolutely nothing else to focus on, besides the sound of— oh, god, Ilya is breathing like he’s trying not to cry.

“Shane, I—” Ilya starts, voice low, head down. His sunglasses are dark, but Shane can see past them from this angle when he glances over, and Ilya’s eyes are closed. “I just—”

“It’s okay,” Shane says.

“It is not,” Ilya says. “I am so, so sorry.”

“So am I,” Shane says weakly.

“You should not be,” Ilya says. “I— I took it too far. I should have— I wish I did not push you away.”

“I wish I didn’t go so easily,” Shane says, voice tight. “I wish I didn’t let you.”

“It is all my fault,” Ilya is starting to cry, fingers trembling between Shane’s. “All of it.”

“It’s not,” Shane says. “It’s mine, too, and the reporters, the media, the whole league—”

“Is mine,” Ilya chokes. “My mother—”

“Don’t,” Shane says sharply. “Don’t do that, Ilya.”

“We left Russia to escape my father,” Ilya says. Shane knows this; Ilya’s father was an abusive piece of shit, and Shane has heard the story before. “She made the decision to leave my brother behind because he was too far gone; he was too like my father, too mean, too awful. She took me with her because I was not. She thought she could save me.”

“Ilya, stop,” Shane says.

“She made me promise her, a few years ago, that if I ever felt like dying, I would tell her. I did not ask her to promise me back,” Ilya sobs.

“You were a kid,” Shane manages.

“She made me promise her that because she knew me, Shane, she thought I was too soft for this world, too weak, too sad. Like her. And I was. I was like her. I was too soft and too sad. But hockey made me tough. It made me strong, inside and outside. But it did not make me less sad. It made me— like my father.”

“You’re not,” Shane says. “You are not like him, Ilya.”

“Not in every way,” Ilya says lowly. “But in some ways. In the ways that matter.” He pauses for a beat to look out the window. “In the ways that I hurt people.”

Shane has never met Ilya’s father, probably never will, and does not care to. He cannot confirm or deny any likeness or lack thereof between the man and Ilya, not logically, but in his heart, he knows that Ilya is not, and could never be, like his father.

“She called me, a few days before,” Ilya confesses. “She was drunk. I was drunk. I do not remember most of what was said, but I was not kind. She was, what do you call it? Bumming me out,” he laughs angrily under his breath. “I was partying. It was my birthday. None of the other guys were spending their night talking their mothers off of cliffs. I got angry.”

“Ilya, that is not why she—“

“She told me I sounded like him,” Ilya says. Shane’s stomach lurches. “She said I sounded like my father. I have never sobered up so quickly in my life.”

“Ilya,” Shane breathes.

“I apologized, I cried, for fuck’s sake, and she forgave me. She apologized for hijacking my night, and she told me she loved me, and she hung up. Few days later, at some point, she swallowed half a bottle of sleeping pills with an entire bottle of wine.”

Shane, quite recklessly, crosses two lanes of traffic into the breakdown lane. He can’t see the road through his tears. The car goes from 100 kilometers per hour to 0 in under 3 seconds, and Ilya braces his arms against the dashboard. Shane bends his entire index fingernail back in his haste to undo his seatbelt, and it hurts like a bitch, but he barely notices, hauling himself up and over the center console and into Ilya’s lap. Ilya seems unsure what to do with him, but Shane drags Ilya’s head into his chest with one hand, crushing his other arm behind

Ilya's back to hold him securely. Ilya melts, arms coming slowly to wrap low around Shane's waist, and sobs into his chest.

"Hey," Shane says, stroking Ilya's hair. "Hey."

"I will never forgive myself," Ilya cries, shaking hands curled into the back of Shane's linen shirt. "I wish I—"

"Do not," Shane bites out, stifling Ilya's words with his own chest. "Do not fucking finish that sentence, Rozanov."

Nothing moves for a while other than the cars whizzing by outside the driver's side window. Ilya gains control of himself slowly, first the tears, then the shaking hands, and then the grip in the back of Shane's shirt loosens. "Sorry," he says, as he pulls away, voice still thick but not quite as broken. "I am sorry."

Fuck. Shane wants to kiss him. *Fuck.*

Ilya is looking up at him, big, watery blue eyes, rimmed with red, his cheeks still damp and his lips swollen from chewing on them. He is so fucking beautiful, the spitting image of his mother; the longer Shane stares at him, the sadder he appears.

"I—" *love you*, Shane wants to say. "I know."

"We should drive," Ilya says, pressing himself back against the seat as if he's the one crowding Shane's space. "Yuna will be very worried if we are too long behind them."

Shane nods, but he makes no move to climb off of Ilya and back into the passenger seat. "I—" he starts again. *Love you.*

"I know," Ilya whispers, and it seems like he really does. How could he not?

Shane climbs off of him with less grace than expected from a professional athlete, dropping back into the driver's seat with a huff. He glances back over at Ilya, but Ilya is resolutely not looking at him, tugging the sleeve of the hoodie he hasn't taken off since yesterday down over his hand and mopping at his face with it. His sunglasses are gone, Shane isn't exactly sure when they came off, but he spots them down on the floor between Ilya's feet, forgotten.

"Are you hungry?" Shane asks, to give Ilya something else to think about, and turns to focus on merging back onto the busy highway.

"No," Ilya says quietly. "Thank you."

"You sure?" Shane presses. "I mean, I'm sure my parents will have something whipped up pretty soon after we get to the cottage, but—"

"Shane," Ilya cuts him off gently. "Thank you."

"Yeah," Shane says. "Mhm."

It's quiet for a while. Ilya reaches for the aux cord again at some point and puts on some decidedly less terrible music, and it almost feels like Ilya is Ilya again, the Ilya Shane knew when he was twelve, the Ilya he got to grow up loving. Almost.

Ilya is so clearly not that twelve year old boy anymore, nor is he any version of himself that came after that. He's changed, this man sitting in Shane's passenger seat. Maybe that's the biggest change; when Shane glances over out of the corner of his eye, Ilya is a man, a big, built, hardened man, not a trace of baby fat left on him, not a single inch of skin that hasn't been molded into the fucking Adonis that Ilya was, in retrospect, always going to be. It's more than that, though, it's the sadness in his eyes that, if only just recently amplified, seems permanent. It's the tightness of his jaw that has become so familiar in the past year, Shane isn't convinced that it isn't just part of his bone structure now. It's the pinch in his eyebrows, the little wrinkle between them, the scars on his knuckles from going after men twice his size on the ice and winning every single time. If Shane had only ever known the version of Ilya who was twelve years old, happy and free and funny and hopeful, even with the weight of the fucking world on his shoulders, then he wouldn't be able to pick this man out of a lineup. Shane has known every version of him, though, every single iteration of Ilya Rozanov that has created the version sitting beside him, and maybe that's how he can be so completely, utterly sure that he is completely, utterly in love with him; he never stopped, he never will.

Ilya can pick up all the obnoxious Bostonian traits he wants, can listen to the trashy music that his teammates listen to, can throw all the insults he wants at Shane on the ice, but there has never been a version of Ilya that Shane has not been absolutely head over heels for, and there will never be a version of Shane that feels differently.

Chapter 18

The same day – Lanaudière, Québec

Ilya should not have come here. He loves it here, it is so beautiful, so peaceful, so revitalizing and soul-healing. It might be his favorite place on the planet, besides the ice. He should not have come here.

There is nothing to do here but think. He can sit by the water, and think. He can go out in the canoe, and think. He can sit by the fire, and think. He can go for a run, and think. All the time he is thinking. Thinking is so dangerous.

He has been here for less than two hours. He wants to go home. He wants to never go home. He wants to paddle to the middle of the lake and float until he cannot float anymore, until he sinks to the bottom, never to be seen again. He wants to fly to Moscow and beat Alexei to within an inch of his life, maybe further, and his father, too.

He is angry. He is scared. He is confused. He is devastatingly, overwhelmingly sad. Most of all, more than anything else, he is empty.

He is hollow. There are so many emotions in him, so many feelings he must feel, so many thoughts he must think, but beneath all of them, beneath the surface where they all skim like waterbugs, there is nothing. As he sits, gazing out at the sun rippling on the water from the safety of the deck, he cannot help but focus on the part of him that is completely, concerningly empty.

He has not even begun to unpack in his mind the events of the past three days. The past six months. The past year. It all hangs above him like an anvil, threatening to fall at any moment and crush him completely.

He is here. He is with Shane, and the Hollanders. He is at the cottage. He spent so much time and energy over the past week, since running into Shane in Vegas, preparing himself to never see this place again, and now he is here. Without his mother. Because his mother tried to kill herself before he got home.

Shane comes to the deck eventually, offering a glass of lemonade and a plate of snacks. Ilya offers him a small, careful smile in return, and Shane settles down next to him on the patio sofa, giving him just enough space that Ilya does not feel crowded, but not so much that Ilya could not reach out and touch him, if he wanted. He wants. He does not move.

Ilya is so grateful for him. Shane has been perfect, since the moment he showed up to the hospital. Since the moment Ilya called him. Ilya almost did not call him, for exactly this reason; Shane is perfect, always has been, always will be, and as much as Ilya loves him for it, it is also endlessly grating to Ilya's nerves. Shane is able to read him like a book, is able to anticipate his every want, need, and whim, and at some point, Ilya is going to snap at him,

probably when Shane deserves it the least, because that is what Ilya does. He takes, and he takes, and he takes, and the second that Shane pushes at just the wrong time, Ilya is going to ruin this whole thing. Shane will realize that he did the right thing when he walked out on Ilya, and he will be too kind and considerate to ask Ilya to leave now, but he will be miserable, and it will be Ilya's fault. Again. Like it always is. Like everything is.

He does not leave the patio sofa for the entire afternoon. David feeds him a cheeseburger around sunset, and he eats on the sofa, and then there is a fire, like there always is, and Ilya stares into it with everyone else, the crackling of the wood filling the space of the conversation no one is willing to have.

Yuna does not take her eyes off of Ilya. Ilya does not look at her, cannot meet her eye, but he can see her in his periphery, watching him over the fire like she expects him to open his veins right here on the deck, like she expects him to get on his knees at Shane's feet and beg his forgiveness, explain everything away, and offer her precious son the peace of mind that Ilya has long owed him.

Yesterday, while repacking his suitcase in Ilya's bedroom in Ottawa, Yuna and Ilya had something of a... heart to heart. She was silent at first, pushing him out of the way once he had emptied his suitcase and setting about repacking it herself; she and Shane are so achingly similar in so many ways, but Shane could never hope to mother the way that Yuna does. Ilya watched her, her lips set in a thin line while she worked, until finally she turned away and sobbed, dropping Ilya's Boston Bears t-shirt on the bed and shaking her head.

"I am so angry with you, Ilya," she had whispered, finally turning to look at him, tears streaming down her face. Ilya forced himself to hold her gaze, though he could hardly see her through his own tears. "I am so angry at everything you did to Shane, everything you put him through— you broke his heart, Ilya, you broke *him*. You— fuck," she breathed, mopping at her face. "But I love you, Ilya. We all do. Shane included."

Ilya had shaken his head, frowning at the floor.

"We love you," she had insisted. "And we are going to be here for you, we are going to help you get through this. You are not alone, Ilya, okay? We're not going anywhere."

"Thank you," Ilya had choked out through his tears.

"But," Yuna had continued, "you need to clean up your act. Especially around Shane. I don't know what got into you in Boston, but I hope you left it there. If you hurt him again, Ilya—"

Ilya had cut her off with a sob, burying his face in his lap. She was there immediately, rubbing his back, shushing him sweetly, but it had taken Ilya an embarrassing amount of time to catch his breath, whimpering as he looked up at Yuna again.

"I was being harassed by my brother," he had told her. Yuna's jaw had dropped, and Ilya could not look at her anymore, but he continued. "He was threatening me, threatening Mama, my career, my life... He did not know about Shane, and I needed to keep it that way. I needed him to think that Shane was not something he could come after, something that he could take

away from me. That is why I started acting the way I did. But I took it too far. I hurt him. And I never told him why. I was ashamed. I am still ashamed.”

“We’ll go to the police,” Yuna had said immediately. “We will have him investigated, make sure he can never contact you—”

“I have already taken care of it,” Ilya had said. “He has not contacted me in months, and I do not believe he ever will again.”

Yuna had nodded, silently working through it in her head. “And Shane doesn’t know any of this?”

“No,” Ilya said, looking up at her quickly. “And I— Please, do not tell him. I need to— he needs to hear it from me. I owe it to him.”

“Oh, Ilya,” Yuna had sighed, tugging him into her arms. “You should have—”

“I know,” Ilya said. “I know. I am so ashamed, Yuna. I would go back and change it all if I could. I hate myself for what I have allowed to happen.”

“I can’t imagine how hard that was,” Yuna said, squeezing him tighter and then letting go. “I’m so sorry you were going through that all alone. That breaks my heart.”

“I will fix it,” Ilya said. “I will fix all of it, I promise. I just— I did not expect— Mama—”

Yuna had hugged him again when he broke into another round of tears, and had held him until he gathered himself again. “You’re not alone, Ilya,” she told him. “This is not your fault. We’re here, we love you, and we’re going to help you.”

“Thank you,” Ilya had cried, pressing his face into Yuna’s shoulder. “I am so sorry.”

“So am I,” Yuna had whispered.

Now, she stares. Ilya is uncomfortably hot, and not only because of the blazing fire in front of him. Shane is on the opposite end of the patio sofa, staring at his own feet. Ilya wants to crawl across the sofa to him, curl up in his lap, and cry himself to sleep. He wants to slither inside of Shane’s skin and be held until this all goes away. He wants to tell Shane everything, tell Shane exactly what happened— no, he does not want that. He wants to throw himself into the firepit much, much more than he wants that.

It feels like a bad excuse, is the thing. It feels like a very, very foolish thing to have ruined his entire life over. It does not excuse his behavior, does not excuse the pain and suffering he inflicted on Shane in the last few months of their relationship, and it does not warrant Shane’s forgiveness. If anything, Shane should hate him even more when he learns the truth. And Ilya— Ilya cannot have that. He cannot take it.

Still, Shane should know.

It will become another thing for Shane to fret over, another thing for Shane to have to soothe him about and help him heal from. Ilya cannot stand the thought of adding more to Shane’s

plate of things to soothe Ilya about and help him heal from.

Still, Shane should know.

David and Yuna leave, eventually, with quiet *goodnights* and sleepy *love yous*. Shane does not budge from his end of the sofa, and so Ilya does not budge, either, until Shane sighs and looks over at him.

“Wow,” Shane says, politely ignoring the way Ilya jumps. “What a year, huh?”

Ilya watches his face as the firelight flickers over it. Shane looks so tired. He is so beautiful. “Yeah.”

“It was just a year ago we were sitting here like this, waiting for our lives to change,” Shane says, looking back at the fire when it seems looking at Ilya is too much to bear. “God, if we’d known what that change was gonna look like...”

“Shane,” Ilya says, voice breaking. Shane looks over so quickly, between one flicker of the fire and the next, Ilya does not even see the movement happen. “I am so sorry.”

“Don’t, Ilya,” Shane says, voice low. “Don’t apologize to me right now.”

Ilya can feel his face screwing up, but he holds his tongue.

“Not now. You can apologize to me when the world isn’t on fire,” Shane says.

“No,” Ilya says. “I need to do it now. I need to tell you,” he breathes.

“Not now, Ilya,” Shane says, with a soft smile, like he thinks he is being charitable. “There’s enough going on, you don’t— you don’t owe me anything right now.”

Ilya owes him everything. He wants to push, wants to argue his case, but he is afraid of crossing Shane’s boundaries again, of pushing him too far. Ilya would walk barefoot over a bed of hot coals right now if Shane wanted him to, so if Shane wants him to wait to apologize, well, it is the least he can do.

“Can I just say one thing, then?” Ilya says, just short of begging.

Shane does not answer right away, watching Ilya’s face. “Okay,” he whispers eventually.

“Everything you said that night was true,” Ilya says. “I was awful. And I need you to know that it was not your fault. I was trying to— it was not because of you.”

Shane continues to watch him for a long, painful moment, his expression carefully blank. There is a flicker behind his eye, not from the fire, that tells Ilya he wants to know more, he wants to hear the rest of it, but he is willing to wait, because he thinks that is what is best for Ilya. And maybe— maybe he is right. Ilya is grateful to not have to say more right now, grateful to have gotten that much off his chest and to be able to sit with it for now, to have time to formulate the rest of what Shane needs to hear from him.

“Okay,” Shane says, finally, just when Ilya thinks he is not going to say anything at all. “Thank you for telling me that.”

Ilya nods, and then rubs at his eyes. “I think I will go to bed,” he says.

“Okay,” Shane says quietly, sinking into the sofa a little more. “Go ahead. I’ll put the fire out.”

Ilya floats into the house like a ghost, moving soundlessly up the stairs and into the guest room. He sits on the edge of the bed and waits, listens, but after so long, Shane still has not come up the stairs, so Ilya leaves the guest room, crosses the hall to the bathroom, and peers out the window, which looks out over the back deck.

Shane is still sitting on the sofa outside, head in his hands, hood up, just watching the fire die. Ilya watches him for far too long, hunched over the edge of the sink to observe. Eventually, Shane sits up and wipes at his face, like he has been crying. Ilya’s heart aches in his chest. Shane dumps a bucket of water over the fire and starts heading into the house; Ilya waits until he cannot see him anymore, and then moves to stand just inside the bathroom door, listening to Shane’s footsteps on the stairs. He times it perfectly— just as Shane goes to walk past the bathroom to get to his bedroom, Ilya pretends to just be leaving the bathroom, coming face to face with Shane in the dark hallway.

They stare at each other for a moment; Shane’s face is shrouded in darkness, but Ilya can tell that his eyes are red and swollen, cheeks blotchy from tears. Ilya offers him a small, consoling smile, and walks back to the guest room.

He looks back when he gets to the door, finding that Shane has moved to his bedroom doorway, watching him. As soon as Ilya meets his eye, Shane nods toward his room.

Ilya does not hesitate even a moment. He follows Shane like a dog, right into his bed and under the covers, curled into Shane’s side, sharing a pillow, sharing the air between their lungs. Shane falls asleep almost immediately, still warm from the fire and smelling of smoke and outside, and Ilya listens to him breathe for as long as it takes to follow him down.

Five days later

It takes a few days of trying, but Shane finally coaxes Ilya away from the cottage on Friday morning, exactly one week since the incident. Ilya has been... quiet. Concerningly so. Shane feels like they’re twelve again, like he has no idea how to communicate with Ilya, worried that Ilya isn’t understanding a word he says. He just seems so hollow, so withdrawn, so dull

and heartbroken. Shane grew up basking in the sunshine that Ilya kept in his pockets. It's been a cold week.

They drag the kayaks out, just the two of them, and set off in swimming trunks and hoodies in the late morning sun. Ilya goes on ahead, and Shane falls back easily, giving Ilya the space he is too fragile to ask for out loud.

It has been a very delicate dance, trying to predict and anticipate all of Ilya's needs and feelings so that he does not have to ask for anything. He's very good at it, always has been, and it's comforting, in a way, to know that he's still capable of reading Ilya's mind. It is also comforting to know that Ilya is still in there, underneath all of the negativity he picked up in Boston, that he is still sensitive and kind deep in his soul, and that his soul does still inhabit his beautiful skin. Ilya is so sad, so broken, but he is Ilya again. Shane's Ilya.

Shane is trying to keep with the task at hand, honestly, he is, but this week has been confusing, to say the least. A month ago, maybe even less, Shane hated Ilya's guts. He was disgusted with him, repulsed by him, hated even the mention of his name. But maybe that was never really the case. Maybe Shane knew all along, long before the drive up here, that he has been in love with Ilya all the while, never really stopped. And he is— in love, that is. He is desperately, hopelessly, undeniably in love with Ilya, and such a discovery has never been made at such an unfortunate time.

It is made even worse by the fact that he is sure that Ilya feels it, too. So much has happened between them, so many things that neither of them can take back, things that are going to take real, conscious effort to heal and grow from, but Ilya has slept in Shane's bed every single night since Shane showed up for him at the hospital, and that's not nothing.

But then again, maybe Ilya just had no one else to call. Maybe Shane was the only person he could turn to, the only person stupid enough to come running to him after everything. Ilya always did hate being alone. Is Shane just a convenient crutch? Is his kindness and bottomless love for Ilya being exploited in a moment of need?

How could Ilya have fallen out of love so fast? Shane was the one who left, the one who had had enough. Did Ilya stop loving him before that, even? Has Ilya ever really loved him at all? Has Shane just been convenient for him this whole time? It's not like he can ask. Ilya is having a hard enough time with everything going on around him without Shane in his ear about whether or not he's allowed to be in love with him.

They've both stopped paddling, for the most part, drifting atop the surface of the water and gliding along the shoreline. Shane isn't paying attention, lost in his own mind and watching the sun sparkle on the ripples of the lake, and his kayak bumps into the back of Ilya's, earning him a playful splash from Ilya's paddle.

Ilya smiles at him over his shoulder, and Shane's mind slows. Ilya loves him, even if he doesn't know it, even if he's not thinking about it right now. Shane knows, even after everything that happened, there has never been a version of Ilya that didn't love Shane, either.

“I think I should go back to Ottawa,” Ilya says, as Shane’s kayak glides along beside him, finally matching his pace as it slows. “Tomorrow, maybe.”

“Oh,” Shane says. “Okay. I’ll drive you.”

“Thank you,” Ilya says quietly. “I will have to get things ready. Put my ducks in my basket.”

Shane can’t help but smile, but he doesn’t correct Ilya’s bastardized idiom. “I’ll help, if I can,” he offers.

“You have helped enough,” Ilya says. “Really. Thank you.”

“Yeah, but, like,” Shane pushes, “if there’s anything, literally anything at all—“

“Shane,” Ilya says. He locks eyes with Shane when Shane looks over, and smiles. “Thank you.”

“Yeah,” Shane says. “Yeah, of course.”

“I will call my coach,” Ilya says. “I will probably have to beg to be let out of my contract.”

Shane doesn’t say anything for a moment; a motorboat passes by two hundred meters away, and the rippling waves rock their kayaks gently. “Are you gonna miss Boston?”

“Yes,” Ilya says, and then after a moment of deliberation, “and no.”

Shane nods, looks down at the water, and then out at the shoreline.

“I will miss having Sveta close,” Ilya says. “She helped me. A lot.” *After you left me.* He doesn’t say it, but Shane hears it in the tone of his voice, gentle, not cruel.

“You’ll keep in touch with her, though,” Shane says. It’s not a question.

“Yes,” Ilya says. “And I will see her when— well, if I ever go back to Boston.”

“You’ll play there,” Shane says.

“Yes, if the Centaurs will have me.”

“You can’t quit hockey, Ilya.”

“I will,” Ilya says. “If I have to.”

“They’ll take you,” Shane says. “Any team in the league would take you. They’d be stupid not to.”

“Even Montréal?” Ilya teases.

“Well, maybe not *any* team,” Shane teases back.

“Fair enough,” Ilya says.

“Can I tell you something?” Shane asks.

“Of course,” Ilya says, all serious, his blue eyes round and as sparkly as the water.

“I fucking hate Boston,” Shane says.

Ilya blinks, and then smiles. “Yes, Shane,” he says lowly. The sound of his name in Ilya’s voice sends shivers down his spine. “I know this.”

“It’s a stupid fucking city,” Shane says.

“It is not so bad,” Ilya says. “But, yes, I can’t say I will miss it terribly. The people, especially. Very hard to make friends in a city where no one speaks or looks at each other.”

“Didn’t seem like you ever had trouble finding people to be friendly with.” It comes out before Shane can decide to keep it in his head, and once it’s out, he wants to flip his kayak and let himself sink to the bottom of the lake. Ilya looks just as shocked as he feels, cheeks pinking slightly.

“I’m sorry,” Shane says immediately. “That was— I didn’t mean to say that. I didn’t mean it like that, I mean. I just— y’know. I saw pictures, and stuff.”

Ilya looks away; near the shore, a loon dives under the water, resurfaces a moment later with a tiny fish in its beak. “It is not untrue,” Ilya says, eventually. “I was... out of my mind, a bit. For some time.” He looks back at Shane, all his playful energy replaced with sadness and regret. “I was very lonely.”

Shane hates himself. “Yeah,” he says, voice breaking slightly. “Me too.”

Ilya frowns at him, but he quickly wipes it away. “Did you...” he mutters, eyes dropping to Shane’s chest. “With anyone?”

Shane hesitates; he doesn’t want to hurt Ilya’s feelings, not like this, not again, but he also doesn’t want to lie. “Uh, yeah,” he says. “I tried. A little.”

“With who?”

“Some random girl, the night that, uh—” Shane flushes, and Ilya looks down, nodding once. “It didn’t go well. And then a guy in Mexico, a few weeks ago.”

“And that went well?” Ilya asks. He doesn’t ask why Shane was in Mexico, why it didn’t go well with the girl, or anything else. He looks desperate to know whether or not Shane enjoyed himself with another man. Shane feels like shit.

“It... went better,” Shane shrugs. “But it wasn’t...”

“Did he hurt you?”

“No,” Shane says. “He just wasn’t...”

“What?” Ilya pushes. He looks almost wild when Shane meets his eyes, leaning so close that his kayak is beginning to tip dangerously.

“You,” Shane says.

Ilya inhales sharply, scrambling to right his kayak before it flips. Shane reaches out to help stabilize him, one hand on the back of the boat, and Ilya swallows hard while he uses his paddle to push himself out of the wake of his own turbulence.

They don’t talk again as they paddle back to the cottage. Ilya helps him pull the kayaks out and get them back up on the rack, and then Shane wanders away, disappearing into the cottage to try and regain some of his dignity.

He’s so stupid. *He wasn’t you?* Really, Shane? Now? With everything going on? With everything that happened during the season? With everything that’s happened since they’ve been apart? He chooses *now* to tell Ilya that Ilya has ruined him for every man on Earth, sexually, that he is still in love with him and always will be, and that he will never move on from what they had?

Well, okay, he didn’t actually say any of that. But it was implied. Did Ilya get the implication? He almost tipped his fucking kayak over, so, probably. God, Shane hates himself. He should start faking sick now so that David will offer to drive Ilya home tomorrow.

Ilya still has something to tell him. Shane has not forgotten that for a second. Ilya has an apology ready to go that Shane has refused to hear all week, because he’s terrified that it is coming loaded with other things that Shane will not want to hear. What if Ilya tells him that he doesn’t love him anymore? That he never did? That he’s actually only into girls now, and everything they shared as teenagers was just a fluke?

Shane should just talk to him, probably, get it all out in the open so that they both can get on with healing. But, Shane reminds himself, this is not the motion being deliberated at present. Ilya has so much to heal from already, Shane should be able to put his own feelings aside and just be there for him, be supportive for an old friend, if nothing else. Why is that so fucking hard to do?

Ilya spends the rest of the day on the deck, starting to make phone calls and write emails and research things on his phone. Shane gives him an abundance of space; he works out, goes for a run, takes a swim, takes a shower, rides to the grocery store with David, helps cook dinner, helps light the fire after dinner, and determinedly does not look at Ilya the entire time. Ilya, for his part, does not seem keen on looking at or speaking to him, either, which drives Shane even deeper into his own head, until he’s completely convinced that he’s ruined everything, he’s hurt Ilya even more, and they will never come back from this.

He goes to bed on his own that night, after a second shower and a long evening pretending that he’s not totally falling apart. He tosses and turns for hours, but Ilya seems to have found sanctuary in the guest room tonight. Of course. Of course Shane would ruin everything now. Of course Ilya would come back just within Shane’s reach and Shane would fuck it all up instantly, and for good this time.

He sleeps fitfully, waking every half hour to stare at the ceiling and resume his fussing. It's nearing four in the morning, and Shane has just drifted halfway back to sleep when the mattress dips behind him, and a pair of strong arms wrap around his chest. Ilya can probably feel the way Shane's heart is racing, but Shane presses back into him, curling his hands around both of Ilya's wrists to keep him close, to make sure he doesn't leave. Ilya holds him tighter, presses his face into the back of Shane's neck, and Shane feels all of the tension of the day seep out of him, out of the room, and out over the lake.

The sun has only just begun to peek up over the trees, casting the entire lake in its golden glow. Ilya blows another puff of smoke out over the surface of the water, still as glass, and hugs his knees a little tighter into his chest. He should have worn a sweatshirt, or even a shirt, at the very least, but he did not have the foresight to grab anything more than his lighter and the pack of cigarettes from his suitcase after he crawled out of Shane's bed this morning. Shane was so peaceful, sleeping soundly since almost the moment Ilya caved and crept into his room, but Ilya has far too much on his mind to have gotten even a wink of sleep.

He will leave Lanaudière later this afternoon, so long as Shane will still drive him. He has a hotel booked in Ottawa, and has already called a moving company to have Irina's apartment packed up and all of their belongings put into storage until Ilya can find somewhere else for them to live. He never wants to step foot in that apartment again, and he does not want his sweet mother to have to step foot in there, either. He has saved a few listings for houses for sale in Ottawa and the surrounding suburbs, but he will not buy anything until he has seen it in person, and he should wait until he is sure he can get out of his contract with the Bears first, as well.

He is excited, in a way, to get his life back on track, to fix all of his mistakes and heal while he helps Irina heal, too. He did not realize how out of control he has felt for the past year until it all came crashing down around him, and he is grateful to have been given this opportunity to make up for everything he has let ruin him and those around him. He is also deeply, profoundly sad, scared, embarrassed, harrowed, regretful, ashamed—the list goes on. He worries that Irina will be different now, that something has broken inside of her that he cannot fix, that the doctors cannot fix. He worries that he will never be able to look at her the same way, that every time he meets her eyes he will see her pale, lifeless face staring back at him, completely limp as he tried to shake her awake, completely unhearing as he screamed and cried until the ambulance arrived.

He takes a deep drag of his cigarette, closes his eyes, and submits as the scene replays in his head for the thousandth time this week. There is no stopping it, once it has started. The only way out is through.

He jumps when a hand touches his back, dropping his cigarette into the lake. He does not watch it sink, turning to look up at Shane, who hands him a steaming cup of coffee and drapes a blanket over his shoulders. Ilya accepts both quietly, and Shane sits down next to

him on the edge of the dock, his own cup of coffee cradled in his hands. Ilya shifts to share the blanket with Shane, and Shane presses close, resting his head against Ilya's shoulder.

Ilya sips his coffee—made just how he likes it best—and reaches for the pack of cigarettes beside him, pulling another one free. He waits for Shane to scold him, to remind how bad it is for him, but Shane says nothing, so Ilya lights the cigarette and smokes it down to the filter. The sun inches up in the sky, and the coffee in their cups runs low, and Ilya puts his cigarette out against the cold metal edge of the dock and reaches for another, just to see what will happen.

Shane makes a quiet noise of dissent, and Ilya smiles.

“What?”

“That’s so bad for you,” Shane grits out, like he cannot help himself.

Ilya tucks the cigarette back into the box, and places the box down on the dock. “Okay.”

Shane lifts his head and looks up at Ilya, surprised, but pleasantly so. “Can I tell you something?”

“Yes,” Ilya says, fixing the blanket where it has started to slip off of Shane's shoulder. Shane is in a hoodie and sweatpants, socks, and sneakers, but the tip of his nose is red from the chill of the morning air.

“I miss you.”

Ilya takes it like a punch to the gut. His coffee rises in his throat, but he cannot look away from Shane, his big, shiny eyes, his little red nose, his soft hair peeking out of his hood.

“I am right here,” Ilya whispers.

“Yeah,” Shane says. “I know.”

Ilya really is itching for that third cigarette now, but he does not reach for it, searching Shane's face for— he does not know what. He does not find it.

“I’m sorry,” Shane says. “I shouldn’t have said that. But I’ve been wanting to all week.”

Ilya cannot look away from him. It would be so easy to lean in and kiss him, cup his face, run his fingers through his hair, hold the back of his neck, lay him down on the dock, and kiss him breathless. He does not. He does not deserve to.

“I miss you so bad,” Shane says. His eyes are beginning to water. Ilya might be sick. “You’re still my best friend, at the end of the day. You know?”

“You are my best friend, too,” Ilya breathes.

“So can we go back to that?” Shane asks. “Can we be best friends again? Can we not be enemies? We can be rivals, whatever, I don’t care, but I don’t want to hate you, or pretend

that I do.”

Ilya looks away, physically cannot make himself watch that tear drip down Shane’s perfect cheek. Shane wipes it away quickly, but still, Ilya cannot look back at him. *Tell him*, Ilya thinks. *Tell him, tell him, tell him.*

Tell him what, exactly? *I got an email from my brother and it scared me so bad that I treated you like shit to protect you but I took it too far and made you hate me and you should hate me because I deserve to be hated and I do not deserve your forgiveness or your kindness or your help or your love and I am so sorry for everything but please do not forgive me.* Fuck that. Fuck it all. It is so stupid, such a weak, unacceptable excuse, let alone an explanation.

“Do you hate *me*?” Shane asks, voice breaking.

“Shane,” Ilya says, finally turning his head to meet Shane’s eyes. “I could never, ever, *ever* hate you,” he says. “Ever.”

Shane smiles, but it is a sad, weak little thing. “Me either,” he says. And then, after a minute, “Well, that’s a lie. I did hate you, Ilya, I really did, in that moment. I was just so... and you were so...”

“I know,” Ilya says. It is his voice that breaks this time. “And I do not blame you for hating me.”

“But I don’t,” Shane says quickly. “I don’t hate you, Ilya, because that wasn’t you.”

Ilya looks away again.

“I don’t know who you became, and I don’t know why, but it wasn’t you.”

“You are right,” Ilya breathes.

“The rivalry thing got to you,” Shane says, a little desperately, as if trying to confirm what he has been telling himself all this time, a story he created to fill in the gaps of all the things Ilya is keeping from him. “You took it too far, and it carried off the ice, and it came between us.”

Of all the things Shane could believe, this probably is the least harmful, and not completely untrue. It is less pathetic than the whole truth, at least.

“Yes,” Ilya says simply. “That is what happened. I am so sorry, Shane.”

“I knew it,” Shane says softly, vindicated. “But I didn’t see a way to fix it, so I just ran away. And I’m so sorry for that.”

“Do not be sorry, Shane,” Ilya says lowly, firmly. “There was no way to fix it. I would have carried on like that forever if it was not for...”

“You’ve been through so fucking much, Ilya,” Shane breathes.

“Yeah,” Ilya mutters. “I know.”

“Thank you for calling me,” Shane says.

“Thank you for answering,” Ilya says.

Shane puts his head back down on Ilya’s shoulder, tugging both ends of the blanket into his chest to fully engulf them both in the warmth. Ilya puts his head down on top of Shane’s and stares out at the water, guilt and shame and heartache and coffee and nicotine swirling inside him.

If he was not so fucking hurt, and sad, and scared, he would try to kiss Shane right now. Shane would probably let him. Or he could just tell Shane that he loves him, that he always will. Shane would probably say it back.

But this is not the time, nor the place. He is not in the headspace for that, and neither is Shane. Shane wants to be friends again, wants to put the past year behind them and move on, and Ilya should take what he has been offered, because it is far more than he deserves. He still has not told Shane the truth, or given him a genuine apology, and he cannot ask Shane to love him again when Ilya has not even given him that. In time, maybe, when Ilya figures his shit out. But not now. Not yet.

Chapter 19

July, 2011 – Ottawa, Ontario

It all happens very fast. Over the course of a couple of days and a couple hundred phone calls, Ilya talks the Bears into trading him to the Centaurs for a family emergency. No one is happy with this, besides the Centaurs; Ilya is taking a massive pay cut, and leaving a legendary team for a rather abysmal one, but his mother is sick, she needs him, and no one can fault him for that. The day he signs his new contract with the Centaurs, he puts in an offer on a house in the suburbs. It is gorgeous, not overly grand, but still stunning with its views of the river and its twelve foot ceilings and its spacious, open concept living space. He pays extra to close early, to have all of Irina's things moved in and set up for her, and to have her bedroom repainted her favorite shade of yellow. He better be able to turn the Centaurs around next season, or else he is going to have to start making FanCams on the side, like Hayden fucking Pike.

He flies to Boston one more time near the end of July, and holds a very somber, awkward press conference outside of the Garden. He announces that he has already ended his contract with the Bears in order to move back to Ottawa to take care of his mother, who is very sick, and that he regrets only having spent one season in Boston, and that he hopes his fans will forgive him and continue to support him during this time. He manages to make it through his entire pre-prepared statement without rolling his eyes even once, and then Svetlana takes him to dinner, which ends up being another somber, awkward event. They both manage to hold it together until they are on the sidewalk outside of Svetlana's apartment; Ilya is the one to break first.

"Ilyusha," Svetlana says, pulling him into her arms when he starts to let the day catch up to him.

"I have to leave you again," Ilya says miserably.

"And we will come back together again," Svetlana says, pulling away with tears in her big, beautiful eyes. *"I will come visit, and you will take me out when you are in town for games."*

"I will be so lonely in Ottawa," Ilya says.

"You need to fix things with Shane," Svetlana says.

"He wants to be friends again," Ilya says.

"That is a good start," Svetlana shrugs.

"I cannot, Sveta," Ilya says. *"I cannot tell him the truth, because I have let him believe a lie, and he will hate me if he finds out. I cannot ask him to take me back, because I cannot focus*

on him right now, and he does not deserve that. He does not deserve any of it. And I do not deserve him at all."

"Oh, Ilyusha," Svetlana sighs. *"You are so fucking stupid."*

"I know," Ilya says. Svetlana pets his hair sweetly.

"You will miss your flight," she says. *"Go. And call him. The longer you let this go on without fixing it, the more impossible it will be."*

Her words haunt him for the rest of the night. His flight back to Ottawa is late, and he gets back home after midnight, lets himself into his dark, empty, brand new house, and spends the rest of the night fretting.

He cannot fret about what Svetlana said right now. He cannot fret about Shane Hollander right now. His mother comes home tomorrow, and there is not enough time in the world to finish fretting about that. He triple checks that her bedroom is exactly right, that the kitchen is well stocked with all of the ingredients for all of her favorite dishes, that all of her blankets and homey decor are exactly where he expects she will like it.

She has been out of the hospital for some time, but Ilya paid to send her on some fancy wellness retreat that one of her doctors mentioned in passing. He needed time to get everything ready, to make sure everything would be perfect, that she would have nothing to worry about, nothing to be disappointed with. He has spent so much time worrying about whether she will like the house, whether she will be happy here, whether she will be pleased with the effort Ilya has made for her. She can move out, eventually, if she wants to, but Ilya will not give her the chance to be alone until she expresses that she would like to be— god, to think of how alone she must have felt when Ilya *and* the Hollanders went away, when she was all alone in that apartment, with nothing but her thoughts and her loneliness...

He leaves very early in the morning, drives back over the border into upstate New York, where Irina has been resting, relaxing, and participating in various therapies and healing activities for the past week. She is waiting for him with a nurse in the lobby when he arrives, and the sight of her nearly brings Ilya to tears.

She looks fresh, well rested, her hair clean and pulled back from her face. She is dressed in her own sweater and leggings, with her own purse over her shoulder, her smile bright and convincing when she spots Ilya.

Ilya does not know what he was expecting, but she looks so like herself, so healthy and so warm and so—

"Mama."

"Ilyusha!" she gushes, running across the lobby and into his arms.

"You look so well," Ilya says into her hair. *"Are you? Are you well?"*

"I am wonderful," she says, pressing up on her toes to kiss Ilya's cheek, and then whispering into his ear, *"Get me the fuck out of here."*

Ilya pulls back, eyes wide, and Irina pastes her smile back on. Ilya signs her out with the nurses at the desk, takes her bags, and leads her out to the car. Irina does not speak until Ilya has put her things in the trunk and climbed into the driver's seat.

"Mama, was it—"

"I love you," Irina says, grabbing his hand off of the gear shift and pressing a kiss to the back of it. *"More than life, solnyshko, more than anyone has ever loved anything. But fuck you for sending me to that place."*

Ilya feels like he has been slapped across the face. *"It was not good?"*

"It was awful, Ilyusha," Irina groans. *"These people are— they are insane! They are more insane than the patients! They made me do yoga!"*

"I am sorry, Mama," Ilya says, squeezing her hand. *"I thought it would be nice. I thought it would—"*

"It was," Irina says quickly, before Ilya can get worked up. *"It was nice, Ilyusha. But next time you need to occupy me for a week, could you just hire a babysitter?"*

"Mama," Ilya says. He failed. He has been back with his mother for less than ten minutes, and he has already failed her, she has been miserable all week, Ilya feels *terrible—*

"Oh, Ilyusha," Irina says, catching his eyes. *"Oh, moy lyubimyy. I am sorry. I am grateful. It was— it was hard to take, but it was helpful."*

"It was expensive," Ilya mutters.

"I learned things— ways to cope, ways to help myself. It was not all bullshit. Darling, do not feel bad. I am sorry. Thank you for giving me that experience."

"I am sorry they made you do yoga," Ilya says weakly.

Irina smiles, kissing Ilya's hand again. *"I will teach you some of the moves."*

Ilya forces a smile in return. *"Not a chance, Mama."*

They do not speak much while Ilya drives them home. Irina watches the world pass by outside the window, holds Ilya's hand all the while, occasionally chastises him for driving too fast, but otherwise remains quiet. Ilya continues to fret, silently, until he pulls into the driveway, and Irina gasps quietly.

"Oh, Ilyusha," she breathes.

"Welcome home," Ilya says.

Irina spends much of the rest of the late morning exploring the house, weepy and overwhelmed. She loves it, she assures him over and over, she is so proud of him, so grateful for him. Ilya tries to give her space, tries to allow her to decompress on her own time, but he quickly finds that he cannot let her out of his sight; every time she leaves a room, every time he cannot hear her moving around or humming quietly to herself, he starts to panic, rushing to check in on her and startling her every time.

“*Solnyshko*,” she says, after she has caught Ilya peering at her from the other side of the living room once again.

“*Sorry, Mama*,” Ilya says. “*I missed you*.”

Irina sits down on the sofa, and opens her arms. Ilya goes to her without a second thought, curls up in her lap as if he is not twice the size of her, and three times her body weight.

“*I am so happy, moy lyubimyy*,” she assures him, lips pressed to his forehead, fingers carding through his hair. “*I am so happy to be here with you*.”

Ilya is miserable. He is completely, sickeningly miserable, and that is not going to change any time soon.

It is very quiet, the first few days that Irina is home. She does not do much; she calls her therapist for an hour each morning, struggles through it in English, and though Ilya knows he should not listen, he often finds himself sitting near her bedroom door, catching every fourth muffled word. She is always quiet for some time after the call, but emerges from her room somewhere around an hour later, and insists on cooking breakfast for Ilya and herself. After that, she comes down to the gym Ilya had built in the basement, walks on the treadmill for a while whilst Ilya works out. She follows Ilya around the house after that, probably so that Ilya does not have to be the one to follow her around, and then she spends a while curled up in the armchair she likes best in the living room with her therapist-recommended journal. Ilya usually spends that time watching her from whichever corner of the house he can find a reason to loiter in, and when Irina is done, she makes lunch and they eat out on the patio, overlooking the river. Later in the afternoon, Ilya drives her to her mandated group therapy session, spends those two hours staring at his own hands, and then he drives her back home, where she typically disappears into her room, or falls asleep on the sofa, or outside in the hammock on the patio. Ilya hovers while she sleeps, checking in a few times an hour, but she always wakes up. She cooks dinner, they eat together at the dining table, and then Irina disappears to her room for the night, unless Ilya can talk her into a movie, or a card game, or some other desperate attempt to stop them both from rotting away completely.

For such a mundane schedule, it is completely exhausting. Ilya goes to bed each night completely beat, eyes falling closed before his head even meets his pillow, but then he lies awake most of the night, listening for any sound of Irina, distress or otherwise, from the other

end of the house. Ilya has not slept well in ages, not since— well, since he left Lanaudière. Since he stopped climbing into Shane's bed every night.

He does not have time to think about that. He does not have time to care about that, or about anything besides making sure his mother is going to be alright. Shane has called, texted, offered to come by, to help out, but Ilya has given him the bare minimum, because that is all he can afford to give. He feels awful about it, but when so much of Ilya's day is consumed by the paralyzing fear of failing his mother again, he cannot bring himself to be concerned with a few missed calls, a few unanswered texts.

Shane is not the only one Ilya has ignored, nor is he the only one who has reached out— Svetlana has texted every day, Yuna calls every now and again, even David has texted him a few times. Cliff Marlow, Ilya's friend from the Bears, has reached out, and a couple of the other guys, too, and even his old coach, once or twice. His new coach sent his well wishes along in an email with the training schedule for the end of the summer, which was nice, and some of Ilya's new teammates have sent him messages through social media. He is not alone in the world, as much as he feels like he is. As much as he feels like he should be.

Things get worse, as time goes on. Irina has been home for almost two full weeks when Ilya finally admits it to himself; she is not the same, she is not who she was before Ilya left for Boston, she is broken in a way that Ilya is not sure can be fixed, and it is all his fault.

He breaks down one night, as Irina sits in her armchair, facing the window, watching the river run through the window. He is on the sofa, watching her, when he finally cannot take it anymore, hiccuping loudly in the otherwise silent room. Irina looks over at him slowly, like she is drugged, her neutral expression pulling down into a frown.

"Ilyusha," she says softly.

"Mama," Ilya whimpers. *"What is wrong?"*

Irina blinks at him, and says nothing.

"What changed?" Ilya pushes. *"You were not like this before I left. Did I do this to you?"*

"No, moy lyubimyy," Irina says, defeated. *"No, it was not you."*

"Then what?" Ilya begs.

Irina does not answer for a long moment, looking back out toward the river. *"I— I was alone. It... made me realize things. About myself, about the world. About life."*

Ilya mops at his face, watching the left side of his mother while she curls into herself a little.

"I am talking to my therapist about it. It helps. She says I made important discoveries, but my reaction to them was... skewed. Because of— because I have depression."

Depression. Ilya has heard of it, obviously. It is for crazy people and teenage girls. Not his beautiful, strong, funny, perfect mother.

"You were gone," Irina continues, "and then the Hollanders were gone— because I pushed them away. I felt like I had absolutely no one in the world. It made me realize that I am just no good on my own. I cannot do anything for myself. Everything I have ever done, every good choice I have ever made, it was all for you. And we would not have lasted a year in Ottawa if it was not for Yuna and David. I am just so scared, and tired, and sad all the time... I am useless without a purpose, without someone to take care of, someone to make proud, someone to live for. I could distract myself with the people I loved for a while, but when everyone was all gone, it felt like there was nothing for me anymore."

"It is all my fault," Ilya breathes. "I should not have left. I should not have ruined things with Shane, and the Hollanders would not have—"

"You stop that, Ilya," Irina says. "You did not cause anything. If anything, it— gave me an opportunity to finally hit rock bottom. And I did. Hard. And you were the one to pull me back. You are the one giving me a second chance— a third chance, really. I never would have made it out of Russia if it was not for you, solnyshko, and I certainly would not have made it out of that bed."

Ilya thinks about arguing, pointing out to Irina that if he had just stayed in Ottawa, she never would have had to hit rock bottom. She seems to be one step ahead of him, though, watching him from her armchair.

"I get to heal now," she says, smiling sadly. "Therapy is hard, but it helps. It helps me to realize that I am not useless, I do have purpose, I have reasons to live beyond you, beyond the people I love. These are lessons I would not have learned any other way, moy lyubimyy. They are lessons I think you could benefit from."

"I am not depressed," Ilya says quickly. "I am— I am just—" Worthless. A piece of shit. A monster. A sorry excuse for a man."

Well. Hm.

"Okay, Ilyusha," Irina says gently. "I do not want you to blame yourself. I made a stupid, foolish, terrible mistake that day— I did not even mean to do it, not really, just, one thing led to another, and then I woke up in the hospital, and I... I am so sorry, Ilyusha. I am going to get better. I am going to be better. There is medicine I can take, and there are things I can do. I am only disappointed I did not know this sooner."

"I think," Ilya starts, but he trails off, does not know how to finish.

"It is a long road, solnyshko," Irina says. "It is hard. But it is not too hard."

Ilya sits with that for the rest of the night, until he settles into bed, Irina's words playing over in his mind. *It is hard, but it is not too hard.* Everything is too hard these days. Life is too hard. The whole goddamn thing is too goddamn hard.

Maybe Irina is right. Maybe he does have a few lessons to learn.

August, 2011

Ilya's house is fucking gorgeous. Like, insanely beautiful. The location, the scenery, the landscaping, the architecture— from the moment the Volvo pulls down the driveway, Shane is entranced, taking in every detail. It is much easier to focus on this, on the stunning picture windows and sleek, modern design, than it is to focus on what lies behind the impressive front door.

Shane has not seen Ilya since he drove him back to Ottawa from Lanaudière, left him at a hotel, and drove back to the cottage in tears. None of them have seen Irina since Las Vegas, at the awards ceremony, and none of them have spoken with her in longer than that. Shane doesn't even remember the last time he spoke to Irina, the last time he enjoyed her cooking, the last time anything felt even the slightest bit normal.

David rings the doorbell, at the same time Yuna knocks on the door. They share a look; it's good to know that Shane isn't the only one who is anxious about tonight.

Shane has been losing his mind, a little, the past few weeks. He has tried to give Ilya his space, to not be overbearing, but it's hard to sleep wondering if Ilya is okay, if he needs help that he won't ask for, if he's suffering, or if he's handling everything just fine, doesn't need Shane at all, doesn't want his help in the slightest. Ilya has barely answered any of his texts, almost none of his calls, and Shane knows he must be busy, stressed, completely overwhelmed, but any sort of acknowledgement of Shane's empathy and anxiety would be appreciated.

As hard as he has tried to not let himself go down this road, Shane can't help but think that he was right; Ilya only called him because he had no one else to call, and Shane has already been as useful to him as he can be, and Ilya does not need him anymore. It is all he can think about, when Ilya answers the door, and so he chooses to focus, again, on the house, waiting for his parents to enter first and then brushing past Ilya easily.

"Wow," Yuna says, before Shane can say it. "Ilya, this place is gorgeous."

"Thank you," Ilya says. "We have been very happy here."

"That's great to hear," David says. He's the first one to hug Ilya, which Ilya appears to find surprising, or maybe he doesn't, Shane doesn't know, he's dutifully not looking at him.

"Do you know who designed this place?" Shane asks, eyes on the impossibly high ceilings.

"Mr. Real Estate, huh?"

Shane rolls his eyes, but does not look at Ilya. "It's really great."

“Thank you,” Ilya says. It sounds genuine.

“Irina,” Yuna says.

Irina has just finished floating down the stairs, and Shane cannot look away from her once he’s caught sight of her. She looks— well, she looks awful.

She has always been a petite woman, but there is hardly anything to her now. Her face is pale and so thin Shane swears he can see her bones through her cheeks, and her hands shake as she lifts her arms to hug Yuna. Her smile does not quite reach her eyes, but she hugs David, too, and then crushes Shane in her arms in a way that does not align with the frailty of her appearance.

“*Lapochka*,” she murmurs into his ear, squeezing him tight. “I am so happy to see you.”

“You too, Irina,” Shane says; he hugs her back, but he is gentle, because he really is worried she might break in his arms. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

She smiles at him when she pulls away, eyes wet, and pinches his cheeks. Shane blushes, and when Irina moves away from him, his eyes finally land on Ilya, standing awkwardly in the opening to the kitchen, somehow looking even worse than Irina.

He looks so... dull. His skin is pale, like his mother’s, and his eyes are dark and hollow, exhausted. His jaw is set tight, shoulders hunched, in a way that goes deeper than situational anxiety. He is struggling. He is stressed, overwhelmed, heartbroken. Shane itches to reach out and hug him, soothe him. He looks down.

“Dinner is ready,” Irina says, guiding the party into the kitchen. “It has been so long since I have been able to cook for such a group. Come, come, help yourselves.”

Dinner is awkward, slightly painful, and very upsetting. Irina shakes the entire meal, stumbles over her words, starts conversations and does not finish them, like she cannot think straight, like her mind is so jumbled and overworked that she cannot control it. And Ilya. Ilya just— sits.

Shane cannot take his eyes off of Ilya throughout most of dinner. Ilya barely speaks beyond responding when spoken to, and otherwise just stares at the table. Shane is so worried for him, his chest aching every time he sneaks another glance over at him, but Ilya only meets his eyes twice throughout the meal— once, when Yuna asks if he’s been able to get everything squared away with his transfer to the Centaurs, and again when Irina asks Shane when he’s going back to Montréal.

“Uh, tomorrow,” Shane says, locking eyes with Ilya for just a moment. “I’m moving into a different apartment— I bought a building, and I’m renting out the other units, uh. It’s kinda boring. But I’m hoping to have it all set up before training starts next week.”

“Mr. Landlord,” Ilya teases.

“I’m gonna turn it into one place, eventually,” Shane says. “But for now it’s just, uh. You know.” No one cares. He shovels a bite of food into his mouth.

Conversation remains stilted, unnatural. Shane does not contribute much. Neither does Ilya. Irina hugs Shane twice more after dinner, and then Yuna throws him a lifeline.

“Well,” she says, “Shane has to leave early to get back to Montréal, so we should probably go. Thank you for dinner, Irina, that was lovely.”

“It is so nice to see you all,” Irina says, and she really sounds like she means it, doling out another round of hugs. “We will do this again soon, yes?”

“Yes, definitely,” David says, after his final hug of the evening. “It’s been too long.”

Shane meets Ilya’s eyes again, but Ilya is the one to look down this time. Right. So much for being friends again, then.

“Bye, Ilya,” Yuna says, offering Ilya a rather stiff hug. “Good luck with your season, if we don’t see you.”

“Thank you,” Ilya says quietly.

Shane is the first one out the door, climbing into the backseat of the Volvo like a petulant child. No one says much on the way back to David and Yuna’s house; there will be more to say in the morning, when they’ve all finished processing the evening, but it isn’t until they get back to the house that Yuna pulls Shane into her arms and holds him tight.

“We love you, Shane,” she says. “We are so proud of you.”

Shane pulls away with a tight smile, and nods once. “I love you, too. Goodnight.”

He shuts himself in his childhood bedroom, covered floor to ceiling in Centaurs memorabilia, and stares at the ceiling until the house is completely dark. He takes his phone out several times, opens his text thread with Ilya, but upon seeing the last few messages in the thread, he cannot bring himself to add another.

June 30th

Shane: Hey! How’s everything going?

July 5th

Shane: Just wanted to check in. Is your mom home yet?

Ilya: Not yet. Soon.

Shane: How are you?

July 19th

Shane: Hi, hope you guys are doing okay.

Ilya: ❤️

Shane: Let me know if there's anything I can do ❤️

August 1st

Shane: Saw the press conference you did, that must have been tough. Call me if you want.

August 9th

Shane: How are you? How's your mom?

He's such an idiot. He's desperate to be there for Ilya, to make sure that Ilya knows that he cares. But does Ilya care? Does Ilya care at all that Shane has barely slept since the day he drove Ilya home from the cottage? Does Ilya care that he consumes almost every single one of Shane's waking thoughts? Does Ilya care that Shane would drop everything and move into that house with him if only to lighten his load?

Probably not. It does not change how Shane feels.

It does not change how Shane feels to the extent that, eventually, he gives up on sleeping altogether. The house is quiet, his parents have been asleep for hours, but still Shane creeps down the stairs like a teenager, grabs the keys for his Land Rover from the hook near the front door, and jogs to his car. He drives all the way back to Ilya's house before he can talk himself out of it, and only once he's in Ilya's driveway does he put another message into the text thread.

Shane: Are you awake? I'm outside.

Shane: Please let me in.

It's a long few minutes, and it's cold out. Shane shivers on the front steps of Ilya's house until the light flicks on over his head, and the door flies open.

"Shane?" Ilya says, spooked. He's shirtless with a pair of basketball shorts, his hair all fluffy and ruffled like he was trying to sleep, too. He looks so tired. Shane loves him so much he aches with it.

"Hi," Shane says.

"What is wrong?" Ilya says. He's still standing in the doorway, blocking Shane's entrance, but probably more out of shock than anything else. "Are you okay?"

"No," Shane says.

"What?" Ilya asks. "Are you— are you hurt? What is going on?"

"Can I come in?" Shane asks.

Ilya steps aside, finally, but Shane is on him before he's even made it all the way through the door, grabbing Ilya by the face and crushing their lips together like he can't help it, and he *can't*, pressing Ilya back against the door as it falls shut behind him. Ilya is stunned for only a fraction of a second, and then he kisses back just as desperately, hands slipping up the back of Shane's t-shirt and drawing him in close. Shane whimpers into Ilya's mouth, and Ilya seems to regain some consciousness, turning his face and effectively breaking the kiss.

"What are you doing?" he breathes.

Shane says nothing; he doesn't know, he has no idea, but he needs to do it, needs it like oxygen, like water. He pushes gently at Ilya's jaw until Ilya turns toward him again, and this time, the kiss is sweeter, less frantic. More desperate. Less hungry.

Ilya allows it for a little longer this time, panting by the time Shane finally pulls back.

"I love you."

Time stands still. Shane's hands slip from Ilya's face, over his neck, down to his chest. Ilya's fingers are pressing divots into Shane's lower back, his eyes wide and searching.

"Oh," Ilya says.

Shane might be sick. He drops his hands from Ilya's chest, and Ilya's hands slither out from under his shirt. "Oh?" Shane echoes.

"Shane, I—" Ilya looks mortified, backing away half a step. "I am not— I cannot do this right now."

Shane blinks. His blood is ice in his veins. His knees might give out. Fuck, he is so fucking stupid. "What?"

"I am not saying I do not love you back," Ilya says, so quietly that Shane might mistake it for the wind, if he weren't listening so intently. "But I— I cannot do this."

"I'm not asking you to do anything," Shane says. "I'm just telling you, I— I love you. I never stopped."

"I think you should go," Ilya tells the floor.

"Ilya."

"Shane."

"I—"

"You should go."

Shane drops his eyes to the floor. His entire body is tingling like he's going to pass out. He manages to move one foot, and then the other, reaching for the doorknob and slipping back

out into the night. He makes it to his car, climbs inside, shuts the door, and looks up to watch the light over the front door go out.

He drives home in a fog, unthinking, unfeeling. He hangs up his keys and toes his shoes off and goes back to his bedroom like he never left, climbing into bed and continuing to stare at the ceiling like the past half hour did not happen at all.

Except, it did. Fuck. That happened. He kissed Ilya. He told Ilya he loves him.

Ilya asked him to leave.

Ilya *told* him to leave.

Shane rolls over quickly and presses his face into his pillow to muffle his sobs. Fuck.

Fuck.

Chapter 20

September, 2011 – Ottawa, Ontario

“And now to the NHL– which is still reeling from the upset of Ilya Rozanov being traded to Ottawa.”

“I can’t wrap my mind around it, Jim. This kid was set up to be one of the greatest of all time– hell, he was already one of the greatest rookies of all time. It’s just so disappointing, seeing a player like Rozanov end up on a team like Ottawa.”

“It really is, Tim. But you’ve gotta hand it to him, putting his family before his career, moving back home and playing for such a truly *awful* team... kid’s got a good heart in him.”

“Allegedly! I’m still wondering if that’s really the truth. I’m honestly shocked to learn Rozanov has a heart at all, let alone a good one!”

“He does seem like a jerk, doesn’t he?”

“He’s a brute! That kid’s got more anger management issues than anyone else in the league!”

“You never know, Tim, maybe he’s gonna take Ottawa by the balls and turn the whole team around. Maybe the Centaurs will see a cup win for the first time in... jeez, how long?”

“Ever, Jim. I’d like to see him try. It’s gonna be a tall order, that’s for sure.”

“Well, we wish him luck, and of course our thoughts are with his mother, who is apparently very ill.”

“Yes, Jim, we hope she’s okay. We’re also offering our congratulations to Shane Hollander, who is no doubt over the moon to be witnessing the downfall of his rival.”

“They did run a whole scheme at one point about being friends, remember that, Tim?”

“I still don’t buy it. You’ve seen those two on the ice– there is definitely a lot of respect there, but there’s no love.”

“No love, indeed. Speaking of Shane Hollander, we’re expecting great things out of Ontario’s pride and joy this season. He’s shaping up to–”

Ilya jams his finger against the radio dial, cutting off the idiots on sports radio in favor of listening to the rain beating down on the roof of the car. He rubs at his face, staring at the door of the recreation center through the torrential downpour and willing it to open so that he can go the fuck home.

It has been a long day. It has been a long week, a long two and a half months. He is exhausted.

He is back to daily practices as the season starts up, which should be a good thing, but Ilya is struggling to find the bright side of anything these days. His new team is awful. There is no morale, there is no sense of purpose. In Ottawa, hockey does not feel like a game— it feels like a job that he clocks in and out of, shows up just for the paycheck.

In Boston, hockey was a lifestyle. It was all the players cared about, on and off the ice. They had fun, joked around during practice, hung out outside of practice and after games, and operated under the unspoken, mutual agreement that each of them would do whatever it took to contribute to their team winning. In Ottawa, there seems to be an unspoken agreement that they are going to lose no matter what they do, so they might as well just keep showing up to get paid.

With Shane, hockey was everything. It was a game, but it was more than that, it was the future, it was the air they both breathed, it was *theirs*, and that was all that mattered.

Shane. Oh, Shane. Ilya cannot even think about Shane without a pit forming in his stomach, which is unfortunate, because Ilya has never and will never be able to separate hockey from Shane, and hockey is his job, and Shane is so very painful to think about. Ilya dedicates a lot of time, more than he would like to admit, to *not* thinking about Shane Hollander.

Irina has graduated to only having to attend her group therapy sessions once a week, which is a wonderful development and much more convenient than having to bring her here every day, but it also gives Irina a lot more free time to sit around the house and do... well, absolutely nothing.

Now that Ilya is busy with practice every day, Irina spends a lot of time in the house by herself. Ilya often leaves for his two- to three-hour practices and returns to find Irina exactly where he left her, whether it be on the sofa, in her bed, or out on the porch, when the weather is nice enough. It is almost a relief to pick her up from therapy after practice, instead, when at least he can be sure she has moved her body and spoken to people other than Ilya.

He is a little early today; coach called practice after a very uninspired hour and forty-five minutes, sent everyone home to rest up and bring their best effort tomorrow. He had asked the same thing yesterday, and the day before that, and he will ask the same thing tomorrow, and no one will deliver. Ilya should really do something to improve the morale in the locker room, something that will turn this team around, like everyone in the hockey world expects of him. He could be the saving grace of the Ottawa Centaurs, could dedicate himself to improving his team's rank in the league, could make Jim and Tim and all the other talking heads of the industry proud and live up to his potential despite the obstacles that keep throwing themselves in his way, despite everything—

Or, he could not. He could just show up to work and make it through the day and go home, like everyone else. He could stop trying to hurdle every obstacle in his path. He could just be.

The door of the recreation center cracks open, and Ilya drags himself out of the car, umbrella in hand. He meets his mother at the door, holds the umbrella low enough to shield her from

the rain more so than himself, and guides her back to the car, still running on the curb.

“Thank you, solnyshko,” she says softly, kissing his cheek before she steps into the car. Ilya closes the umbrella, tosses it into the trunk, and jogs back to the driver’s seat. *“How was your practice?”* Irina asks, once he is safely inside the car.

“It was okay,” Ilya says; he always gives Irina the same answer, and never the truth. If she has caught on to that, she does not make it known.

“Good,” she says, and then turns to stare out the window.

“How was your group?”

“It was okay,” she says, voice low. She always gives the same answer, and never the truth. Ilya has caught on to that, but he does not make it known.

“Good,” he says.

They do not speak again until they have arrived home. Ilya jumps out of the car, fetches his umbrella, and walks his mother to the door. She kisses his cheek again in thanks when they are inside.

“Will you be home for dinner tonight?” she asks, as Ilya places his umbrella out on the covered front steps so that it will not make a mess.

“Yes, why?”

“David and Yuna are coming.”

Ilya does not look up, toeing his shoes off next to the door. *“Actually,”* he says, *“I have a team dinner tonight, I just remembered–”*

“Ilyusha,” Irina says softly. *“You cannot avoid them forever.”*

“I am not trying to,” Ilya says weakly.

“Shane is in Montréal,” Irina says. Ilya bristles at the sound of his name. *“You can have one dinner with Yuna and David, Ilyusha, please? For me?”*

For you, Ilya thinks. *Everything for you. All of the time.*

“Fine,” he sighs.

The Hollanders– sans Shane– have been incredibly helpful since Irina’s incident. They come over often, and even more so now that they are home from Lanaudière for the season. David cooks with Irina as often as possible, and Yuna puts in long hours chatting with Irina over sodas and quiet music, and Ilya hides from them all as much as he can, unwilling and unable to face them after– well, everything.

He has not spoken to Shane since that night back in August– or, rather, Shane has not spoken to *him*. It is a two-way street, Ilya supposes. It is not a street Ilya intends to venture down first.

Ilya could die when he thinks about it, and so he spends a lot of time and energy trying desperately to think of anything else, but somehow, it always comes back to that night, to Shane's beautiful eyes, Shane's soft lips, Shane's shock and horror when Ilya sent him away.

He must be so hurt, so embarrassed, so angry, and sad, and confused– Ilya feels awful, more awful than he has ever felt in his life, but even so, he stands by his decision to ask Shane to leave. He loves Shane more than anything in the world, he always has, and he always will, that will never change. What also will never change is the fact that Ilya does not deserve him, never has, and never will. All that aside, Ilya does not have the bandwidth to process any of his feelings toward Shane right now, not with everything else going on, with Irina, with the Centaurs, with Ilya's own internal struggles.

Regretfully, Ilya has come to admit, if only to himself, that he is struggling. He is sad, more sad than he should be, and for reasons beyond the obvious, reasons he cannot even understand. He is exhausted, all of the time, no matter how much he sleeps, and he is empty, has no interest in hockey anymore, no interest in partying, in sex, in anything.

Preseason games start up next week. In eighteen days, the Centaurs will play the Voyageurs on home ice. Shane will be in Ottawa, on the same ice, possibly in the same face-off– oh, hell, *definitely* the same face-off, there is no one else on Ilya's team who could possibly take that face-off, unless Ilya somehow falls ill, or is horrifically injured in a freak training accident the day before, or goes missing, or–

It is going to be a long, long season.

Eighteen days later – Ottawa, Ontario

Shane nibbles at his salad, pushing lettuce around the plate to find those less saturated with dressing, which he specifically said he didn't want, because it is not part of his performance diet and he has a game tonight and he's playing against *Ilya* and he *really* needs to be at the top of his game and–

"One gram of sugar is not going to ruin your career," Yuna says from across the table.

"I know," Shane says petulantly.

"Oh, shoot!" David hisses. "You asked for no dressing! I'm sorry, buddy, I'll make you a new one–"

“No,” Shane and Yuna say in unison. Shane gives his mother a look, and then smiles tightly at his father. “It’s fine, Dad, really. Thank you.”

“You sure, kiddo?” David asks.

“Yeah, all good,” Shane says.

“Have you spoken to Ilya at all?” Yuna asks, as if Shane doesn’t already feel sick enough from breaking his diet.

“Uh, no,” Shane says, scraping a bit of cheese off of a piece of lettuce and eating it gingerly.

“I think he’s really struggling,” Yuna says. “We were there, what, two weeks ago?” She looks at David. “Three? He just seems so... sad.”

Shane stares at his salad, waiting out a wave of nausea. He should reach out again, probably, offer to help out, or at least ask if there is anything Yuna and David can do, but the thought of reaching out makes Shane want to keel over and die, honestly, after his last interaction with Ilya. Ilya probably doesn’t wanna hear from him, anyway, after Shane violated him and his boundaries to the point that Ilya had to fucking throw him out of his house. Yuna doesn’t know that, though, and she doesn’t need to, so Shane shrugs.

“He has my number if he needs something,” he mutters.

“Shane,” Yuna gasps. “That’s awful.”

Shane knows that. It is awful, *he* is awful, and he is trying so, so hard not to be. “I didn’t mean it like that,” he says. “Just, every time I’ve reached out, he either doesn’t answer or he says he’s good. I don’t know how much more I can do.”

“You two used to be so close,” Yuna sighs. “I just can’t figure out where it went wrong.”

Shane can think of a hundred different places it went wrong, could probably draw a diagram from memory of every single fucking place that he and Ilya went wrong. Instead, he shrugs again.

“I don’t know,” he says. “I should go. Thanks for lunch.”

“Shane, you barely ate anything,” Yuna says.

“Here, I’ll get you a container,” David says, “you can take the rest with you.”

There is no use turning him down. Shane waits patiently while David scrapes the mostly full plate of salad he made for his son into a tupperware container, which Shane is most likely going to throw away as soon as he leaves. “Thanks,” he says.

“Good luck tonight,” Yuna says, squeezing him tight before he leaves. “And, Shane, if you see Ilya at all, just let him know that you—”

“I will, thanks Mom,” Shane says quickly. “Bye, Dad. Love you guys.”

He hurries out the door before either of them can say anything else, drops the tupperware container in his hand into the first trashcan he comes across on the street, and starts jogging.

He doesn't mean to, but he ends up jogging all the way back to the hotel where his team is staying. He would normally opt to just stay at his parents' house when playing in Ottawa, but he's been having a hard time facing either of them since the summer ended. All they ever want to talk about is Irina, and Ilya, and how hard things are for both of them, and how much they love both of them, and how much they want to help— it is so hard to listen to when Shane cannot think about Ilya without wanting to walk into traffic. It is much easier to share a hotel room with Hayden, who is sprawled on the bed with headphones in when Shane bursts in. Hayden gives him a little nod, and Shane returns it, and then he locks himself in the bathroom and throws up everything he ate at his parents' house.

It's not sitting right, that's all. His body isn't used to digesting sugar and dairy anymore. He feels better, or at least he tells himself he does, when he gets up off the floor and flushes the toilet.

Hayden hasn't moved an inch when Shane comes out of the bathroom, doesn't spare Shane another glance, so Shane waves a hand in his face and taps his wrist.

"Oh, shit," Hayden says, pulling his headphones out of his ears. "Time to go?"

"Yeah," Shane says. "I'll see you downstairs."

They ride to the arena on the team bus, and Shane makes a conscious effort to not jiggle his leg anxiously the entire time, but Hayden still elbows him a few minutes before they arrive.

"Hey, man," Hayden says quietly. "You good?"

"Yeah," Shane says.

"Don't worry, we're gonna beat his ass," Hayden says. "Rozanov doesn't stand a fuckin' chance."

He says it lightly, grinning when Shane looks up at him, but Shane finds the grin very hard to return. He also finds it very hard to walk into the arena when they arrive, finds it very hard to keep his eyes up when Ilya's face is plastered fucking *everywhere*, finds it very hard to get changed in the locker room and go out on the ice to warm up knowing that Ilya is here, in the building, probably dreading seeing him, too.

They take the first face-off of the game together. Shane is trembling like a leaf as he bends over the circle, keeping his eyes down and his mind carefully empty. Ilya sniffs, and Shane glances up reflexively; Ilya's eyes are down, too, jaw clenched, nostrils flaring every now and again. Shane lowers his eyes, watches the puck drop, and skates away with it without a bit of resistance from Ilya.

The Voyageurs win 5-0. It is not even a satisfying win; the Centaurs just lie down and take it, especially Ilya, who throws the entire game in favor of staying the fuck away from Shane. Shane feels about ready to shatter into a million pieces by the time he gets off the ice.

Hayden's girlfriend drove in from Montréal to come to the game, and she has a room on a different floor, so Shane ends up with the room to himself for the night. He spends a few hours opening and closing his text thread with Ilya, staring at those last two texts he sent last month, right before he ruined everything past the point of repair. Ilya would rather lose a hockey game than even acknowledge that Shane exists. Shane has never felt so disgusting in his life.

He heaves over the toilet, but there is nothing to expel. When he finally manages to go to sleep, it is with the burn of bile in the back of his throat and his heart broken open in his chest.

November, 2011 – Montréal, Québec

Ilya hates Montréal. It is a fine city, actually one of the nicer cities he has been to in his career. He hates it so viscerally that he wants to put his head through the wall in the visitor's room at the arena.

If Marlow was here, he would be egging Ilya on, cheering in response to Ilya slamming his equipment around, huffing and puffing while he gets ready to warm up. The Centaurs just look at him like he is a space alien, and eventually someone touches his shoulder gently.

"All good, Roz?" asks Evan Dykstra, looking genuinely concerned when Ilya turns to look at him.

"I hate Montréal," Ilya says simply.

"Oh. 'Cos the Hollander of it all?"

Ilya huffs again. "Yes," he says. "The Hollander of it all."

It is not the Hollander of it all. It is the Shane of it all. It is the Ilya of it all. The Shane and Ilya of it all; or the lack thereof. It is the fact that Ilya will go out there on the ice tonight, play three periods against someone he knows better than he knows himself, and will spend the entire night pretending to not know him at all. It is the fact that Shane will do the same, but at least Shane will have another win to add to his roster, while Ilya will have to go back to his hotel and pretend that he is not ready to just end it all. Maybe he will go out tonight, find someone to hook up with— but that would hurt Shane so badly if Shane were to find out, and Ilya thinks Shane has been hurt plenty by now.

Shane's parents are at Ilya's house tonight, watching the game with Irina. He does not envy them; he thinks the only thing as bad as living like this must be having to watch it from the outside. Irina, Yuna, and David are the only people in the world who could possibly

understand what this is like for them, and even they all do not know the full story. Even Shane does not know the full story. Ilya wonders if *he* even knows the full story.

They take the first face-off of the game against each other, because of course they do, because they always do. Ilya has almost mastered the art of keeping his gaze down, eyes on the ice between them— almost. His eyes get caught on Shane's stick, which of course leads him up to Shane's hands, twitching in his gloves, up his arms to his strong, tense shoulders, his neck, his clenched jaw. Ilya does not allow himself to look at Shane's eyes; he is too worried Shane will meet his gaze, but he is more worried that Shane will not.

The puck drops. Ilya makes a weak attempt— there is no point, really, in exerting any effort. Shane takes the puck easily, turns on his skates and is gone, racing across the ice. Ilya falls back, watching him go, watching Nick Chouinard pretend like he is ever going to catch up to Shane. Except, Chouinard does catch up to Shane. And Shane is distracted, does not see him coming. And then Chouinard is checking Shane into the boards, and Shane is—

The past eight years of Ilya's life play through his mind like a film in hyperspeed. Shane, twelve years old, offering Ilya a hockey stick and asking him to play after school. Shane, thirteen years old, showing Ilya around his parents' cottage for the first time. Shane, fifteen years old, letting Ilya kiss him for the first time in an alleyway in Ottawa. Shane, eighteen years old, crying after the NHL draft because he thought he was going to lose Ilya forever. Shane, twenty years old, telling Ilya he still loves him, despite everything, only to be sent out alone into the night. If Ilya died tonight, these would be the memories of his life that replay for him. If Shane dies tonight—

There is no life without Shane, Shane *is* his life; there was no purpose for Ilya before Shane, and there will be no purpose for him after Shane.

Ilya is there before he really even decides to be. Chouinard is devastated, already shouting in horror at what he has done, and the refs are shouting, and the medics are flooding onto the ice.

"He hit his head," Ilya is shouting, and he is in the way of the medics, but he cannot move. He cannot do anything but shout. "He hit his head when he fell, check his head, check his head!"

"Back up, Rozanov!" someone is shouting; it might be a medic, maybe a ref. It is not Shane. Shane is not moving. Shane is limp and lifeless on the ice, and they are not checking his head.

"His head!" Ilya shouts back. "Is he— fuck, is he okay? Tell me!"

"Rozanov!" Someone pushes at Ilya's chest, sends him gliding back a few feet. "Go to your bench!"

"Is he okay?" Ilya demands. "Fucking tell me!"

"Bring out the spinal board," another voice shouts.

“Get the ambulance ready,” shouts another.

“Shane!” Ilya is shouting; he is vaguely aware of his mouth forming the word, but his vocal chords seem to have gained autonomy. “Shane!”

Shane is lifted onto the spinal board, strapped down, and carried away. Ilya tries to follow, but the refs push him back again, successfully steering him back toward the bench. Ilya lets himself drift over the ice until his back hits the boards, watching after the medics until Shane is out of sight. The crowd is clapping respectfully for Shane, and Ilya wants to scream for them all to shut the fuck up, this is nothing to clap for, this is—

This is *Shane*. This is *Ilya’s* Shane. This is Ilya’s Shane being taken away on a spinal board in an ambulance to the hospital because he got hit so hard that he could not get up. Ilya might be sick.

No one that Shane loves is in Montréal tonight. God, how lonely Shane must have been all this time, in this city with nothing and no one but hockey. Shane could not even be with his family after Ilya broke his heart last season, did not have any friends to turn to in Montréal. He has been here all alone with all of these guys who do not really know him; Shane is so hard to get close to, he is so slow to warm. Ilya knows that Shane has one or two friends on this team, but they do not know anything about him, not really, because Shane could never tell them, because they would never understand him, not like Ilya does.

He turns around, eventually, to look helplessly at his teammates, only to find several members of the Voyageurs looking very confused and alarmed behind him.

In the chaos, he skated to Montréal’s bench. Hayden Pike leans over the boards, eyebrows furrowed.

“Rozanov,” Pike calls. “You lost?”

Yes. “Fuck you, Pike,” Ilya mutters, skating back to his own bench. Chouinard is sitting, head in his hands, while several of the other guys shield him from the bloodthirsty Montréal fans behind them. Ilya sits on the opposite end of the bench, stares at his skates, and tries to breathe through the nausea. Each time he blinks, his mind presents him with the image of Shane hitting the boards *hard* chest first, Shane falling backwards over his own feet and landing hard on his head and neck, Shane crumpled and broken on the ice before him, Shane being carried away unconscious and still.

Ilya loves him. Ilya loves him more than anything in the world, and he has wasted so much time and energy trying to pretend that that is not true and for what? What good came of it? Is Shane safe? No, he could very well be paralyzed, or brain dead, or worse—

After some debate, Ilya is sent back onto the ice to resume the game. They are less than thirty seconds into the first period. Ilya cannot feel his fingers, or his toes.

The Voyageurs win 1-0. Without Shane, the Voyageurs are almost as useless as the Centaurs, and with Ilya experiencing every stage of grief at once without being able to express it, the Centaurs still do not stand a chance. Chouinard is almost as inconsolable as Ilya feels, spends

the rest of the night in the locker room, and receives a police escort back to the hotel when the game ends.

Ilya should go back to the hotel, comfort Nick, be a good teammate, and call Yuna in the morning to ask after Shane. Ilya should not be ducking away from the bus and into a cab, pulling his phone out of his suit pocket to call Yuna only to find that he already has several missed calls from her.

She picks up before the first ring when Ilya calls her back. “Montréal General Hospital,” she answers, in lieu of a greeting. “They are expecting you.”

“I am on my way,” Ilya says. “Yuna, is he—”

“I don’t know,” Yuna says. Her voice is remarkably steady, given the situation. “He’s having an MRI tonight. We’ll be there in the morning, unless— unless we have to be there sooner, but it’s late, and—”

“I will stay,” Ilya says. “I will not leave him.”

“I’ve already spoken with a number of the medical staff,” Yuna says. Ilya expects no less from her. “They shouldn’t give you any trouble.”

They do not give him any trouble. The moment he arrives, the hospital staff parts like the sea, his arrival prophesied by the crazy mother of the very famous hockey player who has just entered their emergency department. Ilya is led to a waiting room, deposited, and left to his own devices until Shane comes out of his MRI.

Ilya, unfortunately, is no stranger to hospital waiting rooms just like this. It was only a few months ago he was here, in a different hospital in a different city, but in the same state of mind. He picks out his armchair, settles in, and fights to keep himself together.

The game was awful. Everyone, on both teams, played as if they were traumatized from watching Shane go down the way he did, but none as much as Ilya, who did not contribute a single useful move for the rest of the game. His teammates kept trying to check in on him, subtly, unsure how to approach; it is common knowledge that Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander were best friends growing up, but no one in the league has ever really been able to figure out their dynamic since their NHL careers started. As far as anyone in this world knows, Ilya has always been the person he became in Boston, and that person and Shane Hollander are just so wildly, completely incompatible, a friendship seems radically impossible. That person is not Ilya, though, and Ilya has not been that person in months. He is ashamed to say that he was that person, for a moment in time, and that that person has led him to where he is now, here, in this waiting room at Montréal General Hospital, hands clenched in his lap while he waits to find out if the love of his life will be okay.

It is late when a nurse finally comes to get him. Ilya has been texting Yuna and David constantly since he sat down, even answered the phone when Irina called after the Hollanders left to go home, and it has been a welcome distraction, but Ilya still feels as though he has been waiting days when he finally hears, “um... Mister Rozanov?”

The nurse looks uncomfortable, confused, to be speaking with him. Ilya, cruelly, does not offer any sort of explanation or excuse for his presence, just stands up and marches to her. “Is he okay?”

“He’s back from his MRI,” the nurse says. “His, uh, his mother said that you’d be the one to give updates and—”

“Yes, yes,” Ilya says impatiently. “Is he okay?”

“Moderate concussion, fractured collarbone, but it could have been worse,” the nurse says. “Would you like to see him?”

“He is awake?” Ilya asks.

“He’s awake,” the nurse confirms. “He’s a little out of it, but he’s responsive.”

“Take me,” Ilya says.

The nurse leads him down the hallway and opens a door for him, allowing Ilya to slip inside. Graciously, she does not follow, which is a very good thing, because before the door has even fallen shut behind him, Shane gasps loudly. “Ilya!”

Ilya shushes him, making sure the door is shut tight and then finally allowing himself to look at Shane. His beautiful face is all bruised and swollen from the way the bridge of his nose collided with his visor as he went down. His right arm is in a sling, and his eyes are hazy and mostly unfocused, but he is grinning at Ilya like nothing is wrong in the world, or at least like he is on some very, very good drugs.

“I—” Ilya says, eyes locked on Shane’s. “I just wanted to...are you okay?”

“Concussion, fractured collarbone, out for three months,” Shane says, as if reciting what the doctors told him. “But...”

“Could have been worse?” Ilya guesses.

“Could have been worse,” Shane grins.

“Chouinard feels terrible, he did not mean to hurt you,” Ilya says. He cannot look away from Shane’s face, so open and relaxed, in a way Ilya has not seen him in— well, in years, maybe. It almost seems wrong, seeing Shane battered and bruised in a hospital bed, smiling like he is on vacation.

“I know, part of the game,” Shane hums, his head falling back against his pillows. “We all get our bell rung eventually, right?”

“Right,” Ilya breathes. He can barely get the word out around the lump forming in his throat, and it must show on his face, because Shane’s smile drops immediately.

“Hey,” Shane says softly, his eyes searching Ilya’s face. He reaches out with one hand, beckoning Ilya toward the bed. “Hey...”

Ilya rushes to him, partly to quiet him, but mostly because he did not realize how badly he needed the invitation. He takes Shane's hand, and Shane's eyes fall closed, his smile returning.

"Yes," Shane hums quietly. "Better."

Ilya examines Shane's face from this new angle, blinking away the tears still beading in his eyes. "You scared me," he admits quietly.

"I'm sorry," Shane mutters.

"No," Ilya says quickly. He cannot help himself, reaching up with his free hand to stroke his thumb along Shane's cheekbone, smoothing over his freckles. "It is okay."

"I'm really happy you're here," Shane says, nuzzling into the hand on his cheek. "I was really nervous about the game, and about seeing you—"

Ilya shushes him again, dragging his thumb across Shane's lips. "You should rest now."

"I miss you," Shane hums, still smiling against Ilya's fingers.

Ilya is relieved that Shane's eyes are still closed, because he cannot hide the way his face screws up at that. "I miss you, too," he whispers.

Shane has not spoken to him in over two months, because the last time they saw each other, Ilya broke his heart, again, and sent him away hurt and embarrassed. Ilya has done nothing except hurt Shane and push him away for well over a year at this point, and yet Shane kisses the tip of Ilya's thumb and squeezes the hand still tangled with his own.

"Will you stay?" Shane asks, cracking one eye open to look up at Ilya.

Ilya cannot stop the tear that drips down his cheek, but he nods. "I will stay," he says.

Shane smiles even brighter, eyes slipping closed again. Ilya removes his hand from Shane's face and cards it through his hair, instead, scratching lightly along Shane's scalp and then smoothing his hair back into place. Shane hums happily, melts into his pillows, and he is gone in a few short minutes, his breathing going deep and even.

It is easier, once Shane is asleep. It is easier to be here, to watch his face, and know that even if Ilya slips and tells Shane the thing on the tip of his tongue right now, it will not matter, because Shane is not awake to hear it.

This is not the time to tell Shane that he loves him. This is not the time to apologize, to tell Shane about everything that has been going on in his head, to beg for the forgiveness that he does not deserve but needs so badly. Ilya loves him so much, though, and he is so sorry, and he desperately wants Shane to know why it all went so horribly wrong. Ilya wants him more than he has ever wanted anything, misses him more than he thinks he can stand. Ilya could never play hockey again, could never see Ottawa again, could never see anything but the inside of Shane's apartment for the rest of his life and he would be perfectly fine, he would

be happy, because he cannot imagine ever wanting more than this, ever needing anything else.

He is a fucking monster. This is all his fault. If he had not spent so much time pushing Shane away and shutting him down for the past year, they would not be in this position. Ilya would not be sick to his stomach with need for a love that he does not deserve, and Shane would not be in a hospital bed, out for half of the season, injured and broken.

Does Shane know this? Will Shane be angry when he wakes up, when the drugs have worn off, because he also knows that this is Ilya's fault? Will he change his tune when he opens his eyes, yell at Ilya, call him a coward and idiot and an asshole, because he knows it is the truth? Will Shane finally realize that Ilya is more trouble than he is worth, that he is to blame for everything, and decide he does not actually love Ilya anymore?

Ilya backs away slowly, releasing Shane's hand gingerly so as not to jostle him. Shane frowns and makes a quiet noise of dissent in his sleep, but otherwise does not stir. Ilya takes a few more selfish moments to watch Shane sleep, and then he turns on his heel, slipping out of the hospital room and down the hallway.

He calls Yuna as he exits the hospital, because the least he can do is ease her mind. She answers almost immediately, but her voice sounds tired down the line.

"Ilya? How is he?"

"He is okay," Ilya says. "He has a moderate concussion, and a fractured collarbone. He is out for three months. He is sleeping now, he was very loopy. But he is okay."

"Oh, thank god," Yuna breathes. "Thank you, Ilya. Thank you for being there."

Ilya clenches his jaw, ducking through the lobby of the hospital and out onto the street. "I am just leaving."

"Wait, what?" Yuna says. "You're leaving? No, stay with him, please, just until we—"

"I have to go back to the hotel," Ilya says, his tone exactly as cool as he intends it to be. "Sorry."

"Ilya," Yuna says desperately. "Please."

Ilya falters, but ultimately keeps walking. "He does not need me," he admits quietly.

"Bull-fucking-shit," Yuna says harshly. "Ilya—"

"Sorry," Ilya says again, and then hangs up the phone. Yuna calls back immediately, and then again, and again, and Ilya is crying so hard by the time he has managed to walk back to his hotel that he has to stop in a park near the river and collect himself, sitting down hard on a metal bench and burying his head in his lap.

He told the truth— Shane does not need him. Shane should not want him. Shane should hate him as much as Ilya hates himself. Ilya does not deserve him, not one part of him, not his

kindness, not his forgiveness, not his big brown eyes and his perfect freckles, not his sweet laugh and his breathtaking smile. Ilya deserves this pain, but he cannot take it. He should just go walk into the river, save them all the trouble—

He scares himself with the thought. He scares himself so badly that he stops crying altogether, sitting up straight on the bench. He does not want to die. Shane would never forgive him if he... took his own life. No matter what Ilya deserves, Shane still loves him, misses him— he told Ilya himself. The least Ilya can do is try, make an effort to do better, to be better, if only because that is what Shane deserves from him.

He does not want to die. What would his mother do? She would die, too. Ilya cannot have that. Irina saved his life, risked her own to do it, and Ilya could be so cruel as to cut it short and waste all of her efforts? No. He can do better. He will be better.

But. The river is just there. Would it look like an accident? Or was he out of his mind on the ice tonight to the point that people noticed, and everyone will assume he killed himself out of some kind of sadness for his rival? He would hate to be remembered that way. Maybe he will not be remembered at all.

He forces himself into the hotel, into the elevator and up to his room, which he is sharing with Evan Dykstra. As nice as it would be to have privacy at a time like this, Ilya is grateful that he does not have to spend the night alone. Dykstra nods at him when he enters the room, and Ilya takes a deep breath and nods back.

“Hollander okay?” Dykstra asks, watching Ilya curiously.

“Yes,” Ilya says. “He will be.”

“How long is he out? Does everyone else in the league get a fighting chance now?” Dykstra asks. He is trying to lighten the mood, which Ilya appreciates, but cannot quite bring himself to participate in.

“Three months,” Ilya says.

“Damn,” Dykstra says. “Are you, uh... you okay?”

Ilya looks up at him quickly. *No*. He nods. *I have never been less okay*.

“So, you guys are, what? Friends?”

“We were,” Ilya says. “We— I do not know what we are now.”

“Still hard to watch someone you care about go down like that,” Dykstra says. “I get that.”

He does not get it. Nobody gets this. “Yeah.”

Dykstra has more questions, Ilya can feel them hanging in the air, but he does not ask them. Ilya’s phone buzzes again in his pocket, and he sighs when he sees his mother’s name.

He answers in Russian, angling his body away from Evan, who quickly at least pretends to look busy and uninterested.

“Ilya,” his mother says sharply down the line. *“Where are you?”*

“At my hotel,” Ilya says. *“I have a very early flight.”*

“Ilya,” Irina says again. She is upset with him; Ilya does not remember the last time she went so long without calling him by a nickname.

“I cannot, Mama,” Ilya says lowly. *“I— it is too hard.”*

“You left him?” Irina accuses. *“Yuna is a wreck. David wants to drive there tonight.”*

“It is only two hours,” Ilya says.

“You—” Irina bites off whatever she was about to say, but it still stings. *“Ilya.”*

“I know,” Ilya says lowly. *“I am awful. Everything I do is—”*

“That does not make it okay,” Irina says. *“Acknowledging it does not make it okay to do. Do better, Ilya. You need help.”*

“I need him,” Ilya grits out. *“But I cannot have him.”*

“Unless ‘him’ is God, then you are mistaken,” Irina says. *“Ilya, you—”*

“I have to go, Mama, I have a roommate.”

“Ilya—”

“Goodnight, Mama.”

Dykstra glances over at him when Ilya hangs up, but Ilya pretends not to notice, turning his phone off and collapsing back against his pillow. Dykstra turns the light off eventually, but Ilya does not sleep at all. In the morning, he will board a plane that will take him to the States for the next week and a half, far away from Shane, from Irina, from Montréal, from Ottawa, from all the things he cannot change or control.

Two weeks later – Ottawa, Ontario

“You know, you’re out for another two and a half months. You probably could cut yourself some slack on the performance diet, no?”

Shane sighs, choking down another mouthful of his kale and spinach smoothie. “It makes me feel better,” he lies. “Plus, I can’t work out right now, so I really shouldn’t be eating like shit.”

Yuna frowns at him over the top of her avocado toast. It is topped with pickled onions and feta cheese, a balsamic drizzle, and a poached egg. It looks fucking delicious. It makes Shane’s stomach turn.

“I hardly think your father and I eat like shit,” Yuna says.

“At least let me make you some eggs,” David bargains. “Surely you can have eggs?”

“I don’t *want* eggs,” Shane huffs. He feels like a child again every time he comes home to stay with his parents again, struggling for the autonomy he has gained as a fully grown adult with his own apartment in a different city. He hates it.

David holds his hand up in surrender, but Yuna keeps watching him while she eats.

“How’s your head today?” she asks gently, like she’s speaking to a toddler.

“It hurts,” Shane grumbles. It hurt yesterday, it hurts today, and it’ll hurt tomorrow, when she asks again.

“The doctor said you can—“

“I know what the doctor said,” Shane sighs. Yuna purses her lips. “I’m sorry. I’m just—“

“I know, honey,” Yuna says. “We’re just trying to help.”

“I’m gonna go lay down,” Shane says.

“Okay. Don’t stare at your phone. And don’t—“

Shane shuffles away before she can finish that sentence, dragging himself up the stairs and falling back into his bed, which he only got up from less than an hour ago. He is miserable; everything hurts just as much as it did the day he was released from the hospital. He feels like he got hit by a truck, not by another man, but Nick Chouinard is probably closer to the former, all things considered. His head aches constantly, his collarbone twinges every time he so much as wiggles his fingers, and on top of all of that, he is so emotionally bruised he spends most of each day just trying not to burst into tears.

He feels absolutely useless not being able to play hockey. His fans have been ruthless, criticizing him online for being so stupid, so distracted, for letting himself get hit like that. They’re not wrong; he should have seen Chouinard coming, but he was so distracted by his primary goal of getting as far from Ilya Rozanov as he could physically be while sharing the same ice, he didn’t even think about the fact that he was skating headlong into the Ottawa defenseman’s territory.

And as if that isn’t enough, he’s been trying to remember ever since the drugs wore off whether Ilya really visited him in the hospital that night. He is pretty sure Ilya was there,

pretty sure they held hands and had a whole conversation, but he is not entirely convinced it wasn't a dream, and no one will give him a straight answer about it. Yuna brushes it off every time he asks, and David just keeps telling him to focus on the present, to not worry about that night, it's not good for his head. Shane feels crazy, like he lost an entire day to this injury, and no one will help him fill in the blanks.

Ilya has not spoken to him since that night, or maybe before that, if that night really was just a dream. Shane texted— in the middle of the night, when he was sure Yuna wouldn't catch him looking at his phone— out of desperation, to ask if Ilya was really there, but Ilya never answered.

His head is pounding, but he has been trying to stay away from the pills the doctors gave him; he's not going to be one of those athletes who gets hooked on pain pills after an injury and fucks up the rest of their career. Instead, he props himself up, closes his eyes, and forces himself to sleep. He sleeps clear through until dinner, when he is awoken by a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Are you okay to come down for dinner?" Yuna asks, brushing her fingers through his hair. "Irina will be here soon."

Shane groans, pressing his face into his pillow. "How soon?"

"Half hour?" Yuna says.

Irina is Irina. Irina is not Ilya. Irina is Ilya's mother, yes, but she is not Ilya, and Shane cannot hold a grudge against her for that. "Fine," Shane sighs, sitting up slowly. "I need to shower."

"Yes, you do," Yuna says, smiling when Shane scoffs at her. "Go ahead. We'll wait for you, if you're not down in time."

Shane drags himself to the bathroom, turns the shower on hot, and tries to not pass out while he washes himself. His head is spinning by the time he gets back to his room to get dressed, and he sits down for a few more minutes, until he hears the doorbell ring.

He makes it downstairs just in time to see Yuna pull the door open, revealing Irina in the doorway, along with—

Oh. Ilya.

Ilya looks horrified when he sees Shane at the bottom of the stairs. Shane strongly considers turning on his heel and going back upstairs, but instead he just turns his eyes to the floor, suddenly wishing he did pass out in the shower, after all.

"Oh," Yuna says, her voice tight and unamused. "Ilya."

"I hope it is okay he came, too," Irina says.

"No, of course, of course," Yuna says in that same displeased tone, moving aside to let them both into the house. "Come in. There's plenty of food."

Shane has been ignoring the hockey world, for the most part, for the past two weeks, but he did happen to know that the Centaurs have been on the road for quite a while. He had no idea that Ilya was home, that he'd be attending tonight, and neither did Yuna, clearly, given the look she shoots in his direction. She seems annoyed, more so than Shane has context for, but he isn't exactly happy that Ilya is here either.

"Dinner is almost ready!" David calls from the kitchen, rounding the corner and stopping in his tracks. "Oh," he says. "Ilya."

"Hi," Ilya says sheepishly. Shane feels lightheaded.

"*Lapochka*," Irina greets Shane, tugging him off the last step of the staircase and into her arms. Shane goes stiffly, keeping his eyes on the floor. "How are you? Your head?"

"Uh, getting better," Shane says. "Still just sore most of the time. I've been sleeping a lot."

Irina pets his head sweetly, still damp from the shower. "Your doctors are pleased?"

"Yeah, I think so, it's all normal," Shane shrugs.

"Good," Irina says, pinching Shane's chin very gently and planting a kiss on his cheek. Shane blushes, eyes sweeping around the room, and accidentally landing on Ilya.

Ilya is still standing just inside the door, like he's still not sure whether or not he is welcome. He looks sick, pale and sunken, and his eyes are locked on Shane, the corners of his lips pulled down into a frown. He looks away almost immediately, giving Shane the freedom to look him over, take him in.

He looks terrible. His skin is dull, his hair is too long, his jaw is unshaven. His usual hulking frame seems diminished, somehow, shoulders hunched and pulled in tight while he loiters next to the door. He looks up at Shane again when Yuna and Irina follow David back into the kitchen, and Shane can't move, rooted to his spot under Ilya's gaze.

"Hi," Ilya says, awkward.

"Hi," Shane says tightly. He turns and walks away without further preamble, following his parents and Irina into the kitchen. Ilya wanders in eventually, too, finding a spot for himself in the corner, as far from Shane as he can be without leaving the room.

Shane wants to go back to bed. He wants to smash his head off the tile floor so hard he has to go back to the hospital. He wants Ilya to smash his head off the tile floor so hard he has to go to the hospital. He wants Ilya to come over here and hold him, kiss him, tell him that he loves him too. He wants Ilya to leave.

None of those things happen. Dinner is served, and they all take their usual seats at the dining table, which puts Ilya directly across from Shane. Shane stares dutifully at his dinner, does not touch it, does not speak a word, until finally his head is pounding so hard he has to hunch forward to rest it against the table.

Conversation tapers off, and there's a hand on his back. "Shane?"

“Sorry,” Shane says, forcing himself to sit up. “I’m not feeling well.”

“Honey,” Yuna says very, very quietly, rubbing small circles into his back. “You need to eat.”

“I’m gonna go lay down,” Shane mutters, pushing away from the table and shuffling to the stairs. The room is silent as he goes, but he cannot bring himself to care, closing himself in his cool, dark bedroom and pressing his face into his pillow.

He gets a rather long stretch of peace, all things considered, before there is a gentle knock on his door. His heart stutters in his chest; Yuna doesn’t knock, she just enters, and David always calls through the door when he needs something. That leaves either Irina or Ilya coming to call upon him, and he isn’t sure which option is worse.

“Shane?” Irina’s voice calls gently. “Are you awake?”

Shane sighs, sitting up. “Yeah,” he calls back weakly. “Come in.”

Irina opens the door silently, closes it after herself just as quietly, and smiles at Shane sadly. “Your room has not changed,” she says.

Shane looks around, like he’s unfamiliar with the room; it is still covered with Centaurs memorabilia, a relic of a life long past, one he never got the chance to clean up from. “Yeah,” he mutters.

“How are you doing?” Irina asks, sitting down at the edge of his bed.

Shane resists the urge to sigh; he just gave the spiel before dinner, did he not? The same spiel he has to give whenever *anyone* asks that question, which is the only question anyone ever asks anymore.

“Just really tired,” he says. “And sore. But the doctors—”

“I do not mean your body,” Irina says. “I mean you.” Shane blinks at her, and she smiles. “Your soul, Shane. Your heart. How are *you*?”

Shane swallows around the lump that has suddenly formed in his throat, dropping his eyes to the bed. His heart hurts almost as much as his head. His soul has felt dislocated for over a year now, but he can’t tell Irina any of that— it is her son’s fault, almost entirely, at the end of the day. He shakes his head slowly.

“You are hurting very much,” Irina says knowingly.

Shane nods.

Irina reaches for his hands, massaging her thumbs along Shane’s knuckles. “Because of Ilya,” she says. It is not a question.

Shane hesitates, and nods again.

Irina takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly. “He is hurting, too.”

Shane can't help but scoff, turning his head away.

"Because of me."

Oh. Shane's an asshole. Of course that's what she meant. Of course that is why Ilya is hurting. God, Ilya must be hurting so bad. Shane squeezes his eyes shut.

"He is such a sweet, sensitive boy," Irina says. "He always has been. And I have hurt him worse than anyone, worse than his father ever could have. I am torn up about it."

Shane looks up at her, finding her eyes are as wet as his suddenly are.

"I am trying to do better," Irina whispers, smiling brokenly. "And I am doing better, but I know his hurt is never really going to go away, and that devastates me."

Shane wipes at his face, pulling his hands free from Irina's in order to do so. "Irina," he says, voice rough, "you know I love you, but I am so tired, I should rest—"

Irina cups his face in her hands, wipes away the next tear that falls. "Oh, *lapochka*, you sweet little thing," she breathes. "I am sorry to have caused so much pain."

Shane shakes his head, frowning. "You shouldn't apologize," he says.

"He is pushing you away because you are the only person left in the world who has not hurt him yet," Irina says. Shane feels dizzy. "And I have just proven to him that everyone he loves, no matter who, is capable of hurting him, and he does not want you to be next."

Shane can't stop the sob that escapes him, leaning into Irina's hands on his cheeks. "I would never hurt him," he says miserably, closing his eyes while Irina thumbs away each of his tears. "I just want him back."

Irina snuffles, pulling one hand from Shane's face to wipe at her own. "I know, *solnyshko*," she whispers. Shane leans into her, cries a little harder; he has heard Irina call Ilya that word countless times over the years, but she has never called Shane that particular nickname. He collapses into her arms when she wraps them around him, mindful of his collarbone, and cries into her neck like she is his own mother.

Irina holds him for a while, lets him get it all out. She doesn't offer any solutions, or next steps, or anything at all. She just rubs his back, and whispers softly in Russian in his ear, and for the first time in his life, Shane gets a little insight into what it feels like to be Ilya, and—yeah, he'd be pretty devastated, too, if this sweet woman was brought to suicide and he had even an inkling of an idea that it was his fault. The thought makes him cry even harder, and Irina tuts next to his ear.

"Oh, *lapochka*, I am sorry," she coos. "I did not mean to make you more upset."

"No," Shane says, finally pulling himself together enough to sit back. "You didn't. Thank you for talking to me."

Irina smiles sadly at him, leaning forward to press a kiss to his forehead. "Please talk to him," she whispers, while she's there.

Shane looks down when she pulls back, unable to meet her eye.

"Shane," she sighs softly. "I know he hurt you last year, after everything with his brother, but—" she cuts herself off, staring blankly at the bed for a moment.

"Wait," Shane says, his brain slow to catch up. "What?"

Irina mutters under her breath in Russian, shaking her head. "I should not have said that. He still has not told you?"

"No?" Shane frowns. "What happened with his brother?"

"Oh, Ilyusha," Irina sighs, shaking her head at Shane's mattress. "I thought he would have told you by now."

"Told me what?" Shane asks desperately.

"I cannot," Irina says, standing up from the bed. "He needs to—"

"Irina, please," Shane says, his voice breaking, grabbing for her hand before she can get too far. "Please, I have been dying, Irina, I—"

"His brother contacted him," Irina says, like it is being wrenched from her. "It scared him. He tried— he was trying to protect you. Shane, I cannot— he should have been the one to tell you— I have to—"

"Irina," Shane says, refusing to drop her hand when she tries to pull away. "Is he safe?"

Irina pauses, looking at his face. "Yes," she says. "We all are safe. Alexei is— just a bully."

Shane releases her hand, and Irina sinks back down to the bed.

"Please do not tell him I told you this," Irina says. "He is so ashamed, he knows that he owes you an apology and an explanation, but—"

"I need to lay down," Shane says, voice flat.

"Okay," Irina whispers. She stands, walks to the door, and then turns to look at him once more. "*Lapochka?*" Shane looks up at her. "Please, please talk to him."

Shane lets his eyes fall back to the bed.

"Goodnight," Irina says.

"Goodnight, Irina."

The dining table is silent when Irina gets up to go visit Shane's room. Dinner is long over, Shane's plate has been wrapped and stored away in the fridge, and Ilya fears he may catch flame when he is left alone at the table with David and Yuna. No one says a word, so Ilya finally shifts awkwardly in his chair, looking up at each of them in turn.

"Yuna, David," he says, voice so low it almost does not make any sound, "I wanted to apolo—"

"Oh, save it," Yuna mutters, pushing her chair back abruptly and leaving the table.

"Yuna," David says, but Yuna has left the room, disappeared around the corner.

"I am sorry," Ilya breathes. "Truly, I am so sorry."

David looks conflicted; Ilya is not forgiven, he knows that much, but David is much too nice to tell him that. "It's just a little too late for that, kiddo," he says eventually, rising from his chair and following after Yuna.

Ilya sinks down in his chair, staring at the ceiling for a long few minutes. Yuna keeps her house so clean; there is not a cobweb to be seen along the ceiling, not even a hint of a waterspot. Ilya knows very well that he is the dirtiest thing they have ever allowed into this home.

He gets up after a few minutes, collecting the rest of the dishes left on the table and carrying them into the kitchen, heart heavy in his chest. He finds David and Yuna on the far side of the room, speaking in hushed voices, which fall silent as soon as Ilya rounds the corner. David turns his back to Ilya, but Yuna glares, marching toward him as he puts the dishes down.

"I begged," Yuna spits; Ilya stands at least a foot taller than her, but she has no trouble getting in his face. "I fucking begged you not to leave him. And you *did*."

"I know," Ilya says, eyes full with tears immediately. "I know I did. I have nothing to say for myself."

"He was so scared," Yuna grits out. "He was all alone when he woke up, we couldn't get there fast enough, and he was *alone* and he was *scared* and confused and hurt and—"

"Yuna," David says.

"—and *you*, you promised you would stay with him, you *promised*—"

"I am so sorry," Ilya says, not bothering to wipe the tear that falls down his cheek. "Yuna, I— I hate myself for it. I will never forgive myself."

"That makes two of us," Yuna says. She does not give him the courtesy of storming away this time. She grabs the stack of dishes Ilya brought into the kitchen and starts angrily loading the

dishwasher, leaving Ilya to try and force himself to breathe at the counter.

“He didn’t remember you being there,” David says. “He keeps asking, he thinks he dreamed it. We haven’t had the heart to tell him.”

Ilya nods. It is better, probably, that Shane thinks that was not real, that he remembers Ilya in that dream-like way, and does not get the chance to be crushed by the truth that Ilya left him battered and unconscious, all alone in that hospital bed. Shane was so happy to see him that night, to hold his hand and tell Ilya that he missed him. Tonight, when Shane caught sight of Ilya in the doorway, he looked so disappointed, so disgusted. Ilya cannot blame him.

“I owe him so many apologies,” Ilya says lowly. “I know I do.”

Yuna scoffs, turns to glare at him once again, and Ilya finds himself too weak to endure it. He hunches his shoulders in and turns, walking back to the living room to sit and wait for Irina to come back downstairs so that they can leave and Ilya can go far, far away from this poor, beautiful family that he cannot stop victimizing. It is a while before Irina comes back down, and then she disappears into the kitchen for a little while with David and Yuna, leaving Ilya to sink a little deeper into the living room couch, like a child waiting for his ride home.

Irina finally emerges from the kitchen some time later, eyes red and teary. She levels him with a stern look, nodding toward the stairs. “Go,” she says.

Ilya might be sick. “Go?”

“Go upstairs,” Irina says. “Talk to him. That little boy is devastated, Ilya.”

Ilya should go. He should climb the stairs, knock on Shane’s door, sink to his knees at Shane’s feet and come clean, tell him everything, apologize until he is blue in the face, until Shane asks him to leave. He should tell Shane that he loves him, that he needs him, that life is not worth living if Shane is not with him. Irina raises her eyebrows at him and— yes. Yes, this is exactly what Ilya will do.

He is emboldened only until he reaches the top of the stairs. He pauses once he gets there, staring down the hallway at Shane’s closed bedroom door, and then drags himself toward it as if it may be the last thing he ever does. He checks his surroundings once he gets to the door, though he knows the hallway is empty. He can hear Irina, David, and Yuna downstairs, talking lowly in the kitchen. Ilya raises his hand to knock on Shane’s door, hesitates, drops his hand, raises it again, and knocks.

There is no response.

Ilya sighs and knocks again, still to no avail.

“Shane?” he calls softly, dropping his forehead against the door. Nothing. “Shane?” Eerie, unsettling silence.

Ilya panics, tries the doorknob, and the door swings open easily. Ilya steps inside, checks the hallway once more, and closes Shane’s door behind himself.

Shane is asleep, curled up on top of his covers. His face is half mashed into the pillow, and Ilya can tell by his breathing, rough and stuttering, that he cried himself to sleep. Ilya's heart aches so badly in his chest that he has to physically clutch at it, inching his way closer to Shane's bed.

There is a blanket folded at Shane's feet, and it comes free with a bit of gentle coaxing. Ilya unfolds it, frowning at the mascot of his own hockey team smiling back at him when he holds the blanket up. It is such a ridiculous mascot, the Centaur. Half man, half beast. A monster, a freak, a mistake. Maybe Ilya belongs on this team, after all.

He spreads the blanket carefully over Shane's body, and then bravely pushes Shane's hair out of his face. Shane twitches, but does not wake up. Ilya does it again, just to see, but Shane just relaxes into his touch this time, and Ilya pulls back like he has been burned.

He cannot wake him. Even if Shane was awake, Ilya could not possibly do this tonight. He needs to, he knows he does, and he keeps telling himself that he will, but not now, not like this. Not with their parents waiting downstairs. Not when Shane is wrapped in a fucking Centaurs blanket. Not tonight.

He watches Shane sleep for longer than he would like to admit, and then creeps back toward the door. He lets himself out to the hallway, descends the stairs in a fog, and gains the attention of everyone when he enters the kitchen.

"He is asleep," he announces, and then, to Irina, "*I could not do it.*"

Irina looks so, so disappointed, and Yuna turns away quickly, unable to even look at him. David slips out past Ilya, toward the stairs, as if he is going to go check to make sure Ilya did not harm a hair on their precious son's head.

"We should go," Irina says, ducking her head. "Thank you for dinner."

"You're always welcome, Irina," Yuna says. She does not spare Ilya even a glance.

It is a tense ride home. Ilya's hands shake around the steering wheel, and Irina stares straight ahead all the while.

"*What did you talk about?*" Ilya asks, when he cannot hold it back anymore, moments before pulling into his and Irina's driveway. "*When you went upstairs?*"

Irina looks over at him, smiles sadly, and squeezes his arm. "*That little boy is very fond of you, solnyshko,*" she says. "*And he is very, very hurt.*"

Ilya does not speak again until they are out of the car, in the house, shoes and coats put away.

"*I do not know what to do,*" he says, a little too harshly, startling his poor mother.

"*Everything I do hurts him even more! I do not deserve him, not at all, and he deserves so much more than me, and I— I do not know why he will not just move on, do better, let me go!*"

"*Because, Ilyusha, that is not what either of you wants,*" Irina says simply.

"It does not matter what I want!" Ilya says, voice raised. "It matters that he is okay, and I cannot make sure of that!"

Irina's eyes flash, just enough to knock Ilya off kilter. "Let me tell you something, Ilya," she says through her teeth, firmly, "he is not okay. He has lost you, and now he has lost hockey, and those are the two things in this world that he cares for the most. And, yes, he could go and find someone else to love, probably in an afternoon, and that person would love him unconditionally and forever and it would be uncomplicated and beautiful and simple, and he could be genuinely, seriously happy, but it would always pale in comparison to you. You are the person he has loved since he was small. You are the person who makes him the happiest in the world. You are a living, breathing piece of his soul, and you are the one hurting him so, so badly in your attempts to keep from hurting him. You are the only person, Ilyusha, the only one who can make the hurting stop."

Ilya wants to scream, wants to throw something, wants to trash the entire house but that will not solve anything, it will not fix anything, and it will not change the fact that Irina is right. He grabs the pack of cigarettes out of his coat pocket and marches out to the porch, climbing up on the wall which overlooks the river and lighting his first cigarette.

It is such a massive weight on his shoulders, to be told that he is solely responsible for Shane's happiness. He smokes a second cigarette when he finishes the first, and the longer he sits out in the cold air, letting it seep into his bones, he starts to realize that he is not looking at the situation correctly, not really. He is not solely responsible for Shane's happiness— but he is, however, solely responsible for his hurt.

Being apart is not working for them, that much is clear. Being apart hurts so much worse than being together ever did, even when they were at their worst, even when Ilya was completely miserable and Shane was struggling even to be around him. Even those worst days were better than this, filling the growing hollow in his chest with nicotine and smoke and telling himself that next time, the very next time he sees Shane, even if they are on the ice, even if they are surrounded by teammates and fans, Ilya will fix this, he will tell Shane everything, he will make this right.

Shane is sleeping now, Shane is injured, Shane is so, so upset. Ilya wants to call him right this moment, but he cannot do it, cannot ask Shane to sacrifice his rest after all the other things Ilya has already forced him to sacrifice. He goes to bed without reaching out, and in the morning, still cannot bring himself to do it, nor the next day, or the day after that.

Chapter 21

January, 2012 — Montréal, Québec

“Hollander!”

Shane turns quickly, finding JJ waving to him from the dance floor. Shane weighs his options; he doesn’t dance, but he also doesn’t date women, and the three young ladies surrounding him at his otherwise empty table haven’t quite seemed to have grasped that yet. He cringes internally at the hand placed on his arm to keep him from leaving, and politely excuses himself from the table.

JJ looks affronted when Shane arrives on the dance floor alone. “Where are the girls?” JJ asks.

“What girls?”

“The girls who were trying to suck your dick right right there at the table,” JJ huffs. “You were supposed to bring them!”

“Oh,” Shane says, glancing back toward the table. The girls are gone. “I didn’t know. Sorry.”

“Are you gay, or just stupid?” JJ asks. Shane bristles, but JJ doesn’t seem to notice. “Whatever, man. There’s still time to get you laid.”

Shane doesn’t have anything to say to that, so he turns away, rocking to the music just enough to be considered dancing. He scans the dance floor, spotting the happy bride and groom right in the center, connected at the face, like they always are. Shane isn’t sure he could pick Jackie— Jackie *Pike*, as of a few hours ago— out of a lineup, unless her face was attached to Hayden’s. Shane watches them for just a moment too long, and JJ nudges him.

“Don’t worry, Hollander,” JJ grins. “We will find someone for you.”

“No, no,” Shane says quickly. “I don’t— I’m not interested in dating anyone right now.”

“Casual sex, Hollander, ever heard of it?” JJ scoffs. “Just because Pike married his hook up doesn’t mean you have to.”

Casual sex. Of course Shane has heard of it. He’s tried it, even. It’s just not really his thing. It’s just not as fun when it’s not with someone he loves.

It’s just not as fun when it’s not with Ilya.

“What are you into?” JJ asks, leaning too close to Shane’s ear. “Boobs, butts? Don’t say personality.”

Shane flounders. “Uh—”

“Blondes? Brunettes? Asian girls?”

“JJ,” Shane chastizes.

“Jackie does not have enough black friends,” JJ grumbles.

“I’m gonna go get a drink,” Shane says.

“Oh, get me a beer,” JJ says. “I like the— Hollander, wait!”

Shane weasels his way through the crowd on the dancefloor, eyeing the garden door of the reception hall. It’s January in Québec, which means it is freezing outside, but the handle turns when Shane tries it, so he slips out into the cold, dark night, soaking in the silence once the door closes behind him.

He pulls his phone out of his pocket to check the time— a little after midnight. A perfect time to slip away and start heading home before anyone notices he’s gone. He finds a path through the garden behind the country club that leads him back to the parking lot, gets in his car, and texts JJ to let him know that his head is bothering him, he’s heading home, please give the Pikes his love.

He came back to Montréal right after Christmas, partly to get away from the watchful eye of his ever-present mother, but mostly to put some distance between himself and Ilya. He has not seen or spoken to Ilya again since that one horrific dinner, but just knowing that they were in the same city was a little too much to deal with.

His concussion has been cleared for a while now, and the headaches are better, but his collarbone still gives him a bit of trouble when it is exceptionally cold outside. He’s still out for another two and a half weeks, but it is easier to be here, in his new apartment in Montréal, than it is to be at home, where everything reminds him of Ilya.

It’s part of the reason he moved; his old apartment in Montréal held too many memories, too many nooks and crannies where Ilya remained, and not all of them happy memories. Even the happy memories have turned sour, now, though, because each and every time Shane thinks about Ilya, he is transported back to Ilya’s entryway, where Shane told Ilya that he loved him, and Ilya told him to leave. It is nice to be in an apartment where Ilya has never stepped foot, where nothing reminds him of Ilya, where nothing has ever been tainted by memories which only serve to haunt him.

His new apartment is bigger, more luxurious, with a doorman and a private elevator. It is a penthouse, technically, though it’s only on the fourth floor, and the view of the river is stunning from his living room window. He toes his shoes off by the door and hangs his coat and his keys, loosens his tie while he heads toward his bedroom. His footsteps echo through the empty apartment, but he relishes the quiet, strips down in his darkened bedroom and puts his clothes away neatly in his closet.

He thinks, and has thought for some time now, that it is likely he will never love anyone ever again. He doesn't need to— he has hockey, he has Hayden and JJ and the other guys, he has his parents, he has exercise and hockey memoirs and sports podcasts. This is his life, and he's happy with it. He has to be.

Maybe he should try the whole casual sex thing again. If he's never going to fall in love again, he might as well be able to have some fun with people who are only there for the same thing. It's just so complicated, and dangerous, not being into women. It's easier for Ilya; he has more options, enjoys them all equally, and does not need to worry about trusting strangers to keep his secrets. Shane doesn't really have that luxury. Unless—

Ilya. Shane replays that fateful night at the end of the summer in his mind, not for the first time, but on purpose, this time. Ilya kissed him back, Ilya touched him, probably would have allowed more if Shane had not interrupted himself to open his mouth and ruin everything.

Ilya likes casual sex. Maybe Ilya would be okay with casual sex. Maybe Ilya can't love Shane anymore because of whatever happened with his brother— Shane isn't sure he's ever going to get to the bottom of that, no matter how much he agonizes over it— but maybe they could have this. Maybe Ilya could let Shane back into his life in that one small way, and it could be insignificant, it could be meaningless, it could be casual.

It would not be casual. It would not be meaningless, nor would it be insignificant, not to Shane. But he could pretend. He could pretend, wrapped up in Ilya, that they're something again, that Ilya loves him, that Ilya wants him, that Ilya didn't lie and keep things from him for months. He could pretend that it means nothing to him, could lie through his teeth if Ilya ever asked, and maybe such double agency wouldn't be sustainable, but it's worth a try.

He can't stop thinking about it, now that he's started, settling into bed in his boxers and a t-shirt. When he closes his eyes, his mind replays for him that last kiss, Ilya's hands slipping up under his t-shirt, Ilya's hips pressed against his own, Ilya's tongue sliding against his, Ilya's warm breath on his face, Ilya, Ilya, Ilya. Shane has a palm pressed down against himself before he realizes what he's doing, lip caught between his teeth.

What would Ilya have done if Shane hadn't ruined the moment? Would he have swapped places with Shane, pressed him back against the wall instead, hiked him up off his feet? Would he have dropped to his knees, pulled Shane's pants down, and taken him into his mouth? Would he have asked Shane to get on his knees, first? Would he have carried Shane to his bedroom, dropped him on the bed, stripped him down, and—

Shane cries out into the empty air, finishing suddenly into his boxers. He didn't even get a hand around himself, came in his underwear like a horny teenager— that was the last time he did this, probably, and he was probably thinking about Ilya then, too, back before he could have him, back before it was ever a possibility. It might not be a possibility now, either, but *fuck* Shane hopes it is, because it works, it could work, it would be *so good*, just one more time, just—

He drags himself out of bed, eventually, peels his boxers off, and gets in the shower. He can't help himself under the hot water, gets off again leaning against the cool tile wall, imagining

running into Ilya again, maybe after a game, in a hotel room, quick and dirty and desperate and— casual. Perfectly casual.

Fuck. Who is he kidding— he can't do this. He dries himself off, climbs back into bed, and stares at the ceiling. He can't be casual with Ilya. He's only going to hurt himself in the process. But, then again, nothing can hurt more than he's already been hurt, and maybe having some small part of Ilya again would be better than having nothing.

Someday, maybe, Shane will find someone else, someone sustainable, someone he trusts and enjoys being with. Then, he can call it off for good with Ilya, move on, stop pretending. For now, though, he finds himself scrolling through the schedule for the rest of the season, itching to know when he and Ilya will be in the same city again.

March, 2012 — Ottawa, Ontario

“Well, boys,” Dykstra says to the room at large, “hope you enjoyed your vacation these last few games against Montréal. Shit's about to get tough.”

“I should just sit this game out, probably,” Chouinard says. “I'm not fucking going anywhere near him.”

Shane has been a bit of an animal since he has been back on the ice the past few weeks, playing hard as if to make up for the three months he lost, but he is harmless; anyone in the hockey world knows that. The media has created something of a spectacle out of this afternoon's game, though, Hollander's first time back on the ice against Ottawa since his injury, facing not only his long-time arch-nemesis Ilya Rozanov, but also his newfound enemy, Nick Chouinard.

“He cannot hurt you,” Ilya pipes up. “He is like little cat.”

“Yeah, but Boiziau can. He tried to fucking kill me last time they were here!”

Ilya rolls his eyes, pulling on the rest of his gear and effectively removing himself from the conversation. He switches himself into the mindset he has learned to adopt whenever playing against Shane; he keeps his head down, eyes low, and guard up.

He follows the rest of the team out to the ice to warm up, immediately spotting Shane stretching with Hayden Pike near the visitor's bench. Ilya only looks long enough to confirm that it is him, and then turns away, trying to clear his head while he warms up, until he hears someone swish to a stop behind him.

“Hey.”

Ilya turns around slowly, eyes wide. Shane offers him a nervous smile, and Ilya blinks.

“Are you gonna be there tonight?”

Irina had invited the Hollanders to dinner tonight, after the game. They are here, in the audience, all three of them, up in one of the private boxes.

“Yes,” Ilya says simply.

“Cool,” Shane says. “Uh, me too.”

Ilya nods. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Shane says. “Well, good luck.”

Ilya feels like he is dreaming. “You too,” he says, and then, “try not to get knocked out again.”

Shane’s lips part in surprise, but then he smiles. “Yeah,” he chuckles. “Thanks. I’ll try.” He stares at Ilya a moment longer before he shakes his head, still smiling, and skates away.

Ilya waits for the feeling to come back to his extremities. What the fuck was that? Was Shane just... making small talk with him? Being friendly? How did they get to this point? The last time Ilya saw Shane, Ilya’s mere presence in the house was enough to send Shane running for the hills. What changed?

The game is, all things considered, lighthearted. Boiziau does go after Nick a few times, but only for the way the crowd eats it up. Montréal is already most certainly not going to the playoffs this year— it was a rough few months for them without Shane. The Centaurs are definitely not going to the playoffs, on account of they are the fucking Centaurs, so the stakes are low, besides for the obvious, omnipresent Hollander versus Rozanov thing.

And, oh, what a thing it is today. Shane has been on Ilya like glue every moment they have been on the ice together, checking him into the boards, stealing the puck from him every chance he gets— every time Ilya turns, Shane is there, and it should be frustrating, but...

It is *fun*. It is the most fun Ilya has had playing hockey in longer than he can remember. It feels like it used to, when he and Shane were young, alone on the ice before and after every practice. If Ilya did not know better, he would swear they were alone on the ice now, wrestling for control of the puck, chirping at each other quietly.

“Forgot you actually know how to play this game,” Shane huffs.

“Fuck off, Hollander,” Ilya bites back. “Do I need to call for Chouinard?”

Shane glares at him, and then finally wins the battle, firing the puck off to Pike. Ilya swears under his breath, but as he watches Pike score, he cannot help but remember that this does not matter. They are not playing for anything, they have all already lost. Somehow, it does not make it any less exciting.

Ilya cannot escape Shane for even a moment. Even when they are both on the bench, Ilya can feel Shane's eyes boring into him, unflinching even when Ilya meets his gaze. It is such a stark difference from the last several times Ilya has been in Shane's vicinity, he cannot figure it out, and it consumes him well after the end of the game.

Montréal wins, of course, but it does not mean a lot to anyone. The locker room is quiet, and Ilya goes straight home after, though he does not manage to beat Irina, Yuna, and David.

Despite the difference in Shane's attitude this afternoon, the energy in the house is tense when Ilya walks in. Yuna will not meet his eye, and David will not stop fussing over whatever he and Irina are crafting at the stove. Ilya expected this much, and it is almost a relief to know that the world has not completely flipped on its axis without his knowledge.

"Hi, *solnyshko*," Irina hums, the only person in the house who is happy to see him. "Go change. Dinner will be ready soon."

Ilya does as he is told, like a child, heading to his room to change out of his suit. Shane has arrived by the time he makes his way back to the kitchen, looking soft and happy in a crewneck sweatshirt and a pair of joggers. Ilya uses the time before Shane notices him to his advantage, eyes sweeping over him.

Shane has changed so much, even since the summer. He is so much leaner, has lost all of the baby fat that made him so boyish and young-looking. He is still soft, baby-faced, but the muscles in his forearms ripple where his sleeves are pushed up with every hand gesture he makes while talking, and Ilya finds himself mesmerized.

He looks away quickly when Shane finally notices him. Shane finishes his conversation with Yuna and Irina, and then makes his way over to where Ilya is leaning against the wall next to the door to the back patio, pretending to be busy on his phone.

"Hey," Shane says, uncharacteristically casual.

"Hi," Ilya says, glancing up at him over the top of the phone.

"Good game," Shane says. At Ilya's quirked eyebrow, he shrugs. "It was fun, at least."

Ilya nods. "It was," he says.

"Kinda felt like— nevermind," Shane says, blushing.

"No, I agree," Ilya says quietly. "Like old times."

"Yeah," Shane says. His eyes trail down to Ilya's mouth, and then over his throat, his chest. "Old times."

Ilya straightens up a bit, shoving his phone into his pocket. He does not know where this is going, but he does not get the chance to find out, because Irina claps her hands and calls, "Dinner is ready!"

Shane chooses the seat across from Ilya at the table, sits low in his chair and stretches his legs out so that his feet are in Ilya's space. Ilya goes out of his way to avoid making physical contact, but he accidentally brushes his feet against Shane's every now and again, earning himself piercing eye contact. Ilya cannot help but squirm, shoveling his dinner into his mouth just to get it over with. Shane eats slowly, talks a lot, in a very obvious contrast from the last dinner they all shared.

"Shane," Irina says, "you are happy to be back on the ice?"

"So happy," Shane says. "I missed it so much. It sucked not being able to play."

"He works so hard," Yuna says. "It was awful watching him have to take time off."

"Your love for the game is obvious," Irina says.

"It's especially fun when I get to play against Ilya," Shane says. The table falls silent, but Shane does not seem to notice. "I think I missed that most of all. It's *so* fun."

Ilya's eyes sweep around the table, but only Yuna is looking at him, her gaze cold and hard.

"It is my favorite, too," Ilya says quietly, eyes landing back on Shane. "My team is, ah— you know. It is nice to be challenged."

"How come you haven't turned the team around yet?" Yuna asks. The question is not friendly, or playful. "That's what everyone was expecting, right?"

"I have been a bit preoccupied," Ilya says, leveling her with an equally unfriendly look. Yuna blinks, looks down. "Maybe next season."

"I think you could," Shane says, smiling at Ilya. "Next season, for sure. You should be captain, and then you could—"

"Shane, you should eat," Yuna says, cutting him off.

"I am, Mom," Shane says, flushing immediately. He ducks his head, puts a small forkful of food in his mouth, and does not continue his thought from before.

Ilya glances back at Yuna, who is staring at him again. She looks away quickly, watching Shane chew and swallow.

"David, Irina, this is delicious," Yuna says.

"It was mostly Irina," David says. "The woman needs her own restaurant, I tell you."

"I am so happy we can do this again," Irina says, smiling at her plate. "I have missed you all so much."

No one says anything for a long, sober moment. Ilya glances at Shane, who offers him a gentle smile, nudging his foot under the table on purpose this time.

Conversation resumes, but Ilya does not participate much. He understands Yuna's coldness toward him, and he appreciates her not letting him off the hook easily for all he has done, but it does not make it any easier to take. Shane tries, bless him, several times throughout the rest of dinner, to include Ilya in the conversation, but Ilya sticks mostly to gestures and simple answers, until eventually Irina gets up to start collecting the dishes, David gets up to help, and Yuna steps outside to take a phone call.

Ilya does not know what to do with himself, alone at the table with Shane. For all it felt like he was alone on the ice with him earlier, actually being alone with him is a different story, even though David and Irina are just across the room, at the sink.

"Are you excited for summer?" Ilya asks; he does not know what else to say, but he cannot let Shane continue being the only one putting in any effort here.

"Yeah," Shane says easily. "I'm ready to put this season behind me. It kinda sucked."

"Yes," Ilya says. "It did."

"Are you?" Shane asks. "Uh— excited for summer?"

No. "Yes," Ilya says. He is dreading another summer alone in the house with Irina; she has been doing so much better, lately, but it is still hard, and Ilya is still struggling so much with everything on his own plate, he can hardly bear the thought of not having hockey as a distraction anymore, as weak of a distraction as it has been. "More excited for next season."

"Yeah, me too," Shane says. "You'll stay in Ottawa?"

"Yes," Ilya says. "I do not really have a choice."

"Right," Shane nods. He looks down, clearly working up the courage for something, and Ilya's heart sinks. "So, um," Shane says to the table, "are you, like, seeing anyone?"

He is so red, hands twisting in his lap under the table. God fucking damnit, Ilya is so fucking in love with him it makes him want to scream, cry, fall to the floor and beg for Shane's forgiveness, for Shane to tell him he loves him again so that Ilya can say it back, can tell him everything, can finally put all of this behind them.

"No," Ilya says. Shane's shoulders relax a fraction. "Are you?"

"No," Shane says, too quickly. "No, uh. Not really, no. I mean, just, you know. Casual stuff."

Casual stuff. What is casual stuff to Shane Hollander? "Oh," Ilya says. He wants to scream.

"I'd ask if you have, but I kinda already know," Shane says, smiling awkwardly.

Ilya flushes, huffing a humorless laugh and squirming in his seat. "I actually have not," he admits, "since I have been home."

Shane looks up at him. "Like, since your last road trip?"

“Since last summer.”

Shane blinks. “Wait, are you serious?”

“I am dying, a little bit,” Ilya says, cracking a smile.

Shane licks his lips, eyes flickering to Ilya’s mouth. His eyes are so wide, so... dark. He is so fucking sexy, Ilya really *is* dying, he thinks. “Yeah?” Shane says, his voice but a rasp.

Ilya barely suppresses a shiver. This is not happening. This cannot be— they cannot be doing this. How did they get here?

Yuna chooses that moment to reenter the room. Shane shifts awkwardly in his seat, looking away, and Ilya has to subtly readjust himself, staring at the table.

“Well, I should probably go,” Shane says, standing abruptly, all the courage he was working up earlier dissipated. “I’m driving back to Montréal tonight, we have an early practice tomorrow.”

“We’ll go, too,” Yuna says, eyeing David where he has just finished the dishes for Irina. “Thank you for having us, Irina.”

“It is Ilyusha’s house,” Irina hums. “But thank you for coming.”

Yuna nods, smiling tightly in Ilya’s direction. She says nothing. Ilya looks down.

“This was nice,” Shane says; when Ilya looks up, Shane is already looking at him. “We should— uh, it was nice catching up.”

Ilya nods, taking one last chance to sweep his eyes over Shane’s body. “Yes,” he says quietly.

Ilya and Irina both see them all to the door. Shane gets into his own car, and David and Yuna get into the Volvo, and then both vehicles are gone. Ilya says goodnight to his mother and then drags himself to his room, staring at his bed for a long few minutes.

What the fuck was that? What just happened? Does Shane want to fuck him? Is Shane seriously having casual sex? That is so unlike Shane— but then again, Ilya supposes, he really does not know Shane very well anymore. Good for Shane, anyway. Good for him for moving on. Ilya hopes that everyone Shane has been with has treated him like a gentleman. He could be sick over it, the mere thought of Shane with someone else, someone who barely knows him, no idea how lucky they are to be able to touch him like that—

God, Ilya cannot stop picturing it, how desperate Shane must have been to go out and find random men, strangers, to fuck him. How does he pull them? How does he act with them? Is he as sweet and docile for these strange men as he always was for Ilya? Does he smile that same coy, shy smile for them, moan so prettily for them, arch his back and bite at the pillow and—

Ilya is so hard he can barely see straight, cannot be held accountable for how quickly he grabs his phone out of his pocket and scrolls— quite far— for Shane’s contact.

Ilya: Come back.

He does not think until after it is sent, and then he spends twenty minutes pacing his room, pulling at his hair. Shane does not answer. Ilya is so stupid, so weak, Shane does not want him, Shane was simply trying to be friendly, trying to be amicable with him again to make life less fucking hard, Ilya should have just taken that for what it was instead of—

Out of the corner of his eye, he catches sight of headlights turning into his driveway through the window. His heart stutters in his chest, but his feet know what to do, bounding down the stairs as quietly as possible and slipping in his socks to the front door. Irina's bedroom is on the opposite end of the house, and she is probably already asleep, but Ilya is still ginger about it when he opens the front door, finding Shane stepping out of his car in the driveway.

Shane all but runs to him. Ilya catches him in his arms, drags him inside, kissing him so hard that Shane whimpers into his mouth. Ilya walks backwards, not allowing an inch between his body and Shane's, and somehow gets them both safely up the stairs, down the hall, and into Ilya's bedroom. Shane starts pulling at Ilya's clothes the second the door is closed behind them, and Ilya obliges easily, stripping down and pulling Shane back into his arms.

They should not be doing this. They should talk about this. Ilya has so many things he should say first, so many things he needs Shane to know first, but, fuck, this is— Ilya has not felt this alive in months, maybe in years. Shane is whining and purring into his mouth and Ilya cannot— he cannot think straight, he cannot focus on anything besides getting Shane out of his clothes, too.

“Fuck,” Shane breathes, while Ilya flings his crewneck across the room. The Shane Ilya remembers would scold him for that, pick it up, and fold it. This Shane just shoves him backwards onto the bed, climbs up on top of him, and presses his hips down while he reattaches their lips.

Ilya moans into Shane's mouth, grabbing at his hips and pulling him down harder. Shane is doing more panting into Ilya's mouth than kissing, so Ilya flips them over, sitting up to rid Shane of his pants, too.

“Shane,” Ilya says, eyes sweeping over him. “God—”

“Don't say anything,” Shane pants. “Please, just fuck me, I need—”

Ilya does not keep him waiting for another moment. He has to hunt through his bedside drawer for what he needs, but he gets his fingers in Shane as quickly as possible, and Shane's eyes roll back.

“Holy shit, Rozanov,” he gasps.

“Fuck,” Ilya says, leaning in to kiss at Shane's neck, to save himself from saying something stupid, something he cannot take back.

“I need you,” Shane says again, and then bites into his own fist. Ilya reaches up to pull his hand away from his mouth, pinning it to the bed, instead, just to hear Shane whine. “I need

you, I need you, please—”

“You have me,” Ilya hums, pulling his fingers out and kissing Shane again. “I am right here.”

Shane goes quiet once Ilya is finally inside of him, neck bared, eyes closed. Ilya cannot look away from his face, moving his hips slowly at first, building up to a punishing pace, pushing Shane up the bed with every thrust.

It is over far too soon. Shane finishes with a cry muffled into Ilya’s shoulder, and Ilya bites into Shane’s chest while he follows suit, making him jerk and cry and moan again. Ilya takes his time pulling out, and Shane does not protest, boneless against the bed while Ilya drapes himself over him to kiss him sweetly. Shane touches him everywhere, running his fingers through Ilya’s hair, over his face, down his neck and shoulders and down his sides, making Ilya shiver. When they finally break away, Shane looks ruined, staring up at Ilya with glassy, heavy eyes.

Ilya watches him, cannot look away from him, searching his face for any sign that Shane regrets what they have just done, that Shane is hurt or uncomfortable, that Shane hates him. Shane just smiles dopily, tilting his chin up for another kiss. Ilya grants it immediately, licks into Shane’s mouth until Shane finally hums and turns his face.

“Holy fuck,” Shane breathes.

“Okay?” Ilya asks.

“Yeah,” Shane says, closing his eyes. “Yeah. Thank you.” He blushes as soon as he says it, and Ilya grins, kissing his forehead, and then his cheek.

He rolls off of Shane, landing hard on the bed beside him. Shane takes his time, but eventually he sits up, his hair completely disheveled while he looks around the room.

“This is a really nice house,” he says.

It startles a laugh out of Ilya, which in turn makes Shane smile at him. *I love you*, Ilya wants to tell him.

“I really do have to drive back to Montréal tonight,” Shane says, watching Ilya’s face carefully. Ilya works very hard to keep from looking disappointed.

“Okay,” he says.

“Okay,” Shane says, watching him for another moment before he gets up off the bed and collects his clothes. Ilya does not move from the bed, watching Shane move around the room, until Shane turns to look at him sheepishly. “Bathroom?”

“There,” Ilya says, pointing toward his ensuite. Shane nods, disappears into the ensuite, and Ilya drops his head back to the bed, staring at the ceiling for a long few minutes.

They should not have done that. They really should not have done that, because Ilya is already trying to figure out when it can happen again, which it *cannot*, obviously, and of all

the things he owes Shane, this probably was quite low on the list of priorities.

He looks up again when Shane comes out of the bathroom, dressed once again, hair mostly tamed. Shane purses his lips, sits down on the edge of the bed, facing Ilya, but not quite meeting his eyes.

Uh oh, Ilya thinks. Here it comes.

“Can we– uh,” Shane stutters, blushing furiously. “Can we do this? Like, just this? Again?”

Ilya’s heart breaks in his chest. He nods quickly. “Definitely. Yes.”

Shane smiles, relief washing over his face. “Really?”

Ilya wants to cry. “Yes, Hollander.”

“Okay,” Shane grins. “Cool. Alright, well, uh. I’ll see you... at some point?”

“It is a date,” Ilya says flatly. Shane’s smile falters, but ultimately does not fade.

Ilya walks him to the door, but no further. Shane gets in his car, waves to Ilya in the doorway, and then he is gone again, leaving Ilya to wander back to his bedroom alone and collapse on the bed and wonder what the fuck just happened.

He can do this, maybe. Maybe he can just have this. Maybe he can just be one of the guys who Shane Hollander fucks casually. He can pretend it means more, in his own mind, and he can pretend it means nothing, for Shane, if that is what Shane wants. If that is what Shane needs. Ilya would open his veins for Shane, if he needed, if he wanted. He can do this. He can do this for Shane.

Chapter 22

July, 2012 – Lanaudière, Québec

11:34

Ilya: 2-4pm

Ilya: Can you?

Shane: It'll have to be quick. I can't get there til probably 2:30

Ilya: Boo

Ilya: I can be quick.

Ilya: I know you can be quick.

Shane: Fuck you, Rozanov.

Ilya: Yes. At 2:30.

Ilya: 🙄

Shane rolls his eyes, shoving his phone into his pocket and stepping out of the car. His parents are already here, chatting with the real estate agent, who waves Shane over eagerly to the expanse of trees they are all admiring.

“Mr. Hollander,” he says, shaking his hand firmly. “Nice to see you. What did you think of the drive over?”

“It was quick,” Shane says, grinning. “So that’s nice. I really like this area.”

“It’s a good lot,” David says, like he knows anything about lots of land. “Nice and flat. Lots of room.”

“You’ve got just over an acre,” the real estate agent says, “the beach is on the smaller side, but there’s plenty of room to build a dock. The land is suitable for a private well, and if you remove enough of the trees it could be a good candidate for solar, and—“

He goes on, but Shane is having trouble listening. It’s a great lot, very secluded, the beach is beautiful, and it’s only about ten minutes from his parents’ cottage. It’s perfect. He glances at his phone; it’s almost noon. If he left now, he could be in Ottawa just before two.

“Shane?” Yuna says.

Shane looks up quickly.

“What do you think?”

“Uh, it’s great,” Shane says. “I’ll have the architect come look at it this week.”

“That’s great!” the realtor says, clapping his hands once. He must be relieved; Shane has been rather particular about choosing a plot of land for his very own cottage, and he has put this poor young man through sort of a lot over the past couple of weeks. “I’ll start drafting an offer, so we can get things moving after the architect comes out.”

“Awesome,” Shane says, looking at his phone again.

David pulls the real estate agent aside to ask a few more questions about the property, and Yuna nudges Shane.

“He’s cute,” Yuna whispers.

Shane glances up at his mother, and then over at the real estate agent. “What?”

“Jared, the real estate agent,” Yuna says. “He’s cute, isn’t he? You should get his number.”

The real estate agent is maybe a third of Shane’s body weight, and several inches shorter, flamboyant and preppy and almost performatively Québécois. “I have his number, Mom,” Shane deadpans. “He’s my real estate agent.”

“Ask him out!” Yuna whispers excitedly. “Go on a date!”

“He’s not my type, Mom,” Shane says. His *type* is waiting for him in a gorgeous house in Ottawa, two hours away.

“So what?” Yuna says. “Go out, have some fun. It wouldn’t kill you.”

“I do go out and have fun,” Shane says, indignant.

“Shane, you’ve been going on six hour hikes three times a week,” Yuna says. Shane flushes. “Alone. That is not what most people consider going out to have fun.”

Oh, if Yuna knew what those hikes actually entail, she would never look at him the same way again. “It’s fun for me,” Shane grumbles.

“So, what is your type, just for my personal records?”

Big, strong, Russian top with blue eyes, curly hair, and a loose set of morals. “Ew, Mom.”

“I just want you to be happy, Shane,” she says, squeezing his arm. “I don’t want you to be lonely.”

“I’m not lonely,” Shane says. Not all the time, anyway. “I’m fine, Mom, I promise. And I can find my own guys.”

Yuna's eyes light up. "Really? Are you seeing anyone?"

"Mom, stop," Shane groans. "Ugh. I have to go."

"Go where?" Yuna asks.

Well, he can't use the hiking excuse. "I have a meeting."

"No you don't," Yuna frowns. She knows Shane's schedule better than Shane does; hopefully this new cottage will be helpful in cutting the cord, a little bit.

"It's a last minute thing," Shane says. "With some of my teammates."

"So you're driving down to Montréal?" Yuna asks skeptically.

"Yeah," Shane says. "It's not long. I'll be back before dinner."

"Okay," Yuna sighs. "You work too hard, Shane."

Yeah, no shit. "Love you," he mutters, tapping out a text to Ilya as he walks back to his car.

Shane: On my way

Ilya: 😊

Shane has put so many kilometers on his car over the past few weeks he is probably going to have to trade it in by the end of the summer, but it's worth it. He's been driving down to Ottawa several times a week since the season ended; it's not like he can ask Ilya to drive up to Lanaudière to the cottage, where Shane's parents are also staying, and Ilya has to be home with Irina, anyway. Irina has her group therapy session today from two until four, and then her regular meeting with her therapist from ten until noon every Monday. Shane and Ilya have been taking advantage of every moment she is out of the house, and then Ilya goes to pick her up, and Shane drives back to the cottage.

It is not sustainable, but it's only for the summer, Shane tells himself. It's still new, still exciting, it'll wear off before the season starts and they'll be fine going back to only seeing each other every time they're in the same city, a few times a year. It's fine. It'll be fine.

He arrives in Ottawa just after two o'clock, finds Ilya waiting shirtless at the front door. Ilya kisses him in lieu of a greeting, drags him upstairs, and loses his pants on the way. Shane hurries to match his level of undress, and then they fall into bed, and that's that for a little while.

Shane is still lying on his stomach, breathless and brainless, when Ilya's phone rings on the bedside table. Ilya swears quietly against his spine and climbs off of him, grabbing the phone and sitting on the edge of the bed.

He answers in Russian, back turned to Shane, and Shane takes the opportunity to let his eyes sweep over Ilya's shoulders, the curve of his spine, the muscles that ripple when he lifts his

arm to rub at his face. He speaks quietly, and too quickly for Shane to understand with his limited grasp of Russian, and when he hangs up, he doesn't turn around right away.

"Everything okay?" Shane asks.

"Yes," Ilya says belatedly. "Mama is done early."

"Oh, shit, okay," Shane says; he's collected enough of his brain cells to sit up, but Ilya turns quickly, crawling back on top of him.

"I am not ready for you to go," Ilya murmurs, kissing him sweetly. Shane's stomach erupts in butterflies, annoyingly. Ilya has always been sweet after sex, and that has not changed since things became casual. Except— it's not super casual, the way Ilya kisses Shane like he never wants to stop, pulls away only to stroke a thumb over the freckles on Shane's cheek, eyes sweeping over his face like he's memorizing him.

"You shouldn't keep your mom waiting," Shane says, while Ilya watches his lips. "Go. I'll get dressed, I'll be out by the time you're back."

Ilya hums in discontent, kissing Shane again. Shane should pull away, get out of bed, but he's helpless to Ilya's kisses, melting into him.

"Can you come back tomorrow?" Ilya asks against his lips.

He shouldn't. He should have some self respect and take a day off from driving four hours round trip for a quick fuck, but—

"Yeah," Shane says. "When?"

"Mama has book club at six— she's hosting," Ilya says, rolling his eyes.

"Oh," Shane says. "Well, where would we...?"

"We could... do something else?" Ilya suggests. "See a movie? Get dinner?"

Shane stares at him, waiting for Ilya to laugh, tell him he's just fucking around. Ilya's cheeks grow slowly redder, and Shane can't decide what to say.

"Or, um, I could get a hotel," Ilya says quickly. "We could—"

"I think, uh, I actually have— I can't come tomorrow," Shane says. He's such an awful liar; Ilya looks down, devastated. "Sorry."

Ilya smiles tightly, not quite meeting his eyes. "Is okay."

"Do you mind if I shower before I leave?" Shane asks. "I'll be quick."

Ilya gestures toward the bathroom, and then climbs off the bed, pulling his clothes on. Shane tries several times to catch Ilya's eye on his way into the bathroom, but Ilya keeps his gaze low, so Shane gives up and closes himself in the en-suite. Ilya is gone by the time he gets out

of the shower, his car missing from the driveway, so Shane rushes out, wanting to be long gone by the time Ilya comes back with Irina.

He has a lot of time to think on the drive back to Lanaudière. He can't stop picturing Ilya's face, so sincere and hopeful, asking Shane to see a movie, go to dinner, just hang out, like—like old times. Like they're friends. Are they friends?

They're not enemies. They're rivals, sure, but only professionally. They're much too close to ever be just acquaintances, but what they're doing is not something Shane knows how to define. Friends with benefits, maybe, but that still begs the question of whether they really are *friends*, at the end of the day.

It weighs heavily on his mind, even as he gets back to Lanaudière, eats dinner with his parents, lies about the meeting he had with some of his teammates about charity opportunities for next season. He's still worrying about it as he settles into bed, scrolling through his text thread with Ilya for any clues as to whether they're friends or not. It's leaning toward no; Shane gets as far back in the thread as the day Ilya left the cottage last summer, and all that he finds are short, clinical messages making plans to meet up, always followed by a text from Shane that he's made it home safe, and then a thumbs up emoji from Ilya. Shane can't sleep without figuring this out, so he spends a while crafting a message to Ilya, agonizing for half an hour about what to say.

Shane: Hey

Ilya: Can't right now. Mama is in the room. Call you in 20?

Shane: No, I just wanted to check in

Ilya: About what?

Shane: I just feel like it's been a while since we've talked

Ilya: I just saw you earlier today?

Shane: Yeah, but we didn't talk

Ilya: What do you want to talk about?

Shane: Idk. How are you?

Ilya reads the message, but does not respond. Shane is about to give up and try to go to sleep when Ilya finally responds, almost an hour later.

Ilya: Why?

Shane: Why what?

Ilya: Why are you asking?

Shane: Because I wanna know?

Ilya: Why?

Shane: Jeez. Ok, nevermind.

Ilya: I am fine. Do I seem not fine?

Shane: Don't shoot, dude. Whatever. Goodnight

Shane drops his phone onto his bedside table, rubbing at his face. Okay. Not friends. Good to know. His phone buzzes again a moment later, and then again.

Ilya: I booked a hotel room for tomorrow.

Ilya: Be there by six.

Shane should say no. He should call this whole thing off, apologize for starting it, and pretend it never fucking happened.

Shane: 👍

August, 2012 – Ottawa, Ontario

“Fuck, Rozanov.”

Ilya grins, gripping Shane's hips a little harder, pounding him a little deeper. Shane is on his back, both arms covering his face while he grapples with the pleasure, and Ilya carefully changes the angle of his hips to hear the overwhelmed cry that Shane lets out.

“There are no nice men in Montréal, hm?” Ilya growls, directly into Shane's ear. Shane shivers all over, mouthing at the air for a moment.

“What?” Shane pants, looking up at Ilya with hazy, sex-drunk eyes.

“No one in Montréal will fuck you like this, hm?” Ilya says. “You drive all the way to Ottawa for this because it is the best you can get, yes?”

Shane flounders; his brain is broken, Ilya can tell, and he's just being cruel. “Wh- what are you—”

“Come on, Hollander,” Ilya grits out, pumping his hips harder still. Shane falls apart, twisting his hands in the bedsheets, arching away from Ilya's punishing pace. “I know you fuck other guys. But I am the best you get, am I not?”

Shane meets his gaze for only a fraction of a second before his eyes roll back in his head, an animalistic sound escaping his throat. “Y– yeah,” he manages. He brings a hand down to wrap around himself, but Ilya grabs it immediately, pins it above his head, and Shane whines. “I’m– I’m gonna–”

“Tell me,” Ilya says, lips pressed to the shell of Shane’s ear. His tongue pokes out to trace the curve of it, and Shane trembles. “Tell me, Hollander.”

“You’re– *fuck*, oh my *god*, Roza– you’re the best, you’re– I need you, I need, I need–”

Ilya covers Shane’s mouth with his own, cannot actually bear to hear him say it. Shane cries into his mouth, arches against him, and comes so hard that he brings Ilya right down with him out of thin air. Ilya pants into Shane’s mouth, hips finally slowing, and when he finally pulls back, there are tears leaking out of Shane’s eyes, his chest heaving while he catches his breath.

“Fuck,” Shane breathes, reaching up to drag Ilya back down to kiss him again. “So fucking good,” he murmurs against Ilya’s lips.

Ilya kisses him breathless again, and then pulls away to allow Shane to suck in a full breath. He studies Shane’s face while he comes back down to Earth, searching for any hint, any clue as to the emotion behind Shane’s fingers sliding over Ilya’s shoulders, down his back, slipping through the sweat on his skin, his eyes closed and head tipped back. Ilya stares until Shane opens his eyes again, furrowing his brow at the expression on Ilya’s face, and Ilya quickly looks down, busying himself with pulling out and getting rid of the condom.

“Holy fucking shit,” Shane says, eyes slipping closed again. “You killed me.”

“Pity,” Ilya tuts, dipping into the en-suite for a towel. “Who will drive two hours from a different province just to fuck me, now?”

“Shut up,” Shane groans. “Why do you keep bringing that up?”

“Because it is hot,” Ilya says, as he wipes away the mess on Shane’s stomach. He kisses over the skin in the towel’s wake, settles between Shane’s thighs, and kisses the delicate skin there, too. Shane twitches, fingers reflexively curling into Ilya’s hair.

“No,” Shane says. “Give me a minute. Jesus Christ.”

Ilya grins, kissing his way back up Shane’s body, all the way to his mouth. Shane does not let go of his hair. Ilya could be ready to go again sooner than he should be.

“Monday?”

“I’ll be back in Montréal,” Shane says, sighing as Ilya works his way back down to his neck. “I have— hm...”

Ilya chuckles against his skin. “What was that?”

“Captain stuff,” Shane murmurs, tipping his jaw up to give Ilya more room to suck at his neck. Ilya feels the smile drop from his face, though, pulling back to toss the soiled towel in his hand to the floor.

He knew that Shane was being promoted to captain this year. He is happy for him, really, it is an amazing honor, and Shane deserves it more than anyone he has ever met. Ilya could be captain, too, if he tried a little harder. If he had stuck with the Bears, maybe. If he did not fuck up his entire life so thoroughly.

“You must be excited,” Ilya mutters, settling down on his back next to Shane.

“Yeah, it’s really cool,” Shane says. “It’s, like, a ton of work though. But so worth it. I’m so happy.”

Ilya nods, turning to give Shane a half-hearted smile, but Shane is not looking at him, his eyes still closed and head tipped back, not a worry in the world. Ilya watches him until Shane feels his eyes, cracking his own open to peek at Ilya.

“What?”

“You are pretty after sex,” Ilya says simply.

Shane scowls, but the blush on his cheeks betrays him. “Shut up.”

“*You look good, too, Ilya,*” Ilya says, his voice high pitched and whiny.

“I don’t sound like that,” Shane says. “Fuck off, Rozanov.”

Oh. *Rozanov*. Right. Ilya is not sure when that started, but it is a good reminder of where they stand; they get together, they fuck. It is simple. No first names, no feelings, no strings. They cannot afford strings. Shane was already forced to cut them once.

Except— and Ilya knows he spends a lot of time in his own head, especially during these meet ups, pretending that it means more than it probably does— but sometimes it really feels like it *does* mean more. Sometimes Shane clings to him, during, overwhelmed and out of his head, and Ilya thinks he is going to slip and tell Ilya that he loves him. Sometimes Shane lingers after for a little too long, right up until the last minute, like he does not want to leave. Sometimes Shane spends so long talking Ilya’s ear off when he first arrives that they almost run out of time to do what they met up to do. But other times, Shane hardly speaks at all. Other times, Shane settles himself right down on his hands and knees, and keeps his eyes closed the whole time. Other times, Shane cleans up and is out the door before Ilya has even caught his breath. Ilya cannot keep up, he can never predict which Shane he is going to get on any given day, and it is really starting to mess with his head.

It does not matter, not really. Ilya will take any morsel of Shane he can get, even when Shane seems to be pretending that Ilya is someone else. Those hours they spend together, however long they last, are worth the hours Ilya spends after, feeling hollow and numb, staring at the wall and counting the time until Shane will come back. He is living visit to visit, most days. He needs this more than he could ever admit.

“So,” he asks, after a few minutes of silence. “When will I see you again?”

“Uh, shit, I don’t know,” Shane says, reaching for his phone. He scrolls for a few minutes, and Ilya stares at his hands, chewing his lip. “Um, late September we have a preseason match — wait, no, I’m gonna have to get on a plane right after. So... October. You’re coming to Montréal.”

Ilya could turn to dust right here, right now. “October?”

“Yeah,” Shane says distantly, locking his phone and dropping it beside him. “Damn.”

“*October?*” Ilya says again.

“It’s a little more than seven weeks from now,” Shane says, as if that is not a lot of time, but they both know that it will feel like an eternity. They have been meeting up at least three or four times a week, sometimes more, since the beginning of the summer.

Ilya stares at the ceiling, already feeling the numbness taking over. He may not make it seven weeks. “You will have nice men in Montréal to keep you company?”

Shane flushes, squirming awkwardly beside him. Ilya turns his head to watch him, and Shane just flips him off, sitting up and pushing himself off the bed. Ilya watches him retrieve his clothes from where he folded them neatly on Ilya’s dresser, his chest already beginning to ache.

“Can you stay?” Ilya asks, hoping Shane does not pick up on the tinge of desperation in his voice.

Shane freezes. “Stay?”

“Just a little longer,” Ilya says, eyes flickering down to Shane’s crotch. “I am going to need something to hold me over for *seven weeks*, Hollander.”

Shane is not unaffected, but he scowls at Ilya anyway. “You can hook up with other people, you know.” His voice is so weak, so unconvincing.

“I know,” Ilya says, crawling to the end of the bed and then standing up, walking into Shane’s space, and dropping to his knees.

“Oh,” Shane says, hugging his clothes to his chest.

“Stay?” Ilya asks, curling his hands behind Shane’s thighs.

“Yeah,” Shane says. “Okay.”

Ilya: Can I see you tonight?

Shane doesn't see the message until after morning practice, just before he begins stripping down to go to the showers. He catches himself grinning at his phone like an idiot and slams it down in his cubby, rushing through his shower and all but running back to his cubby to text Ilya back.

Seven and a half weeks. They haven't really spoken much, outside of a few dirty phone calls, but those don't really hit the spot the way Ilya is able to in person, physically and metaphorically. Shane has been counting down the hours until today, has had the date memorized since he last saw Ilya at the end of August.

Shane: Absolutely.

Shane: I'll come to your hotel after the game.

Ilya: I did not know you are homeless? You should have said something sooner. Voyageurs do not pay their captain?

Shane: Fuck you.

Ilya: Okay. At your apartment.

Shane slips his phone into his pocket while he makes his way out of the arena, heading home for the few hours before the game starts. Ilya texts again just as Shane is pulling into his garage.

Ilya: What are you doing now?

Shane: Making a smoothie, working on strategy for how we're gonna fucking destroy you tonight.

Ilya: Cool foreplay. Can I come over now?

Shane: No! You can't know the strategy!

Shane: And I'm coming to the hotel.

Ilya: Why?

Because Shane had to fucking move apartments at the start of last season just to get away from any and all memory of Ilya Rozanov being in his home, that's why. This thing they're doing now— it's not a forever kind of thing, it's going to get ugly eventually, and Shane doesn't want to have to move again because he can't stand the thought of going to sleep every night in a bed that he has shared with Ilya. If he allows Ilya into this apartment, it will be tainted, and the second this all goes sideways like he knows it will, he doesn't want to be

stuck here until his lease is up. He can't exactly tell Ilya all of that, though, so he just doesn't answer. Eventually, Ilya texts again.

Ilya: Four Seasons. 1537.

Shane: 👍

Shane: I can't right now. I'll see you after the game.

Ilya: Can you come now?

Shane: I literally just said I can't.

Ilya: Read again.

Shane: Are you serious?

Shane: Okay. Call.

Half an hour and a very exciting phone call later, Shane gets down to business, finally making his smoothie and pouring over the notes from the coaching staff about strategy for tonight's game. It's possible that Shane is taking his role as captain a little too seriously. It's just that he really wasn't expecting to be made captain this year, after the way last year went, with him missing three entire months of the season and all. He's never been much of a people person, has never been very good at motivating others; he always relied on Ilya as his alternate for that, back when he was the captain of their old teams. Ilya has always been a natural leader, a natural hype-man, and a natural friend to all. Shane is just... too awkward. Too intense. He's doing his best, though, and his team respects him endlessly, and he's just trying not to let them down.

He studies the notes for a few minutes, but not a lot of strategy is needed for tonight's game, truthfully; the Centaurs are not exactly fierce opponents, and unless Ilya is on the ice, there's not really much to worry about.

Ilya has been on fire so far this season. It's all anyone in the hockey world can talk about; Rozanov must have really been going through a hard time last season, because this year, he's back and better than ever, playing harder, fighting harder, scoring well and often. The Centaurs are still the worst ranked team in the league, but Ilya has at least put them on the map. Shane can't fucking wait to get on the ice with him tonight. He can't fucking wait to get into bed with him after, either.

The game goes just as anyone could have predicted. The Voyageurs win, of course, but only by one point, Ilya having almost caught up to their lead singlehandedly. He's good, too good to be on such a shitty team, but Shane is almost thankful that he doesn't have to play against Ilya with a team behind him that can actually keep up with him; Shane always hated Boston for more than one reason.

Shane has been keyed up since the middle of the third period, when Ilya pinned him against the glass and stole the puck from him, growling low in his ear, "I cannot wait to fuck you."

He takes a hurried shower in the locker room, and then hurries home to take a more thorough one, and before midnight he's throwing on a hoodie and hurrying back across town to Ilya's hotel.

Ilya rips the door open almost as soon as Shane knocks, dragging him inside and quickly pinning him back against the wall, before the door has even fallen shut. Shane can do nothing but clutch at Ilya's arms and moan, his head knocking back against the wall with the force of the kiss Ilya attacks him with.

"Get on your knees," Ilya says, right into Shane's mouth, and before Shane can decide whether or not he wants to obey, he's already on his knees, tugging Ilya's sweatpants down. Ilya sighs and drags his hands through Shane's hair, knocking his hood off, but he doesn't allow Shane much time to work before he's yanking him back up onto his feet, kissing him breathless.

"Fuck," Shane pants, when they finally break apart. "I missed you so bad."

Ilya presses his hips forward in a way that seems involuntary, cupping his hands under Shane's ass and picking him up off the floor like he weighs nothing. Shane yelps, but Ilya captures his lips in another kiss while he carries him over to the bed, dropping him unceremoniously on his back.

"What do you want?" Ilya asks, shucking his pants the rest of the way off before climbing up on top of Shane.

"You," Shane answers immediately, desperately.

Ilya looks possessed, feral. He gets Shane's clothes off so fast he nearly rips them in the process. Shane can do nothing but lie there, helpless, while Ilya manhandles him, shoving his knees up to his chest and diving down between his legs.

Shane has to bite into his own thigh to keep from crying out. Ilya is relentless, almost frantic, keeping all of Shane's nerve endings buzzing until he comes up for air, bringing his fingers down to replace his mouth.

"Wait, wait, wait," Shane gasps, reaching down to grab at Ilya's hand. "Slow down."

Ilya stops immediately, and then he's there, looming over Shane's face. "Did I—"

"No, no," Shane says, cupping Ilya's cheek with his palm. Ilya presses into the touch, eyes fluttering for just a second. God, Shane is so in love with him, can barely hold back the words threatening to tumble out. "I just— I don't want this to be over."

Ilya smirks, turning his face to bite at Shane's palm. "We just started, Hollander."

"I know, just—" Shane huffs, frustrated. "Just— slow down a little."

Ilya leans in to kiss him, which is gross, considering where his mouth has just been, but Shane finds himself moaning against his lips, anyway. "Okay," Ilya breathes, when he pulls

away. “Okay, *m—*” he cuts himself off, turns it into a hum, but Shane feels his eyes widen, sees the flush of Ilya’s cheeks darken.

He chooses, very carefully, to not bring attention to it. *Moy lyubimyy*. My love. That’s what Ilya was going to say, right? *Okay, moy lyubimyy*. Shane is hard as iron. He wants to call Ilya out for saying it, wants to demand that Ilya finish the thought, but then Ilya might stop, and that— Shane can’t have that.

Ilya doesn’t have to finish the thought, though. He doesn’t need to say it. He puts every bit of it into the way he carries on, the way he gets Shane ready, the way he fucks Shane so slow, so deep, so *good*, Shane is seeing stars by the time Ilya finally gets a hand around him and brings him off. He forces his eyes open to watch Ilya’s face while Ilya finishes inside of him, but he can’t keep them open much longer than that, melting into the mattress when Ilya pulls out and starts pressing kisses to every bit of Shane’s skin that he can reach. It tickles, and it’s too intimate, but Shane hums and moans and sighs until Ilya sinks his teeth into Shane’s inner thigh, just below the crease of his crotch, and Shane gasps as he shoves him away.

“Ow, fuck, Rozanov.”

“You were falling asleep,” Ilya says simply.

“That’s gonna leave a mark!”

“Oops,” Ilya grins.

“You fucking asshole,” Shane grumbles.

“That is for making me fuck you in a hotel,” Ilya says, crawling back up Shane’s body to kiss him sweetly.

And thank god Shane made him do it in a hotel. If Ilya had fucked him like that in his own bed, in his apartment, and then kissed him like this after, like his first drink of water after seven and a half weeks in the desert, Shane would have to end things on the spot, break his lease, and maybe even move out of Montréal entirely.

“Sorry,” Shane murmurs against his lips. It’s not okay; Shane can tell by the way Ilya pulls away to smile weakly at him. It’s not okay, but Ilya gets it, Ilya understands why they’re here and not there. Shane thinks part of Ilya might even agree with his logic.

“I have the day off tomorrow,” Ilya says, stroking a finger over Shane’s cheek, down his jaw, around the curve of his ear. Shane suppresses a shiver, but does not entirely succeed. “You could... stay.”

He couldn’t. He shouldn’t. But this bed is so comfortable, and Ilya smells so good, looks so good, feels so good, and it’s such a long drive back to his apartment, and a whole day together is more than they’ve had in ages, more than anything they had this summer.

“I can’t,” Shane says quietly.

“Why?” Ilya asks.

A thousand excuses run through Shane's head. A million. "Okay. Fine."

Ilya beams. "Okay?"

"Okay."

Shane is gone when Ilya wakes up. For one horrible, soul-crushing moment, Ilya thinks Shane has abandoned him at some point in the night, or, worse, Ilya dreamt the whole thing. As soon as he takes his head off of the pillow Shane was using last night, though, he hears the shower running, and he cannot help the smile that overtakes his face.

Shane is here. Shane stayed. Shane did not leave him.

He uses his moment of solitude to roll onto his back, grinning at the ceiling. This feels like—like a step, maybe. A step in the right direction. A step toward finally fixing this whole thing between them. Shane stayed; he is going to spend the day here, with Ilya. For the first time in over a year, since the week Ilya spent at the cottage last summer, they can just be, they can try to figure out what this new dynamic between them really is.

Shane told Ilya he loved him at the end of last summer. Ilya aches to know if that is still true, if Shane still feels that way about him, or if Ilya has fucked everything up beyond repair, if the only thing Shane feels for him now is sexual attraction. Ilya loves him more now than he has in his whole life, and more every single day. All he can do is hope and pray that Shane has not finally decided to smarten up and move on.

He sits up when the shower turns off, grabbing the room service menu off the bedside table and perusing it. Shane emerges from the bathroom a few minutes later, his towel wrapped low around his waist, but Ilya hardly glances up.

"Hey," Shane says, coming to stand at the end of the bed. "Good morning."

"Good morning," Ilya says distractedly. "I am starving. You want breakfast?"

Shane does not answer for a moment. Ilya lowers the menu in his hands, raising his eyebrows at Shane.

"Seriously?" Shane says. "You have me alone in a hotel room, naked and fresh out of the shower, and you're thinking about breakfast?"

"I am too hungry for sex," Ilya waves him off, looking back down at the menu. "I want eggs. And bacon."

Shane sighs, grabbing his sweatpants off the dresser and pulling them on; Ilya is not too hungry to notice that he does not have any underwear on.

“What do you want?” Ilya asks, handing Shane the menu when he sits down on the bed.

Shane hardly glances at the menu before handing it back. “I’m good.”

Ilya looks him over. “Did you eat last night?”

“What are you, my mother?” Shane scoffs. “Fuck off.”

Ilya shrugs, grabbing the phone from the bedside table. “You are sure?”

“Maybe just a black coffee,” Shane says. “Please.”

Ilya grins. “So polite.”

Shane begins flicking through the channels on the television across from the bed while Ilya orders his breakfast and Shane’s coffee. When Ilya hangs up, he shifts to put his head down on Shane’s lap, and Shane’s free hand comes down to Ilya’s shoulder, tracing delicate patterns. Ilya very nearly drifts back to sleep, but Shane’s stomach gurgles next to his ear, and Ilya turns his head to frown up at him.

“What?” Shane asks, a little too sharply.

“I heard that,” Ilya says. “I am not sharing my breakfast with you, you know.”

“I don’t want your gross breakfast,” Shane says.

“Here,” Ilya says, reaching for the menu again to hand it to Shane. “My treat. I know Montréal is not paying you anymore—”

“I said I’m good,” Shane says, shoving the menu back toward Ilya. Ilya blinks, and Shane huffs. “They don’t have anything I can eat. It’s fine. I’m on a special diet, a performance thing— I’ll eat when I get home, promise.”

Ilya watches him carefully for a moment, and then nods. “You are so boring, Hollander.”

“Fuck off,” Shane mutters. “Lots of athletes follow this same diet. It’s proven to—”

Ilya groans, dropping his head back into Shane’s lap. “Do not try to sell it to me. Bacon is more important than hockey.”

“Don’t come crying to me when you have to retire at thirty-five,” Shane says.

There is a knock at the door, and Shane scurries into the bathroom while Ilya retrieves his breakfast. Shane does not come back from the bathroom until Ilya has already begun eating, plucking his coffee off of the nightstand and taking a careful sip while he eyes Ilya’s breakfast wearily.

“Eggs?” Ilya says, offering Shane a forkful.

“No,” Shane says quietly. “Thanks.”

“You cannot have eggs?” Ilya asks doubtfully.

“Not the yolks,” Shane says. “Or the sauce they’re cooked in, or the fat from the bacon touching them, or the cheese in them—”

Ilya shoves the forkful in his own mouth; Shane’s eyes flicker down to watch, tongue poking out to wet his lips briefly. Ilya offers another forkful, and Shane huffs, sitting back against the headboard.

“Hey,” Shane says, after they have been quiet for a while, Ilya shoveling his food into his mouth rather unattractively. “Um... how’s your mom?”

Ilya does not answer for a few minutes, staring intently at his plate. His mother calls him several times a week, usually crying, to talk about therapy, about her feelings, about how lonely and frustrating it is that she has not been able to go back to work yet. Therapy is hard, and though her good days usually outnumber the bad, there are still times when Ilya worries for her so intensely that he fears he cannot take it anymore, days he has to threaten to have her sent back to the hospital just to get her off the sofa, days he has to cry and beg just for her to look him in the eye. It is exhausting. “Fine,” he says quietly.

“She’s doing better?” Shane asks. “Does the therapy help?”

“Yes,” Ilya lies— the therapy does help, of course, but it is hard, it takes a lot out of her, and there are some sessions that take her days to recover from. It is so much, so intense, so painful, and sometimes even Ilya fears that Irina is not strong enough to handle it all.

“That’s awesome,” Shane says. “My parents say she seems like she’s in better spirits lately, they’ve been going over there a lot to— what are you doing?”

Ilya has abandoned his empty plate on the bedside table, and is climbing into Shane’s lap, tugging Shane’s sweatpants down to his thighs. He does not answer, stooping down to take Shane into his mouth.

“Wait— oh,” Shane says, already thickening between Ilya’s lips. “I— Jesus, Rozanov.”

Ilya pulls off with a pop. “You talk too much,” he says, and then dives back down.

Shane shuts right up. It does not take long to get him exactly where Ilya wants him, and then Ilya pulls off, flips him over, and continues to shut him up for the better part of an hour. Shane is much quieter by the time they are finished, and Ilya takes the TV remote from where Shane left it earlier to resume flicking through the channels, his head in Shane’s lap again. At some point, Shane is going to shove him away, but Ilya intends to spend every moment here that he is allowed.

“I am trying,” Ilya says, unprompted, eyes unfocused while the TV flickers through program after program in the distance.

“Hm?” Shane hums, fingers lost in Ilya’s hair.

“I am trying really hard,” Ilya says. “I am working my ass off. I am taking good care of her, I am giving my everything for the Centaurs, I am doing everything I am supposed to do.”

“That’s great,” Shane says softly, like he really means it. “You’re playing so well this season, it’s all anyone’s talking about.”

“Yeah,” Ilya says noncommittally. “I almost beat your ass last night.”

“Yeah, don’t get crazy,” Shane mutters.

“I just want to be good enough.”

He regrets saying it immediately; he is not completely sure why he said it in the first place, because it is not something he feels like talking about right now, especially not with Shane, especially in some random hotel room in Montréal because Shane will not even allow him inside his apartment.

“Hey,” Shane says, in that soft, sweet little tone he used to use when comforting Ilya. Ilya cannot lie; he missed it, a little. “You are good enough.”

“No, fuck off,” Ilya groans. “Do not pity me.”

“Hey,” Shane says again, tugging at Ilya’s hair until Ilya looks up at him. “You are good enough, Ilya.”

Ilya. Ilya looks down, does not want Shane to see the way his eyes have begun to water.

“Thank you,” he says quietly. “But no. I am not.”

“Why do you think that?” Shane asks.

“Because,” Ilya huffs, frustrated, “I fucking ruin everything I touch. I fuck everything up, always.”

Shane does not make a peep, and Ilya finally looks up at him again, finding Shane watching him very, very closely. He could use this moment, come clean about everything that happened during their first season, give Shane the whole laundry list of reasons why he is a fucking failure. He could tell Shane about Alexei’s emails, about how hard everything felt in Boston, how he fucked everything up on purpose because he was not strong enough to deal with it.

“Sorry,” Ilya says, putting his head back down. This is not the time, nor the place. Ilya wonders if such a time or place will ever exist. He is beginning to suspect that it will not. “I am exhausted. The past few weeks have been...”

Shane still does not say anything, mouth set in a thin, disappointed line when Ilya glances back up at him. “I’ll go, then,” Shane says, finally, pushing gently at Ilya’s head to slide himself out from under his weight. “So you can rest.”

Ilya watches him get up, chewing on the inside of his cheek. “Do you have to?”

Shane does not turn around. “Have to what?”

“Go?”

“You want me to stay?” Shane asks, glancing over his shoulder. He looks even more exhausted than Ilya feels, and probably for good reason.

Ilya should say no, he should let Shane go home. This is crossing a line, probably, asking him to stay here in this hotel room, hang out with him just because Ilya has no one else to hang out with, no one else to talk to, no one else to feel safe with. Then again, though, they never drew lines in the first place, this whole thing is still completely undefined, so who is to say, really, if this is breaking the rules?

“Yes,” he says, barely above a whisper.

“Okay,” Shane says, and climbs back into bed.

Ilya resumes pretending to look for something to watch. Shane falls asleep on his shoulder, and Ilya shifts him into his arms, letting Shane curl up against his chest so that Ilya can watch him sleep. Ilya forces himself to stay awake just to soak this in, to memorize the pattern of Shane’s breathing just in case he never gets this lucky again, but eventually, he drifts off, too. The rest of the day is spent napping on and off, not a lot else sprinkled in between, but it is the best day Ilya has had in a while.

March 2013 – Ottawa, Ontario

“Where are you going?”

Shane struggles to get his jeans buttoned, hands still weak and trembling; he hasn’t even caught his breath yet, fucking hell, but he has to get out of here.

“I told Hayden I’d be back tonight,” Shane says, fixing his hair in the floor length mirror in the corner of Ilya’s bedroom.

“Hayden is your mother?” Ilya quips.

“Fuck off,” Shane mutters. He can’t even turn around to look at Ilya, who is propped up against the headboard, glistening with sweat and still panting himself.

Hayden doesn’t give a fuck whether or not Shane comes back to the hotel. In fact, it would probably be easier to just stay here tonight and not have to face Hayden until the morning, instead of going back now to dodge Hayden’s lewd questions all night about where he’s been.

Shane is just— he can't stay here. He can't stay again, not after the last time, after Ilya came *so* close to finally opening the door that has been locked between them for so long now. He can't keep acting like this is ever going to be anything more than it is.

There is a big part of Shane that resents Ilya for allowing this to go so far without meaning anything, for making it so hard to leave after, for being so goddamn easy to love and so goddamn hard to be in love with. Sometimes, Ilya seems so close to opening up to Shane, to finally apologizing and telling him the whole truth, but then he jumps ship at the last minute, continues shutting Shane out. Shane cannot keep getting his hopes up; it's easier to cut and run as soon as they're done, to let this really, actually be casual, than it is to lie around after and wait for Ilya to do something he's probably never going to do.

Shane has tried to be a friend, has tried to be supportive and kind and patient, but Ilya never fucking talks to him about anything real. Shane is fucking miserable, quite honestly, that this is all he gets of Ilya anymore, but this is how it has to be, it seems.

He's ashamed of how disappointed he is that this is the last regular match-up between Montréal and Ottawa for the season. The Voyageurs are going to the playoffs, which means Shane isn't allowed to have sex until they're over, which means Shane won't see Ilya again until May, at the earliest, but if he's lucky, not until June. It doesn't feel like it would be lucky, is the thing— Shane is ready to choose Ilya over the Stanley fucking Cup, and that is *not* how this is supposed to be going.

He's counting the days until summer, when Ilya will be a mere two hour car ride away, instead of having to live at the mercy of the NHL schedule to get his fix. He feels like an addict, like a total junkie, and his drug of choice is naked and beautiful and beckoning him back to bed.

"Hollander," Ilya whines, climbing out of bed to wrap his arms around Shane from behind, hooking his chin over Shane's shoulder and meeting his eye in the mirror. His hair is all fucked up from how Shane just rode him into the mattress, his eyes still glassy and dark. Shane suppresses a shiver.

"I have to go," Shane says, weaseling his way out of Ilya's arms.

"Okay," Ilya says, dejected, sitting down on the edge of the bed. "Well, good luck in playoffs."

"Thanks," Shane says.

"I guess I will not see you?"

"Yeah," Shane shrugs. "That's the rule. No sex during playoffs."

Ilya nods. "But I will see you after, yes?"

"Sure, in the summer," Shane says. "June, hopefully. If I'm lucky." It comes out as weakly as he means it.

Ilya nods again, grabbing his sweatpants off the floor and standing up to pull them on. Shane leads the way out of the bedroom, down the stairs, and to Ilya's front door, but Ilya traps him against it once they get there. He kisses Shane sweetly, long and slow and deep, pulling away once Shane has started to melt against the door. Ilya smirks. "Bye."

Shane clears his throat quickly. "Bye," he mutters, slipping out the door and all but running to the car waiting for him outside the gate.

He should end this. He should take the distance that playoffs will force upon them and he should get himself over all of this, spend the summer working on himself, on his self-control, his self-respect. He really should end this.

His phone buzzes halfway back to the hotel. It is a message from Ilya, just a photo, no text attached. Shane opens it wearily.

Ilya is in bed, still shirtless, his arm stretched out long to take the photo so that the camera captures the empty side of the bed beside him. He's pouting, head resting on his own bicep, where Shane's should be. God, he's so fucking hot. God, Shane loves him so fucking much.

He closes the text thread, locks his phone, and goes straight to bed once he makes it back to his room.

Chapter 23

June 2013

14:03

Ilya: Good luck tonight.

15:17

Shane: Thanks

16:24

Shane: Holy shit

Shane: Did you see?

Ilya: Yes

Shane: We're shortlisted for the fucking Olympics!

Shane: This is so fucking cool!!!

17:38

Shane: Will you go?

Ilya: idk

Shane: It's the fucking Olympics, you can't just not go.

Shane: There's gonna be crazy security, I'm sure

Shane: And it's nowhere near Moscow, I looked.

23:35

Ilya: Fuck. That fucking sucks.

Three days later – Lanaudière, Québec

“Big celebrations are still taking place all over the city of Boston today, Jim. Those guys really know how to party, huh?”

“They sure do! And they’ve earned it! The playoffs this year were intense, but the Bears played unbelievably during game six. It was a tough loss for the Voyageurs, though, Tim. Imagine how Shane Hollander must be feeling right now!”

“Devastated, I’d have to assume. The kid *cried* on the ice, Jim!”

“He should be immensely proud of himself, though, Tim, honestly. It’s been years since the Voyageurs even made it to the finals, let alone to *game six*. He’s done so much for this team in just a few seasons, and he had an amazing first season as captain, hopefully he’s taking this in stride and next year will be even better.”

“They made it almost an hour into overtime before Boston scored that last goal, Jim, that’s not nothing. To lose the cup to Boston, though... that’s a tough pill to swallow. At least Rozanov isn’t on the winning team to rub his face in it!”

“Rozanov is on the worst team in the league, Hollander still has that to hold over him, for sure.”

Shane pulls his earbuds out; he can’t listen to this anymore. It always comes back to Rozanov, to *Ilya*, even when it has nothing to do with him. Their careers are inextricably linked, and they always will be, which is becoming increasingly more frustrating as time goes on. Shane loops his headphones around his neck, puts his head down, and runs a little harder, feet colliding roughly with the dirt road as he makes his way back to his cottage.

It’s his first summer in his own cottage; construction was completed just last week, just in time for Shane to lose the fucking Stanley Cup to fucking Boston and come back here with his tail between his legs and hide from the world in his very own fortress of solitude. It’s amazing, it’s beautiful and peaceful and everything he’s ever wanted, but... it’s kinda lonely. His parents are just down the road, and they’ve been visiting every day since Shane got here, even when Shane expresses over and over that he’d really like to just be alone right now. The cottage is big, though, really big, and quiet, and it’s only been three days but Shane already isn’t quite sure what to do with himself other than mope and work out.

Ilya would love it here. He always loved Shane’s parents’ cottage so much, the lake, the woods, the fresh air. Shane’s cottage is even better than his parents’; the deck is much bigger, has a much nicer view, the dock is much more scenic, and Shane has installed not only a state-of-the-art home gym, but also a synthetic ice rink on the property. Ilya would lose his mind. It’s too bad that Shane can never have him here, for all the same reasons he can’t invite Ilya to his apartment in Montréal. This place is sacred, it has to be, and much as Shane is dreading another summer of driving to Ottawa for hook ups, he cannot sacrifice the sanctity of this cottage.

He hugs the side of the road tighter when a car rumbles past, but it’s only when the car comes to a halt in front of him that he recognizes the Volvo. The driver’s side window rolls down,

and Shane sighs as he jogs to it.

“Oh, good,” Yuna calls from the passenger seat. “We thought you were just ignoring us. We’ve been knocking on your door for half an hour.”

“Sorry,” Shane says, out of breath. “I’ve been running.”

“Well, here,” Yuna says, passing a covered casserole dish over David to hand through the window to Shane. “We were just coming to drop off some dinner.”

Shane takes the dish, staring down at it for a moment; he’s, like, half a kilometer from his cottage, he’s gonna have to carry this all the way back in the blazing sun, but he’s probably never going to eat it, anyway, so he just smiles and offers his best, “thank you, Mom.”

“How are you?” Yuna asks. “Do you want company yet?”

“No,” Shane mutters. “Not really.”

“Okay,” Yuna says, dejected. “Well, you know where to find us when you do, okay?”

“Okay,” Shane says. “Thanks. Love you guys.”

He turns away without further preamble, walking down the dirt road with the stupid fucking casserole dish in his hands. He can’t really run with it, so he settles for a brisk walk, and before long, he arrives home to shove it in the fridge without even checking what’s inside.

He heads to the ensuite in his bedroom for a shower, pulling his phone out of his pocket while the water heats up. He hasn’t really been responding to anyone the past few days, but that hasn’t stopped people from trying, so he scrolls quickly through his notifications.

Some of the guys from the team have reached out to check in, Hayden has been sending pictures of his twin daughters who were born a few weeks ago, and Rose just keeps sending him memes to try and cheer him up. Shane doesn’t really have it in him to answer any of them; he will, eventually, when he feels a little less like the world’s biggest failure.

Shane taps on his text thread with Ilya, reading over the last few messages since the fateful game three days ago.

Friday 10:32

Ilya: Too soon to ask for head?

Yesterday 16:55

Ilya: Are you okay? Can I see you soon?

Today 16:36pm

Ilya: Hello?

The most recent message only came in about ten minutes ago. Shane closes the thread, leaves his phone on the counter, and steps into the shower, standing under the scorching hot water for far too long. By the time he gets out, he has more notifications on his phone, a missed call and another text, both from Ilya.

Today 17:42pm

Ilya: Can I at least get a sign of life?

Shane feels a little bad; he still isn't really sure where he and Ilya stand in each other's lives, but Shane knows that Ilya worries sometimes, especially after what happened with his mom, and Shane doesn't like the thought of Ilya worrying for him.

Today 17:56pm

Shane: Hey. Sorry. I was in the shower.

Ilya: For three days?

The response comes through immediately, but before Shane can answer, his phone flickers and he is confronted with his own face, an incoming FaceTime call from Ilya.

"Oh," Ilya says, when Shane swipes to accept the call. "You really were in the shower."

"Yeah," Shane says. "But not for three days. Sorry."

"No, I get it," Ilya says, holding the phone a little closer to his face. "Are you naked?"

"I'm hanging up," Shane mutters.

"Wait, Hollander, no," Ilya says, smiling. "I was joking."

Shane levels him with an unimpressed look.

"Are you okay?" Ilya asks, only a touch more serious.

"I don't know," Shane sighs. "I'm just so disappointed, and frustrated."

"That is understandable," Ilya says. He leans back, away from the camera, and stretches his free arm across the back of the sofa in his living room. Shane takes his own phone back to his bedroom, falling onto the bed in his towel.

"It's just, like," Shane grits out, "such bullshit, you know? We worked *so hard*, we played *so well*, we got *so far*, and then it's all over, just like that? Drapeau makes one little mistake and we fucking lose the cup? I was so fucking devastated. I fucking *cried* right there on the ice, it was so embarrassing— and now it's all anyone can talk about, you know? How hard I took it. How I'm so immature and babyish and everyone either feels so bad for me or thinks I'm a total fucking dork and I'm just so *mad* because we should have fucking *won*—"

Shane hasn't spoken out loud this much in days, let alone to another person, and he suddenly becomes aware of the person he has apparently chosen to let this all out on. Ilya, for his part, is patiently letting him talk, a sympathetic tilt to his mouth.

"Sorry," Shane says quietly. Ilya hasn't even made it to the playoffs since leaving Boston, and he probably never will again. "It's not fair for me to be ranting to you about this."

"Is okay," Ilya says softly.

"Thank you for calling," Shane says.

Ilya nods. "So," he says, "is this a bad time to ask you to come over?"

Shane wants to hang up the phone, roll over, and burst into flames. As it is, he can see his face reddening in the little square at the bottom of his screen. Of course that's why Ilya called. Shane just took a booty call and turned it into a therapy session, god, he *is* a total fucking dork.

"Oh," Shane says. "Uh—"

"I am joking," Ilya says quickly. "Mostly. You do not have to— I understand if you are not in the mood."

Shane is upset about the Cup, yes, he is completely devastated, but admittedly, that's not the only thing that's been tugging at him like a lead weight around his ankles. He has tried being more casual with Ilya, more clinical, more emotionless, but it doesn't feel right. He has tried being Ilya's friend, tried talking to him about things other than sex and hockey, but that doesn't feel right either. He has no idea what they are to each other, and every time he tries to figure it out, he feels further and further from the answer. All he knows for sure is that he is completely, desperately in love with Ilya; he can't live without him, but he's starting to suspect that he's going to have to learn to.

Ilya doesn't communicate with him. Ever. About anything. Ilya has gone through more in the past few years than Shane has gone through in his entire life, and he just holds it all in, bottles it up until he can't contain it all anymore. Even before the NHL, it took years for Ilya to tell Shane about his father. It has been two years now since Ilya came home to find Irina, and despite all of Shane's best efforts, Ilya has never truly opened up to him about any of it; not about his mother, not about whatever Alexei did, nothing.

On top of all of that, Shane cannot spend another summer driving back and forth to Ottawa. He simply can't. He needs to gain some fucking self-respect and move on from this, find someone closer that he can have frustratingly casual sex with, the way Ilya already thinks he does. As it is, though, he can't stand the thought of being with anyone but Ilya. He can't stand the thought of not being with Ilya.

"Yeah," he says, when Ilya starts to look concerned with Shane's lack of response. "Okay. I can leave now."

Ilya grins. "Okay," he says.

Shane packs an overnight bag after they hang up, just in case— it's going to be after eight o'clock by the time he gets there, and he isn't sure he'll want to drive back up here after, or if Ilya will ask him to stay like he sometimes does. He doesn't let himself think about it while he tosses his bag in the trunk, climbs into the driver's seat, and starts on the familiar route back to Ottawa.

He can't keep his mind blank forever, though. He can't help but start to think it all through again, about Ilya's lack of communication, his lack of trust in Shane, his lack of interest in apologizing and making everything right again. There isn't a lot Shane wouldn't do to be back with Ilya, to be his boyfriend again, to be able to stop pretending that he's okay with any of this, that this is what he wants. He should just turn around and go back to the cottage, stop answering Ilya altogether, let Ilya fret for a while before he realizes Shane is done. Maybe ripping the bandaid off would be a more respectable approach, though; he could turn around, call Ilya back, and tell him that he's not coming, he's never coming, and stop calling.

He doesn't turn around. He keeps driving toward Ottawa. In fact, he drives a little faster.

Maybe this is the best case scenario. Maybe this is as good as it's ever going to be. It's not like they can really be together, anyway, not with the way the NHL is. Shane gets called any number of slurs on any given day by men who don't even suspect that he could be gay; Shane could never have a *boyfriend*, much less *Ilya*. There would be riots in the street. If the world thinks Shane is a dork now, what would they think knowing he likes to take it up the ass from his supposed arch rival?

It's all the more reason to turn around and go the fuck home. It's all the more reason to keep driving south. He'll never find anyone except Ilya who will understand him, who will make him feel like this, who will keep his secret because he is under the same pressure. He will never find anyone.

It's just starting to get dark when Shane pulls into Ilya's driveway. Ilya is sitting on the front step, smoking a cigarette, which he puts out as soon as Shane's headlights shine over him. He looks like a wet dream in a pair of short running shorts and a crewneck sweatshirt, standing up with that brain-meltingly handsome smile on his face. Shane drags himself out of the car, and Ilya meets him halfway, wrapping him in a hug right there in the driveway.

"Hi," Shane says into Ilya's shoulder.

"Hi," Ilya murmurs. He squeezes a little too tight, with a little much intention, and Shane pulls away slightly. Ilya doesn't let him go far.

"How long do we have?" Shane asks.

"Mama is away until tomorrow afternoon," Ilya says, his chin still hooked over Shane's shoulder. "She went to some convention or something with friends from book club. She has been away all weekend."

"Cool," Shane says, forcing his heart not to sink at the idea of Ilya having been alone here all weekend, texting Shane each day just to never receive a reply. "Can we go in, or are we gonna fuck in the driveway?"

Ilya pulls back, shooting him an unamused look. “Are you okay?” he asks.

“I’m fine,” Shane bites out. He’s clearly not fine. Ilya clearly can tell.

“Okay,” Ilya says, nodding to the house. “Let’s go in, then.”

Shane leads the way, stomping right into the house and up the stairs to Ilya’s bedroom. Ilya trails behind, leaning against the doorframe while Shane shucks his clothes off.

“You are sure everything is alright?” Ilya asks again, as Shane balls up his t-shirt and throws it on the ground.

“Will you just come over here?” Shane huffs.

Ilya obliges, crossing the room in three slow strides to wrap Shane in his arms again. Shane is down to his briefs, but Ilya is still fully dressed, hands pressed flat against Shane’s lower back while he drags him in for a slow, sweet kiss. It’s earth-shattering, like every kiss with Ilya is, but it’s not what Shane is looking for, not tonight.

“C’mon,” Shane mutters against Ilya’s lips, pulling at Ilya’s crewneck.

“We have all night,” Ilya breathes in return, but he does move back a bit to pull his crewneck off over his head. Shane latches back onto his mouth, trying to speed things up, but Ilya holds him tight against his body, licking slowly and languidly into Shane’s mouth.

Ilya lays him down on the bed like he’s made of glass, and Shane huffs again in frustration, grabbing harshly at Ilya’s hair. Ilya moans into the kiss, but does not change his pace, sweeping his fingertips feather-light down Shane’s side. Shane resents the way it makes him shiver.

“Rozanov,” Shane says firmly. “Fuck me.”

“Relax, Hollander,” Ilya says, moving to kiss at his neck. “I want to take care of you.”

Shane can’t stop the scoff that bubbles from his throat. “Since when?”

Ilya freezes for a moment, and then pulls back to look down at Shane with an unreadable expression. “Relax,” he says again.

Shane rolls his eyes, dropping his head back. Ilya reaches down to slip his hand into Shane’s briefs, hesitating when he finds Shane only half hard.

“Are you sure that you—”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Shane hisses. “Will you just get to it?”

Ilya pulls back completely, both hands in the air as he sits up on Shane’s hips. “What is happening?” he asks.

“Can we just fuck, please?” Shane groans. “Stop fucking looking at me like that.”

“Shane,” Ilya says lowly, and, no, that’s not– Ilya doesn’t call him Shane, not like this, not here–

“We aren’t friends,” Shane spits. “Clearly. So why the fuck do you care? Just fuck me like I came here for, and we can be done.”

Ilya’s lips part in surprise, hurt flashing across his features before he settles his face into his usual cool facade, the one Shane is used to seeing on the ice. He climbs off of Shane, flips him over onto his stomach, grabs the lube from the bedside table, and does as he is asked.

He fucks Shane so hard that Shane sees stars almost from the beginning. Shane has to brace himself with his hands against the headboard so that Ilya doesn’t fuck him clear through it, rabbiting his hips so hard, so fast, Shane can’t even keep up. Shane is a mess in moments, whining and shouting and biting at Ilya’s pillow, and Ilya yanks his hips in the air to reach around and get a hand on him, finishing him off quickly, efficiently. Shane falls back to the mattress when Ilya is done with him, turns weakly to get a glimpse of Ilya finishing himself off in his own hand, eyes squeezed shut.

Shane presses his face into the pillow when it’s over, fighting to catch his breath. Ilya wipes his hand on the sheets and then slaps Shane’s ass, retreating to the other side of the bed.

“Okay,” Ilya says, leaning back against the headboard. “Bye.”

Shane feels like his brain has melted inside his skull. He looks up at Ilya, confused, but Ilya isn’t looking at him, staring intently at his phone, jaw clenched tight and chest still heaving a little.

Fuck.

Shane peels himself off the bed, standing up on shaky legs and looking around for the clothes he took off only fifteen minutes ago, maybe less. His hands shake while he gets himself dressed, and he glances over at Ilya a few times, but Ilya is dutifully ignoring him.

Fuck. He really fucked it up this time.

He turns to fully face Ilya once he’s dressed, and Ilya’s eyes barely flicker up from his phone. “Bye,” he croaks out. Ilya says nothing.

Shane lets himself out, hobbling back down the stairs and out to his car in the driveway. His overnight bag slides around in the trunk while Shane turns the car around to start heading home.

He feels terrible, and not only because his ass is aching against the seat of the car. He hurt Ilya’s feelings, he knows he did, and for absolutely no good reason. Ilya was trying to be sweet with him, Ilya was trying to– fuck, was he finally going to open up to Shane tonight? Has Ilya missed him enough that he was going to use tonight to finally sit down and talk, sort through everything, make everything right? Shane was so lost in his own head from his drive down, he was so angry for no good reason, he took it all out on Ilya, and now what? Does he need to apologize? Should he just leave Ilya alone for a while?

He hates himself by the time he makes it back to Lanaudière, if he didn't already the second he left Ottawa. It's just after ten o'clock, and Shane climbs straight into bed, his phone switched off on the bedside table.

July, 2013 – Ottawa, Ontario

The club scene in Ottawa is abysmal. Even Svetlana does not seem to be having a good time, and Svetlana could have a good time just about anywhere.

"*Anyone?*" she says into Ilya's ear; she doesn't even have to shout, the music isn't loud enough, and there aren't nearly enough people around to even drown out the sound of glasses clinking at the bar.

"*Fuck no,*" Ilya says. "*This is atrocious.*"

"*You could have come to Boston,*" Svetlana hums. "*We could have found you an entire orgy by now.*"

Ilya sighs, glancing around the room again. There is a girl near the bar, but she's got long, blonde hair, bright blue eyes, and skin so artificially dark that Ilya can't stand to look at her for more than a minute. "*This is depressing. We should just go home.*"

Svetlana looks at him sympathetically. Ilya cannot take it, turning away from her and walking back to the bar to deposit his empty glass. They have been out for almost two hours, this is the fifth club they have tried, but no one in the city of Ottawa is ever going to do it for Ilya the way Shane Hollander does.

Things are falling apart with Shane, just like he knew they would. He cried for hours after Shane left, last time; Shane was so *mean*, so impatient, so... casual. Ilya had been waiting months for that night. He had been counting the minutes until that little piece of his soul came home to him. He had been sitting on the front step for over an hour when Shane finally arrived. He was so heartbroken the following morning that he could not get out of bed until his mother came home around dinnertime.

He has nothing to be upset about, he knows that. Things with Shane were only ever supposed to be casual; it is his fault, really, for trying to be sensitive, for trying to take care of Shane in what he felt like was his hour of need. Now he has gone and fucked everything up. Again.

Shane has not spoken to him at all since that night. Ilya, for his part, has not reached out either, but that is mostly just to give Shane the space and time he needs to sort through whatever was obviously going on in his head that night. For the life of him, Ilya cannot figure out what it was—Shane seemed almost offended on the phone when Ilya had asked him to

come over after he was done venting, but when Ilya tried to compensate by being gentle, Shane had nearly bitten his head off. Is Shane as frustrated with this arrangement as Ilya is? Does Shane want it to mean more, too?

Ilya jumps at the feeling of Svetlana's hand on his shoulder; she has come all the way from Boston to spend the weekend with Ilya and his mother, skipping out on the biggest party weekend in America to visit Ottawa's terrible array of nightclubs. She is a good friend. Ilya has missed her dearly.

"I think," Svetlana says lowly, as if anyone in this place could understand Russian, *"that we should leave, pick up McDonalds, and eat it in bed."*

Ilya smiles at her; he really, *really* was hoping to get laid tonight, by anyone other than Shane Hollander, anyone who could make him forget about Shane Hollander for even a few minutes. He is starting to worry that he will never be attracted to anyone else, ever.

"Okay," he says, and allows Svetlana to lead him out of the club.

November, 2013 – Montréal, Québec

Shane's eyes are locked on Ilya's, neither of them refusing to back down first. Shane grits his teeth hard against his mouthguard, resisting the urge to melt to his knees right here in the face-off circle, and finally Ilya glances away, but only to steal the puck that Shane has missed being dropped between them.

Fuck. This is not off to a good start. Shane acts on instinct, takes off after Ilya instantly, and manages to catch up and steal the puck back for a few glorious seconds. The crowd is deafening. Ilya steals the puck back, and the crowd roars in disappointment.

It is an intense game. Ilya has been even more intense this season than he was last year, and his team has started to push themselves harder, too. They give the Voyageurs a run for their money; eighteen minutes into overtime, Shane finally scores the winning goal, and Ilya breaks his stick right there on the ice.

There is no part of Shane that expects to hear from Ilya after the game, so he is shocked when he leaves the showers to find a message waiting for him on his phone.

Ilya: Four seasons. 916.

Shane stares at the message for some time, while the room bustles around him. Is this a trap? Is Ilya going to lure him to his hotel room to kill him? Or is this an olive branch? Is Ilya hoping to give them both another chance?

He doesn't reply to the text. He gets dressed, goes home to his apartment, paces for approximately half an hour, changes into sweatpants and a hoodie, and then, against his better judgement, calls a cab to take him to the Four Seasons.

Ilya doesn't answer the door right away. Shane knocks again, more insistently, and Ilya finally cracks the door open, frowning at him. Shane pulls his hood down, and Ilya's eyes widen, as does the gap in the door.

Shane shoves himself through the doorway, just to get himself out of the hallway, but Ilya catches him and slams him back against the door as soon as it's closed. Ilya's mouth covers his own immediately, so forcefully that Shane's head knocks back against the door, and Ilya's hands are everywhere, on Shane's face, his neck, his chest, under his hoodie, stroking over his stomach, his hips, his lower back. Shane is useless, helpless but to kiss back, his hands knotting in the front of Ilya's tshirt just for something to hold onto.

"I did not think you would come," Ilya says, when he pulls back to tear his own shirt off.

"I—" Shane pants, eyes sweeping over his body. God, he never gets less beautiful. "Should we talk? Maybe?"

"After," Ilya mutters, grabbing Shane by the front of his hoodie and dragging him back in.

Shane kisses back for a moment, and then pulls back again to insist that they talk before, but —

"Please," Ilya whines, tugging at Shane's hoodie, and, oh, that's—

Shane is on his knees before he knows what's happening, pulling Ilya's pants down to his ankles and swallowing him down. Ilya braces himself with his arms against the door behind Shane, wide eyes glued to Shane's face, until finally his eyes screw shut and one hand comes down to tangle in Shane's hair, pulling him back roughly.

"Bed," Ilya says, his voice impossibly low. It sends a shiver down Shane's spine, has him scrambling to his feet and tripping his way over to the bed. Before he can fall back onto the mattress, Ilya catches him by the back of his hoodie, yanking Shane back against his chest. Shane leans heavily against him; Ilya sticks his hand down the front of Shane's shorts, making Shane shudder and curl forward.

"You came," Ilya says, his mouth pressed to the side of Shane's neck. "You actually came."

"Yeah," Shane says, breathless. "I wanted— *fuck*, I wanna—"

"Talk," Ilya hums. "I know."

"After," Shane says.

He feels Ilya grin against his neck. "After."

It's rough, desperate, intense. Ilya fucks him on his back, knees up by his ears, whimpering and moaning the whole time like he hasn't been touched in— what are the odds Ilya hasn't

been touched since June?

“Fuck, Hollander,” Ilya whines, curling forward, pressing deep, and finishing with his forehead pressed against Shane’s.

Shane feels like he’s on the moon, so far outside of his body as he watches Ilya gather himself up enough to pull out, kiss down Shane’s body, and swallow him in one fluid motion. Shane finishes deep down Ilya’s throat, Ilya’s nose pressing into his groin, crying out so loudly he has to turn his head to bite into the pillow.

Ilya looks completely wrecked by the time Shane manages to look down at him, resting with his cheek pillowed on Shane’s thigh. His hair is wild, eyes closed, mouth hanging open, still fighting to catch his breath.

“Hey,” Shane breathes, reaching down to card his fingers through Ilya’s hair. Ilya presses into the touch, shifting to prop his chin up on Shane’s thigh, right in the crease of his groin, his breath tickling through Shane’s pubic hair. He looks like absolute sin. Shane almost wants to take a photo.

“Hi,” Ilya says, his eyes turning sad the longer Shane looks at him.

“Are we good?” Shane asks, fingers still buried in Ilya’s hair.

“Good?” Ilya asks.

“You and me,” Shane says.

Ilya seems to ponder it for a moment, and then presses a tiny kiss where Shane’s thigh curves into his hip. “Yes,” Ilya whispers against the skin there. “Good.”

Shane sighs in relief, dropping his head back against the pillows. “I’m sorry, for last time,” he says to the ceiling.

Ilya doesn’t say anything. Shane looks down at him, eventually, finding Ilya studying him intensely, his face carefully devoid of emotion.

“You sure we’re good?” Shane asks.

Ilya crawls up his body, dropping kisses to Shane’s skin here and there until he reaches Shane’s mouth, kissing him sweetly. Shane is a puddle on the mattress by the time Ilya pulls away. “Good,” he says.

February, 2014 — Sochi, Russia

Russia is weird. Sochi is not Moscow, and for that Ilya is grateful, but it is weird to be here, to know that he is walking on Russian soil, breathing Russian air, skating on Russian ice. Weirder, still, is knowing that Shane Hollander is here, walking on Russian soil, breathing Russian air, skating on Russian ice. Shane Hollander, who has become synonymous with safety, with *home*, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada— he does not belong here.

Ilya does not belong here, either, but it is not the first time he has been here infelicitously. It has been more than eleven years since he has been in Russia; nearly as long as he was ever in Russia, to begin with. There must have been some small part of him, way deep down, that knew all along that he would be back someday, but that part has been long drowned out by the part of him that hoped and wished and dreamed to never see this wretched country ever again.

As it is, he does not plan to see any part of this country outside of the athletes village. He has spent all of his free time hiding away in his room, ignoring his bunkmates, and waiting for this whole nightmare to be over. Shane has been texting him since the moment they boarded the plane three days ago, but Ilya cannot bring himself to reply, cannot bring himself to acknowledge that Shane is even here in Russia at all.

His phone buzzes as he prepares to leave for the first Preliminary game this evening, and Ilya rolls his eyes, scrolling through all of the other messages he has ignored.

Wednesday 7:52

Shane: 3 rows behind you

Shane: How are you?

Wednesday 9:36

Shane: Bathroom?

Wednesday 17:22

Shane: How's your room? Mine stinks.

Shane: What room number are you?

Yesterday 8:02

Shane: Good morning, wanna grab coffee? Carter Vaughn says there's a good cafe right outside the village

Yesterday 22:43

Shane: Seriously does your room have that smell?

Shane: JJ thinks it's black mold

Today 8:57

Shane: Vaughn was right, this cafe is good. Meet me?

Today 14:03

Shane: See you soon? Unless you've died of black mold exposure?

Ilya cannot help but crack a smile— this room does fucking stink— but he locks his phone without answering. He wishes that black mold was the biggest of his worries. He wishes that even the fucking *Olympic games* were the biggest of his worries.

His biggest worry, of course, is the level of security in the village and surrounding the games themselves. Ilya is deeply ingrained with a vague distrust of police; his father was a member of the police force, after all, and yet was the biggest threat to Ilya's safety from birth to— well, now, along with Alexei, who is now also an officer. It is unlikely that either of them would be here, that they would travel all this way just to— to what? To hurt Ilya? To scare him? Ilya feels foolish for even entertaining the anxiety, but it is there all the same, twisting in his stomach as he boards the shuttle to head over to the rink.

It is the first match of the games for Team Canada, and Ilya is as excited as he is terrified. It is also the first game he has played *with* Shane Hollander, not against him, in almost four years. It should be exciting, gratifying, like some kind of full circle moment. Ilya just wants to go home.

Shane spots him the moment he enters the locker room, if not before, somehow, like Shane has managed to develop x-ray vision in the few days since Ilya has not texted him back. Shane gives him the decency of finding his cubby and time to change into his uniform, but when Ilya turns around, Shane is there, smiling nervously.

“Hey,” Shane says, overeager.

Ilya looks around quickly. “Hollander,” he nods.

Shane's smile falters. “Uh, Rozanov.”

Ilya ducks his head, sits down hard on the bench, and doubles over to tie his skates.

Shane sits down next to him, fidgeting with the gloves he is holding in his hands. “You didn't answer any of my—”

“Not here,” Ilya says sharply. Not here, in this locker room. Not here, in this country.

Shane hesitates. “Are you—”

“Hollander,” Ilya says, straightening up to glare at Shane. God, Shane is so cute, his rosy, freckled cheeks, his dreamy doe eyes, wide with surprise. “Fuck off.”

Shane blinks, and then blinks again, and then frowns. “I don't—”

Ilya stands abruptly, walks to another bench, and sits back down. Shane looks dumbfounded in Ilya's periphery, but Ilya does not get long to feel guilty about it before another body slams down onto the bench next to him.

"You better fucking watch it, Rozanov," growls JJ Boiziau.

"JJ," Shane says weakly.

"We are all on the same team, here," JJ continues.

"Fuck off, Boiziau," Ilya mutters.

"If you fuck this up for us because you can't be a team fucking player for one night—"

"JJ, enough," Shane says, a little firmer.

"We should give you back to Russia."

"JJ!"

"Listen to your captain," Ilya snarls.

JJ backs off, but not before Shane puts himself physically between the two of them. Shane turns to look at Ilya, but Ilya cannot meet his eyes, though he does not move away when Shane leans in closer. All eyes are on them now, despite the half-hearted conversations starting up again now that the show is over, so Shane keeps his voice very low.

"I got a hotel room," Shane says, almost whispering. "So did some of the other guys."

Ilya sniffs, does not react otherwise. "The mold is that bad, hm?"

"Text me after the game, please," Shane says. "Okay?"

Ilya does not answer.

"Okay?"

Ilya shakes his head minutely. "Not. Here," he grits out.

Shane nods once, and then he is gone, gathering the team for a quick, efficient speech, inspiring yet grounding. He is a perfect captain, all skill and logic, no fluff, no extraneous niceties. His love and affection for the game is woven into every soft-spoken, well-articulated word. Even Ilya is feeling ready to battle for the pride of his home country when Shane is done speaking— Canada, that is. His real home. The only home he cares about.

The game is devastating— for Czechia. For Ilya, it is invigorating, revitalizing, transformative. He almost forgot hockey could feel like this. Three years with the Centaurs, and Ilya has lost all concept of how a team should play, of how a line works together, to Hollander, to Rozanov, back to Hollander— and straight between the goalposts.

Shane keeps grinning at him, rewarding him with manly pats on the back and bumps of their helmets. It is all so completely wonderful that Ilya almost forgets he is in Russia— almost.

He takes the shuttle back to the village after the game, lies down on his cot in his horrible-smelling little room, and waits to fall asleep. It does not happen. His phone buzzes.

Shane: I'm at a bar in Russia with JJ, Scott Hunter, and Carter Vaughn. Life is so weird.

It makes Ilya's skin prickle to imagine Shane, his sweet, perfect, Canadian Shane, out drinking in the dirty streets of Russia. They are not together, Ilya has no claim over Shane, but there is something brewing within him, something protective and loyal, that cannot allow Shane to be unguarded on Russian soil.

Ilya: Where?

The bar is only a few minutes outside of the village. Ilya keeps his hood up until he gets there, finding a small crew of Olympians at a table near the back. Ilya pushes his hood off but keeps his head down as he makes his way over, but Shane is already grinning at him when he reaches the table, trying to disguise it behind the glass in his hand.

"Rozanov!" someone greets him. Ilya peels his eyes off of Shane and finds Carter Vaughn looking at him in surprise. It attracts the attention of the rest of the group; Scott Hunter awkwardly pulls his chair closer to Vaughn to make room for Ilya, and Boiziau just glares.

"Hi," Ilya says tightly, dragging a chair from an empty table and sitting down gingerly between Hunter and Shane.

"Hey, man," Hunter says. "Great game earlier, we were in the stands."

"Thank you," Ilya says. He looks at Shane, who is watching him very closely over the rim of his— Jesus, is he drinking neat vodka?

"It's just water," Shane says quietly. "They didn't have ginger ale, and we're not really supposed to be drinking, anyway—"

"What are you drinking, Rozanov?" Vaughn says, as he pushes away from the table. "I was just going for a refill."

"Vodka," Ilya says reflexively; when in Russia, right? "Neat. No ice."

"Damn," Vaughn says lowly, clapping him on the shoulder as he goes.

"*Anyway*," Boiziau says pointedly, "Hollander, as I was saying—"

"JJ was just telling us about a PWHL player he's obsessed with," Shane says to Ilya.

"I am not obsessed!" Boiziau says. "She's into *you*, I'm trying to be a good wingman, here!"

Shane sinks back in his chair, awkwardly sipping at his water. Ilya shouldn't have come here. "Thanks, JJ," Shane says, "I'm not, uh, looking for anyone right now."

“Well, you should,” Boiziau says. “Tell him, Rozanov, that having sex won’t make him a shitty hockey player.”

“It might,” Ilya shrugs. Shane glares at him. “You should try it anyway.”

“Fuck off, please,” Shane says to the table at large. “Stop worrying about my sex life, JJ.”

“Do you have one?” Boiziau asks.

“I regret coming,” Shane mutters.

“That makes for a terrible sex life,” Ilya says. JJ laughs, shocking everyone at the table.

“He’s funny,” Boiziau shrugs. “Still hate you though, Rozanov.”

“Likewise,” Ilya says.

Vaughn returns with a couple of drinks, and falls easily into his chair after handing them out. Vaughn exudes carefree confidence, always with a smile on his face; Ilya envies him for his cool, easy-going people skills.

“So, Rozanov,” Vaughn says, as Ilya takes a sip of his drink. “What’s it like to be back in Russia? Do you get to come back often?”

“Never,” Ilya says. “By choice.”

“Is it weird to be back?” Vaughn asks.

“I am from Moscow,” Ilya says. “Is nothing like this place. Is weird to be in Russia, yes, but it does not feel like where I grew up.”

“How old were you when you left?” Vaughn asks. “Do you remember it well?”

“I was twelve,” Ilya says. “I wish I did not remember it so well.”

Shane twitches beside him, and Ilya very carefully ignores him, guzzling a little more of his drink.

“This place is nothing like I expected,” Vaughn says easily. “I didn’t even know Russia had beach towns, y’know? I guess I never really thought too hard about it. It’s so cool to be here, though, I always wanted to...” he keeps talking, but Ilya tunes him out, zeroing in on Shane, the way he is holding onto his glass of water like it’s precious.

Ilya wants to leave. He wants to throw back the rest of this vodka and sulk back to the village, but more than that, he wants Shane to do the same. He wants Shane to go back to the village, hide away in his room, and try as hard as Ilya is trying to pretend that they are not in Russia. He wants Shane to be scared of Russia, too, wants Shane to be scared enough that he will keep his head down and stay safe, that he’ll stop leaving the village to go to hotels, and cafes, and bars, where anyone could just—

It is not fair of him to think, let alone ask. Shane has been dreaming of the Olympics since he was small; what child athlete does not? He is enjoying himself, making the most of it, and Ilya cannot fault him for that. Ilya cannot expect him to shoulder and share all of Ilya's anxieties. They are not together— they are hardly even friends. Shane deserves to do whatever he wants. Ilya will just have to settle for making sure he stays safe while he does it.

Realistically, there is no threat to Shane's safety. Nothing is going to happen to Shane here, so long as he is smart and follows the rules. As time has gone on, Ilya is less and less convinced that Shane is actually sleeping with other men, but on the off chance that Shane does find someone he likes here in Sochi, it could be really dangerous. Ilya has never had reason to doubt Shane's judgement skills, but he needs to be sure. He needs to be sure that Shane is okay.

It is not late at all when the group decides to call it a night. They are Olympians, after all, at least for the next week or so, and Team Canada has another game tomorrow. The Americans leave first, heading back to the village, but Boiziau is staying in the same hotel as Shane, Shane would be perfectly safe going back there now with just Boiziau, he would be just fine on his own tonight, he will be fine...

"Will you come back to the hotel?" Shane says lowly, when Boiziau is distracted. "Please?"

Ilya glances around the bar; no one is looking at them. "Is not a good idea, Hollander."

"I just don't want you to be alone," Shane says, barely above a whisper. Ilya's heart aches.

"What hotel?"

Ilya walks around the block a few times, gives Shane and Boiziau both a chance to get into their respective rooms, and then makes his way to the hotel. It is a nice hotel, very ornate; Ilya feels out of place in his hoodie and joggers. He keeps his head down on his way up to Shane's room, and Shane opens the door before Ilya can even knock, like he was waiting by the peephole for him.

"Hey," Shane says, locking the door behind Ilya. "How are you?"

"Fine," Ilya says, kicking his shoes off and sitting down on Shane's bed.

"I'm glad you came," Shane says, shuffling over to sit beside him. "That was a really fun game, earlier. I miss playing on the same team as you."

Ilya stares down at the carpet; he is exhausted, suddenly, much too tired to have this conversation right now. "I am tired," he says quietly.

"Let's go to sleep, then," Shane says, getting up to flick off the lights.

Ilya crawls under the covers of the bed— it is a very comfortable bed, but not as comfortable as Shane's bed back in Ottawa— and curls up on the edge of the mattress. Shane putters around the room for a few more minutes, and Ilya is asleep before Shane has even gotten into bed.

It is very dark when he wakes up, and very quiet. He rolls over slowly, trying to remember where he is. Shane is curled up on the other side of the mattress, his back to Ilya, sleeping soundly. Ilya's heart clenches; he wants nothing more than to crawl across the bed, wrap himself around Shane's back, but he is not sure if he is allowed, if Shane will find that weird, if—

They are in Russia. Shane is in Russia, sleeping peacefully like he is at home, like he has no worries in the world. Ilya resents him, a little bit. He resents him for being so at peace, for being so inherently safe in a place where Ilya feels like he is constantly being watched by eyes he cannot see, constantly being surveilled by people just waiting for him to make the wrong move, step out of line, forget himself for just one moment so they can swoop in and ruin everything.

Shane is— tainted, maybe, now that he has breathed Russian air. He is no longer Ilya's safe place, no longer Ilya's escape, because he is here, he has touched Russian soil, and as hard as Ilya might try, he will never be able to scrub him clean of it. He is angry, suddenly, at Shane, for being here, for wanting to be here, for talking Ilya into coming here and for what? A couple of hockey games?

It is not just a couple of hockey games, and Ilya knows that, the way he knows that Shane is not irreversibly ruined because he has set foot in the country where Ilya was born. This is the biggest accomplishment of their lives, just being here at all. Ilya is more depressed than he has ever been in his life.

He crawls carefully out of bed, locates his phone where it is tangled up in the sheets after falling out of his pocket, and steps out onto the balcony of the hotel room. It is bitter outside, but Ilya does not mind it, hunching his back against the wind and tapping at his phone.

His mother answers on the first ring. "*Solnyshko?*"

"*Hi, Mama,*" Ilya says quietly.

"*Is everything okay?*"

"*Yes,*" Ilya says. "*No. I am not sure.*"

"*Where are you?*" Irina asks.

"*At Shane's hotel,*" Ilya says.

Irina is quiet for a moment. "*Ilya,*" she warns.

"*I know, I know,*" Ilya says. "*He did not want me to be alone in the village. I am... not having fun.*"

"*Why?*" Irina asks. "*Has something happened?*"

"*No,*" Ilya says. "*Not yet.*"

“Solnyshko, you are safe,” Irina says. “Have fun. Enjoy this moment. Do not ruin it for yourself.”

Too late, Ilya thinks. “I want to go home, Mama.”

“Go to sleep, moy lyubimyy,” Irina says.

“I hate it here.”

“I know,” Irina says. “I am so proud of you, Ilyusha, do you know? You are so brave— I do not know how you do it. The bravest man I ever met.”

Ilya leans over the railing of the balcony. “I do not feel brave.”

“You do not have to feel it for it to be true,” Irina says. “Go get some sleep, solnyshko, you have another big game tomorrow. I am so proud of you. Tell Shane hello for me.”

“Okay, Mama,” Ilya says. “I love you.”

“I love you, Ilyusha.”

Ilya drags himself back inside, eventually, climbs back into bed, and stares at Shane’s back until the sun begins to rise.

Eight Days Later

Shane rushes to the door, pulling it open to let Ilya slip inside and then locking it after him, as has become their routine for the past week. Ilya has been coming back to the hotel every night, even when he says he won’t, and Shane is too grateful that Ilya is choosing to be here with him instead of moping alone in the village all the time that he doesn’t even care that Ilya doesn’t speak or move or do anything except sleep when he’s here. They played their second to last game last night, the gold medal game is tomorrow, and then they can get the fuck out of Russia, and Shane can stop pretending that everything is fine.

As amazing as it has been to play in the Olympics, this has been the worst week and a half of Shane’s entire life. He feels awful that Ilya is so stressed out, that there is absolutely nothing Shane can do to help him, that Ilya wouldn’t let him even if there was. Shane hates Russia, hates being here, hates that Ilya has to be here, and Ilya has been getting increasingly more irritable as the days have stretched on.

They have not had sex once since they have been in Sochi, but they have slept in the same bed every night since Shane got the hotel room. Ilya has been very strict about their

interactions, meaning that they don't interact, really, outside of this room, and when they do, it is curt, professional, and sometimes a little biting. They're quiet behind closed doors, acting more like distant colleagues than lifelong best friends and occasional lovers. Acting like Rozanov and Hollander, not Ilya and Shane.

Honestly, the lines between those two identities have become so blurred over the past few years, Shane doesn't even know which is which anymore. He did, at one point, maybe when this whole *casual* thing first started, but it's been a while since Shane has been able to look at Ilya and know exactly who he was looking at.

He's Rozanov tonight, for sure. He's been snapping at Shane all day, and yet following him around like a stray dog to food. It comes to a head after a dinner with Team Canada; Shane has only just gotten back to his hotel room when Ilya calls.

"What?" Shane sighs down the line.

"It is after ten," Ilya says, irritated. "I cannot get in without a key. Come get me."

Shane rolls his eyes and hangs up the phone. He invited Ilya here that first night, insisted on it, even, and he can't be annoyed with Ilya for seeking comfort in him, but Ilya could at least pretend to be grateful. He pulls on a hoodie and heads down to the lobby to open the door for Ilya, and neither of them says a word on the way back up to the room.

One more day, two more nights. One more game, the closing ceremony, and then the next morning, they fly home. Shane has never been so excited for something to come to an end.

"Are you looking forward to going home?" Shane asks innocently, while Ilya kicks off his shoes inside the door and takes off his jacket.

"No," Ilya says haughtily. "I think I will stay in Russia forever, I have had such a lovely time."

Shane tries to bite his tongue, but his tongue protests. "And so has everyone around you, really."

Ilya glares at him. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"I know you're stressed," Shane says, with all of the patience he can conjure. "But can you please, *please*, just try to get through tomorrow without biting my head off?"

"You have no fucking idea," Ilya says lowly. "You have no idea what this has been like for me."

"No, actually, I do," Shane says, before he can stop himself. "I know something happened between you and your brother when you were in Boston, and I know that that's why you were the way you were then, and I get it, I really do, but—"

"How the fuck do you know this?" Ilya says, stepping away from Shane like there isn't a whole king sized bed between them already. His eyes are wild, his face gone pale, and Shane regrets bringing it up, but he can't very well backtrack now.

“Your mom told me,” Shane says softly. “Like, two years ago.”

“What the fuck,” Ilya hisses, turning away and walking to the balcony door. He doesn’t go outside, just stares out at the city for a moment, his back rising and falling quickly with agitated breaths.

“I hate that you kept that from me, but I understand,” Shane says, his voice even, gentle, measured. Ilya slams his fist against the glass door so hard it’s a wonder it doesn’t shatter, and Shane flinches.

“Why the fuck did you not tell me that you knew that?” Ilya growls, turning his wild eyes back on Shane. He looks— well, mortified, ashamed, distraught, all rightfully so.

“I just kept hoping you would tell me someday,” Shane says, dropping his eyes to the bed. “But obviously you were never going to.”

Ilya picks up a pillow off the chaise lounge in the corner and hurls it across the room, very nearly taking out a lamp near the door. Shane breathes in deep, watches Ilya fist his own hair and drop into a squat like he can’t bear the burden of standing up anymore, and feels his blood begin to boil.

“You don’t get to do this,” Shane says, gesturing toward Ilya. “Why the fuck are you mad at me for knowing, but it’s totally fine that you lied and kept it from me for three years?”

“He was fucking blackmailing me,” Ilya hisses, rising back to his feet, “and threatening me, and threatening my mother—”

Shane grits his teeth. Okay, that’s— he didn’t know all that, but still—

“He did not know about you,” Ilya says, his voice breaking a little. “I needed it to stay that way. I wanted to tell you, but I was so ashamed.”

“That doesn’t make it better,” Shane says, against his better judgement. Ilya is actively breaking in front of him, splitting down the middle like a fault line. “It doesn’t make it okay. It just makes you a coward.”

Ilya’s lips part in surprise, but he doesn’t argue. He nods once, looks away, and clenches his jaw. “You are right,” he breathes, shrugging one shoulder.

“I would have done anything, Ilya,” Shane says, his voice beginning to shake. Ilya closes his eyes. “I would have done *anything* to help you, to protect you, to— to comfort you.”

“You could not have,” Ilya scoffs.

“I could have *tried*,” Shane grits out.

“He could have told everyone,” Ilya says, mostly to the wall. “He could have told the world that I was weak, that he and Papa used to beat me, that I would cry and scream and run away. He could have told the world that I fled Russia because I could not take it anymore. It would

not have hurt me too badly. But I could not let him find out about you, Shane. I could not let him know what you mean to me— *meant* to me, I could not let him hurt you, I could not—”

“Ilya,” Shane says; his voice doesn’t even sound like his own.

“If that makes me a coward, then he was right,” Ilya says quietly.

“You could have told me,” Shane says. “You didn’t have to push me away— you just hurt me even more.”

Ilya shakes his head. “You never would have forgiven me either way. I was going to lose you either way.”

“Oh, fuck you, Ilya,” Shane says. “I *begged*, I would have done *anything*—”

Ilya walks to the door, shoves his feet into his shoes, and grabs his jacket.

“Where are you—”

The door slams.

June, 2014 – Las Vegas, Nevada

Ilya’s hands shake while he adjusts his bowtie, determinedly not meeting his own eyes in the mirror. He has been a wreck all day, all *week*; hell, he has been a wreck since the second to last night in Russia. It is probably why they won silver— he was so heartbroken he could not see straight, and Shane was not much better off.

They have not spoken since that night. Ilya rolled his ankle on purpose during practice the day before the Centaurs were due to fly to Montréal in March, and he faked a case of the flu when the Voyageurs came to Ottawa in April. He cannot stomach the thought of facing Shane knowing that Shane knew almost the whole time, knew what Ilya was keeping from him, that he was waiting, hoping, giving Ilya chance after chance after chance to tell him and watching Ilya fail every time. Ilya is more ashamed than he has ever been, he does not know how he is supposed to stand on a stage in— fuck, five minutes— and present an award alongside Shane, how he is supposed to be in Shane’s vicinity at all without crumbling to dust.

Shane is angry with him, he knows that much. He could see it on Shane’s face that night, the disgust, the disappointment. Ilya relives it every time he closes his eyes. He is so ashamed of the way he treated Shane in Russia, the way he treated everyone, and all for naught— his father and brother might as well have fallen off the face of the planet, for all their existence

mattered while Ilya was in Sochi, and yet they were inescapable, tormenting Ilya from inside of his own mind.

He fixes his bowtie one more time, smoothes his hair back from his face, and rolls his shoulders back. Four minutes. Shane will be starting to panic that he is not backstage yet. Shane will be even more angry with him for being late. Shane will hate him even more than he already has reason to.

He walks to the stage door like a convict walking to death row, finding Shane exactly where he expected him to be, tapping his foot anxiously and staring at his watch.

“Where the fuck were you?” Shane spits, his body angled entirely away from Ilya. “We’re on in five seconds.”

“Twenty-five seconds,” Ilya mutters; he cannot help himself, even if the way Shane huffs and shakes his head makes him feel sick to his stomach.

“What were you even doing?” Shane bites.

“And now,” says a disembodied voice, echoing from the speakers in the auditorium, “presenting the Lord Talon award for most sportsmanlike player, Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander.”

Ilya chooses not to answer, brushing past Shane to be the first one on the stage, though Shane is hot on his heels. Ilya plasters on his best smile, comes to a stop at the closer side of the podium so that Shane has to walk behind him to get to the other side, and stares dutifully at the teleprompter until the applause stops.

Shane does most of the talking, which Ilya is grateful for. He feels like his head is full of television static, watching Shane’s lines roll by on the screen and tuning out everything else until his cue pops up.

“–But the most important thing,” Shane is saying when Ilya’s brain kicks back on.

“Is the friends we make along the way,” Ilya says into the microphone, like a space alien. The audience laughs politely. “Hey,” Ilya says, in that same strange, robotic tone, “before we give out next award, can I get a selfie with you?”

Fuck this, and fuck whoever wrote it. Ilya’s hands have reached new frequencies of trembling as he pulls his phone out of his pocket.

“What?” Shane asks. It sounds genuine, despite the fact it is written plainly on the screen.

“Come on,” Ilya grits out, “when will this ever happen again, buddy?”

Never, that is when. Ilya is going to climb into a hole and never come back out. Shane is never going to speak to him again, is never even going to be willing to be in his vicinity outside of events like these; this is *never* going to happen again, and Ilya is trying very hard to be okay with that.

“Okay, fine, but hurry up,” Shane says, standing stock still as Ilya opens his phone camera and holds it out in front of them both, wrapping an arm around Shane and smoothing it down his spine, just gently, just because he cannot help himself. Against his better judgement, he snaps a photo, if only to cry over later when he gets around to studying the deep disdain he knows is evident there in Shane’s eyes.

“Great,” Ilya says. He hopes the audience cannot tell how close to tears he is. “Give me your number, I will text them to you.”

“No chance,” Shane says cheerfully. “The Lord Talon award for most sportsmanlike player goes to...”

Ilya misses the rest of the presentation, giving in to the static in his head. He follows Shane off the stage when they are given the cue to do so, and Shane all but runs from him once they are out of sight, shoving through the stage door and disappearing down the hallway.

Well. That is that.

He manages to hold himself together until he gets back to the bathroom, pushing through the door and freezing in his tracks. Shane is hunched over at the sinks, face in his hands, and he startles upright at the sound of the door. Ilya lets the door fall closed behind him, and then leans back against the wall, looking Shane up and down. Shane is shaking, trembling from head to toe, and his eyes are wet, red and shining.

Ilya feels a laugh bubble out of him before he can think to stop it. If looks could kill, he would be dead on the floor. “Well,” he shrugs.

Shane’s lips part in surprise. “What?” he scoffs. “What the *fuck* do you want, Rozanov?”

This could be the end of everything. This could be the last straw, the final blow, and fuck if Ilya will not go down swinging.

“I want you to suck my dick,” he says, voice low to disguise the way his voice shakes.

Shane’s jaw drops. “Oh, fuck you,” he spits. “You are unbelievable. You suck my dick!” He turns away in an attempt to collect himself, but Ilya can see in the reflection of the mirror the way Shane’s face is screwed up, trying not to cry.

Ilya pushes off the wall, taking one measured step at a time to where Shane is trying very hard to make himself disappear. He reaches for Shane and, remarkably, Shane lets him, lets Ilya pinch his chin and turn his head until he is facing Ilya, wet eyes locked on Ilya’s.

“Maybe ask nicely,” Ilya breathes.

Ilya watches Shane accept defeat, his shoulders slumping slightly. “Please,” he mutters.

And this— this is what they do. No feelings. No earnestness. Sex, and nothing else. Sex, and the suppression of everything else.

“If you want me to get on my knees on this filthy bathroom floor and suck your dick, you are going to have to ask nicer than that,” Ilya says.

Shane looks a breath away from shattering all over the dirty tile, his lip trembling as he says, “please, get on your knees, on this filthy bathroom floor, and suck my dick.” He takes a trembling breath, blinks away a tear. “Please.”

“No,” Ilya says. Shane does not even react, just slumps into Ilya’s chest and releases a shaky sigh. “We are going to go back out there, get through this night, and then you will come back to my hotel room, and I will maybe do more than just suck your dick.”

Shane pulls away, looks up at Ilya with those big, brown eyes, still swimming with tears.

“Yes?” Ilya hums.

Shane must recognize it as the weak apology it is meant to be, because he smiles a little through the abject misery on his face and nods. Ilya cannot help himself, taking hold of Shane’s face again and kissing him so hard that Shane whimpers into his mouth, melting against his chest. Ilya holds him up, kisses him until he really might drop to his knees on this filthy bathroom floor, and then pulls away to tap Shane’s cheek gently. Shane looks dazed, looking up at him through his eyelashes, and Ilya has to tear himself away.

“I will text you,” he mutters. He cannot look at Shane’s eyes anymore, keeps his head down as he turns on his heel and pushes back through the bathroom door, back to the auditorium, back to his seat.

He spends the rest of the evening acutely aware of Shane, his location in the room, who he is speaking to, what he is drinking, whether he is smiling, laughing, frowning. The afterparty has barely gotten going when Ilya pulls his phone out of his pocket, angling himself away from the group he has found himself stuck talking to, and opening his camera roll.

The photo he took of himself and Shane is devastating. Neither of their smiles reach their eyes, and Shane looks wound so tightly he is about to snap, shoulders tense against Ilya’s arm around him. He should delete this, probably, but he does not, cannot; he closes the camera roll and opens his messages, instead, scrolling until he finds Shane’s name.

Ilya: Penthouse 1.

He watches out of his periphery as Shane receives the message, as Shane whips his head around to look for him, as Shane’s eyes lock onto him and he swallows hard. Ilya does not shoot him even a cursory glance; he tips the rest of his drink into his mouth and places his glass down on the table, excusing himself from the conversation he has not done much to take part in and slipping out of the ballroom.

He pours himself a fresh glass of vodka once he reaches his room, unbuttons his shirt, and waits for Shane by the window, gazing out at the city. It is not long before he hears Shane at the door, and he forces himself to look up when Shane comes into the room. Shane stops just inside the door, and Ilya leans back against the window frame, not daring to make the first move.

Ilya has been face to face with Shane countless times in his life, has seen just about every version of him over the course of the past twelve years. He has never seen this look on Shane's face before, a mixture of utter defeat, and utter determination, as if he already regrets what he is doing, but is resolved to do it anyway.

"Penthouse, huh?" Shane says, shrugging off his jacket and folding it carefully over the back of the sofa.

Ilya spreads his arms wide. "I like nice things," he says.

Shane is a nice thing, usually. He scoffs. "You thought you were going to win MVP, didn't you?"

Ilya feels his face darken. "You did not win it, either," he says lowly.

"Nope," Shane says, unbuttoning his shirt and pulling it free from his pants. "But I didn't book a penthouse to celebrate in." He shrugs his shirt off, folds it, and places it on top of his jacket.

Ilya hums, sips at his vodka, and watches Shane strip his pants off and add them to the neatly folded pile of clothes on the sofa. Shane nods to the plush armchair in the corner of the room, and then sets off for the bedroom, leaving Ilya to trail behind, dragging the chair with him.

Shane settles on the mattress, nodding for Ilya to drag his chair all the way across the room to the foot of the bed. Ilya drops into the chair, spreads his legs wide, tries to look cool and domineering, but Shane is in charge here, and they both know it.

Ilya sips at his vodka; he is glad he did not put ice in it, or else the clinking against the glass would betray the way his hands are shaking. Shane is touching himself on the bed, sliding his hands over his torso and down to his groin, dropping his head back against the pillows without taking his eyes off of Ilya. Ilya fights to maintain the eye contact, even as Shane strips out of his briefs and tosses them into Ilya's lap.

It is almost emasculating to watch the way Shane takes care of himself. He touches himself so gently, so thoroughly, moans so prettily at his own fingers opening himself up, gasps and whines as he pinches and pulls at his own chest. Ilya is all but squirming in his chair, and Shane does not look away for even a second; even when his eyes flutter closed in pleasure, they lock right back on Ilya's face when he opens them again. He does not need Ilya, clearly. He touches himself so well that he appears to be right on the edge within minutes, moaning in Ilya's face like a taunt.

Shane does not need him, but he wants him.

Ilya throws back the rest of his vodka and stands from his chair, pulling his shirt off as he stalks toward the bed. Shane pulls his fingers out of himself regretfully and turns over, pressing his face into the pillows and presenting himself to Ilya, who is left standing dumbly at the end of the bed.

Ilya shucks his pants and climbs up behind Shane, smoothing his hands over the curve of his back and hips. Shane melts into the mattress, knees sliding open wider, and when Ilya sinks into him, it feels like coming home, like fitting two missing pieces of a puzzle together, snug and secure.

“Harder,” Shane says immediately, pressing back into him. Ilya has not even started to move yet, has not even finished gathering the faculties to do so, but he pulls out before he is ready to and slams back in. Shane lets out a broken cry, but mashes his face into the pillow and says, “*harder*.”

Ilya fucks him so hard he wonders if Shane will be able to walk when they are done, if Shane will spend the night simply because he is too sore to leave, if Shane will—

Shane comes without any warning at all, clenching around Ilya and screaming into the pillow. It is mesmerizing, the sight of it, so much so that Ilya feels himself curl over Shane’s back and pump his hips even harder.

“Fuck, fuck,” Ilya breathes, holding tight to Shane’s hips as Shane hiccups and moans under him. Ilya buries himself deep, finishes with his forehead pressed to Shane’s middle back, slick with sweat and hot to the touch.

Shane rolls away when Ilya peels himself off and out of him, avoiding the puddle he made on the comforter. Ilya is still trying to rein in the pieces of his mind when Shane sits up and climbs off the bed, wincing only slightly as he leaves the bedroom.

“You are leaving?” Ilya calls after him, sitting back against the headboard and watching in the reflection of the window as Shane starts getting dressed behind the sofa.

“Yeah,” Shane calls back, and then hesitates. “I, uh— I think it’s for the best.”

Ilya watches Shane fret for a moment in the reflection, and then he shakes his head and finishes putting his clothes on. This was a mistake. Ilya fucked everything up beyond repair in Russia, and this confirms it. Shane is done. This is casual, *actually* casual, in the way it never really was before, even when it was supposed to be. Shane did not even kiss him.

“Bye,” Shane calls, his hand already on the doorknob.

Ilya pulls the bedsheets over his naked lap, reaches to the bedside table for the box of cigarettes he left there, and calls weakly, “bye.”

He does not watch Shane leave.

The door clicks shut.

Ilya lights his cigarette.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

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

June, 2015 – San Jose, California

July 5th, 2014 16:52

Ilya: Hey

July 9th, 2014 14:03

Ilya: Are you busy?

August 29th, 2014 9:16

Ilya: Want to come down to Ottawa this week?

October 3rd, 2014 14:12

Ilya: Meet up after the game tonight?

December 20th, 2014 23:49

Ilya: Good game. Are you coming home for Christmas?

January 15th, 2015 22:46

Ilya: My knee hurts, thanks for that hit.

February 18th, 2015 23:34

Ilya: Come to my hotel? Please?

March 12th, 2015 00:27

Ilya: I cannot fucking believe we beat you

Ilya: Want a consolation prize?

April 15th, 2015 8:17

Ilya: This is our first time in the playoffs together. Are you nervous?

April 17th, 2015 22:05

Ilya: Fuck.

April 19th, 2015 23:16

Ilya: You were a fucking beast tonight.

April 22, 2015 00:58

Ilya: 😎

April 24, 2015 00:52

Ilya: 😎😎

April 26, 2015 22:53

Ilya: Well, it was fun while it lasted.

June 17th, 2015 23:46

Ilya: Holy fucking shit. Congratulations. I know you do not want to hear from me but I want you to know I am so proud of you. So so proud. I hope you are celebrating. You deserve it.

Shane groans into his margarita— his fifth, maybe sixth margarita, at that— and scrolls back up to July. *Hey. Are you busy? Want to come down to Ottawa this week? Meet up after the game tonight? Good game. Are you coming home for Christmas?*

He read each message as they came in, of course, the moment they arrived, over and over to the point of exhaustion. He read them, thought about replying, and then thought some more, and then agonized over what to say, what to type, but nothing ever came, and each message sat unanswered until the next came through, rinse, and repeat. Shane feels awful about it, he really does, but he doesn't know how to talk to Ilya anymore, not after Vegas, not after... everything.

Shane feels more guilty about that night in Vegas than he could describe, if he could even admit it. He was wrong to have called Ilya a coward when they were in Russia— those in glass houses, and all that. He knows he hurt Ilya in Vegas, he knows that that night was Ilya's twisted way of trying to make amends, but Shane hurt his own feelings so badly that night that he didn't even make it to the elevator before he started crying, and didn't stop until the sun came up.

Obviously, the only option for the two of them is to be casual, or nothing at all. Every time feelings get involved, they fight, they break down, they push each other away, and it can't happen again, Shane can't let it happen again. Ilya offered him an olive branch in that dirty Vegas bathroom in the form of casual sex, and Shane tried, he really, really tried to let it be casual, to let it be what Ilya wanted, but as he heaved over the toilet later that night, he decided that *casual* isn't really something he's built for.

And, so, the texts. Each one less hopeful than the last. Each one more tempting. And yet Shane resisted. They're not good for each other, not anymore. They can't be in love. They

can't be casual. They can't really be strangers, either, but it seems like the path of least resistance.

A shot glass is placed forcefully in front of him, and Shane picks it up without hesitation, waits only for the group surrounding his table to be ready before he throws it back. It burns like acid, it immediately makes him feel sick, but he breathes through it and uses his margarita as a chaser.

He won the fucking Stanley Cup yesterday. He ended a sixteen year drought in Montréal. He is a fucking hero. He is a fucking *superhero*. He is a fucking *king*. He is on top of the world, the most celebrated man in Québec. He is so fucking *sad* that he hurts down to his *bones*.

He is happy. He is proud, and grateful, and excited. He is soaking it all in. He has been drunk for two days now, a never-ending party with his team, his fans, his *people*. His *person* is going on twelve months of unanswered text messages and probably more pain than Shane can bear to imagine he caused.

He reaches the bottom of the text thread again. *Holy fucking shit. Congratulations. I know you do not want to hear from me but I want you to know I am so proud of you. So so proud. I hope you are celebrating. You deserve it.*

Shane *does* deserve it. But Ilya deserves it, too.

June 19th, 2015 00:32

Shane: I wish you could feel like this.

Shane: And I'm sorry that you don't.

Shane: I'm sorry.

"Hollander!" JJ shouts, clapping a hand on Shane's shoulder. "It's a party! Get off your phone!"

Shane locks his phone as quickly as his slow fingers will allow, pasting on a dopey grin and looking up at JJ.

"I requested your song," Hayden says into Shane's ear to be heard over the music. Shane has a song? "C'mon, Jackie wants to dance with you."

Shane goes, reluctantly, to the dance floor, his phone forgotten in his pocket for the rest of the night.

Ilya never answers his text.

June, 2016 – Ottawa, Ontario

Ilya's throat is tight. On his TV, Shane is hoisting the Stanley Cup above his head for the second time, for the second year in a row. He looks so happy, so proud. Ilya is so happy for him, so proud of him. He wants to melt into the sofa cushions and die.

Irina pats his leg gently, her eyes wet when he looks over at her. *"You will get your day in the sun, solnyshko,"* she says softly.

Ilya offers a small smile and half a nod, and then turns his eyes back to the TV. Ilya could live the rest of his life without a cup. Ilya is going to have to find a way to live the rest of his life without Shane.

Hayden Pike takes the cup from Shane, skates around the perimeter of the ice. Loved ones begin running towards the players, flooding the ice and sharing sweet hugs and kisses. Pike kisses his wife. Drapeau hugs his children. Shane hugs his parents, and then clenches his hands by his sides.

Ilya turns the TV off.

"Ilyusha," Irina says.

"I am fine," Ilya mutters. *"I am going to bed. Goodnight, Mama."*

Irina sighs. *"Ilyusha—"*

Ilya drags himself up the stairs, down the hall, and into his bedroom. He falls onto the bed and stares at the ceiling for a while, and then finally, desperately, pulls his phone out of his pocket. He has to scroll quite a bit to find his text thread with Shane, and then he stares for a while at the last thing Shane ever said to him. *I wish you could feel like this. And I'm sorry that you don't. I'm sorry.*

I'm sorry.

Is he still sorry?

He locks his phone without even bothering to draft a message; Shane does not want to hear from him. Shane probably has not spared him a thought in the past year. He said he was sorry, got it off his chest, and that is that. Ilya, selfishly, has been waiting for proof of his remorse for a year now, and has been proved an idiot yet again.

He slips into a restless sleep, at some point. It is just after four in the morning when his phone wakes him up, vibrating against the mattress where he dropped it.

He swipes to answer before he can decide whether or not he should.

"Shane?"

“You didn’t tell me congratulations,” Shane mumbles, almost unintelligible.

Shane is drunk. Shane is not even drunk, he is completely, utterly obliterated, hiccuping into the phone. It is loud, wherever he is. Ilya squeezes his eyes shut.

“Congratulations,” he says, in what he hopes is an earnest tone. He just sounds sort of sad.

“I fucking miss you,” Shane slurs down the line.

Ilya breathes in deep, releases it slow. *Shane is drunk. He does not know what he is saying.* “You do?”

“Yes,” Shane hisses. “You fu— you *fucking* asshole. I miss you so— so much it— *fucking hurts*— like— my *fucking heart*—“

“Shane,” Ilya says lowly.

“Can I come over?” Shane asks. He sounds close to tears, hiccuping into the phone again.

“Are you okay to drive?” Ilya asks doubtfully.

“F-fuck,” Shane sighs.

“Call me tomorrow, Shane,” Ilya says. “Enjoy your night.”

He hangs up before Shane can say anything else— hell, before *Ilya* can say anything else.

Shane is two hours away, and drunk off his ass; he does not mean what he is saying, he cannot possibly, he is just emotional and too wasted to know what to do about it except take it out on Ilya.

Shane does not call him in the morning. He does not call him in the afternoon. He does not call him in the evening. Ilya has written the whole thing off as a fluke when his phone finally rings the next day, a little after noon.

He debates for a moment on whether or not to answer, but in the end, he swipes to accept the call just before it rings out.

“Hi,” Ilya says belatedly.

“Hi,” Shane says miserably. “Look, I’m hungover, I might actually still be drunk, a little bit, but—“

“Shane,” Ilya warns.

“I’m not gonna pretend that I don’t remember calling you the other night,” Shane says. “And I’m not gonna pretend that I don’t remember what I said. And I’m not gonna pretend that I didn’t mean it.”

“So what *are* you going to do, then?” Ilya says. His mouth is so dry.

“I miss you,” Shane says quietly. “I meant what I said. I miss you, Ilya.”

Ilya feels like he has been stabbed. He grips the edge of the kitchen counter just to ground himself. “I miss you, too.”

“I don’t think I’m in a state to drive, but—” Shane cuts himself off with a little whine, like he is conflicted. “But if you— um, if you’re—”

“I will be there in two hours,” Ilya says. “I will book a hotel.”

“You can— no, you can come here. To my— my apartment.”

Ilya’s knees threaten to buckle.

“I’ll text you the address,” Shane says. “Just— just start driving, please.”

There are so many reasons this should not happen. There are so many things that they need to talk about, so many problems they need to solve, but...

But Ilya thought he lost this forever. Shane. Shane wants him. Shane misses him. After everything, after the past two years, the past four years, the past fourteen years, Shane misses him, and wants him. At his *apartment*.

“I am leaving now.”

Shane spends the next two hours keeping very, very busy. He cleans his apartment, showers, starts a load of laundry, changes his bedsheets to a fresh set, cleans out the fridge, cleans out the freezer, and has just finished flipping the sofa cushions when his phone buzzes on the coffee table.

Ilya: I am here.

Ilya: It is ok if you changed your mind. Just tell me, please, so I can go.

The first text was sent almost ten minutes ago; Shane must have missed it while he was bringing his trash down the hall.

Shane: Fuck I’m sorry I didn’t see this

Shane: I didn’t change my mind.

Shane: I’m buzzing you up now.

Shane: Please don’t leave.

He runs to his front door, holds down the button to allow Ilya into the building until it beeps, and then paces around the living room six and a half times until there is a quiet knock on the door. He takes what should be a soothing breath, fixes his t-shirt, and marches to the door.

Ilya looks exhausted, stiff and awkward in the hallway. Shane does not look much better— he was not lying about still maybe being a little drunk— but is almost shocked by how pale and anxious Ilya looks.

“Hi,” Shane says.

“Hi,” Ilya says.

Shane steps aside to let him in. Ilya immediately begins to wander, taking in the decor. Shane fidgets near the door while Ilya inspects the living room, eyes glued to Ilya’s back.

“Nice place,” Ilya says, eventually.

“Thanks,” Shane croaks out.

“How are you feeling?” Ilya asks.

“Uh, like shit, mostly,” Shane says. “We went out after the game, obviously, and then we went back to someone’s house, I think, and then somewhere else— it’s kinda blurry.”

“But you remember calling me?” Ilya asks.

Shane looks down. “Yeah. I remember that pretty well.”

“You ghosted me for a year,” Ilya says.

Shane can’t help but smile at the floor, just a little; he’s always loved the way English slang sounds in Ilya’s accent. “Yeah. Sorry. You ghosted me for a year after that.”

“Yeah,” Ilya says. “Sorry.”

“I am sorry,” Shane says, too suddenly, too quickly, too earnestly. “About Russia, and about Vegas, and about—“

Ilya is there, suddenly, walking Shane back against the door. Shane swallows hard.

“*I am sorry,*” Ilya says, looking so deeply into Shane’s eyes that Shane wonders if he can see his thoughts moving around in his brain. “For... everything.”

It’s not the apology Shane deserves, and Ilya seems to know that, but Ilya hasn’t exactly received the apology he is owed, either, and Shane suspects Ilya is as willing to overlook that as he is.

They shouldn’t be so willing. They should sit down, talk about it, figure it all out, and stop making the same fucking mistakes over and over and over and—

Ilya's hands are on his neck, Ilya's stomach is pressed to his own, Ilya's knee is pressing between Shane's legs, and Ilya's lips are on Shane's forehead, his cheeks, his nose, and finally his lips.

Shane melts into him, fingers pressing divots into Ilya's hips. If this is so wrong, then why does it feel so good? If this is so unhealthy, then why does Shane feel the best he's felt in years? If this is so dangerous, then why does Shane feel so completely safe?

Just like that, they are back to where they were before. It has been years since Shane has had Ilya like this, but it seems as though no time at all has passed as they fall into bed together, *Shane's* bed. He has broken every rule he had for himself, has ruined every resolution he made, but he cannot find it in himself to be ashamed when it feels this fucking *good*.

Shane spends a lot of time and energy restricting himself, pushing himself, avoiding the things that feel good in favor of maintaining the things he is supposed to want. He can have this, he thinks. He can indulge in this one thing. He can spend his summer driving from Lanaudière to Ottawa, he can spend most of the hours of his day thinking about when he'll get to have this again, he can lie and sneak and hide from everyone else in his life for this, this precious thing, this unavoidable, inevitable thing. He can find ways to protect himself, he can squirrel away little pieces of his soul to maintain control, he can be whoever he needs to be to survive whatever room he is in to make it to the next one. He can have this.

And, so, he does.

October, 2016 — Ottawa, Ontario

"Stay," Ilya murmurs into the back of Shane's neck, arms tightening around his middle when Shane begins to stir.

"I can't," Shane says, but he relaxes back into Ilya, anyway, tracing a gentle fingernail up the length of Ilya's forearm. Ilya shivers.

"Stay," he says again.

"I'm gonna miss my flight," Shane says.

"So what?" Ilya says. "You have two Stanley Cups, it is time to retire. Call your coach right now. I will wait."

"I'm not quitting hockey to have more sex with you," Shane laughs softly, finally peeling Ilya's arms off of himself and managing to flee the bed before Ilya can catch him.

Ilya whines, rolling onto his back and spreading his arms wide. He is still completely naked in the afterglow of their post-coital nap, and Shane is distracted for a moment, eyes sweeping over Ilya's body, before he shakes his head and reaches for his underwear.

"I'll see you next month," Shane says, after he finds his way into his t-shirt.

"Okay," Ilya sighs, finally sitting up to locate his own clothes.

He walks Shane to his car, leaves him with a rather lengthy kiss goodbye that has Shane adjusting himself in his jeans before he drives away. It is late, and Shane has to drive all the way back to Montréal for his flight in the morning, but he always texts Ilya when he gets home safe, so Ilya drags himself back inside and to the sofa, flicking through channels on the TV quietly so as not to wake Irina down the hall.

Ilya loves his mother, loves her more than is probably normal or healthy, and he is very happy that she is so happy in this house, but Ilya is beginning to feel like an overgrown teenager, tiptoeing around at night and sneaking boys (well, just the one boy) in and out of the house. Irina is doing better than ever before; she has been back to work for a couple of years now, and is in the process of developing plans to open her own restaurant, which Ilya is looking forward to helping her with. She has come so far, completely turned her life around, and while Ilya is so incredibly happy for her, sometimes he is achingly jealous.

He is still on a pretty shitty hockey team— he is their captain now, sure, and has put in a lot of work to raise their standing in the league, but still, there are no cups in their future. Some days he is so depressed he cannot get out of bed, especially on days when there is no hockey and no Shane.

He has Shane, though. Sometimes. He has Shane sometimes, and it is *good*. Things feel good between them, steady, secure, like they both know exactly where they stand, even though they have never talked about it. It is not romantic, but it is definitely more than casual, living somewhere in the gray area between comfortable familiarity and actual love. Shane let him come to his *actual* apartment a few times this summer, let Ilya fuck him in his *actual* bed for the first time in— Ilya does not even know how long.

It is good. It is fine. If it is all Ilya can have, then he will take it, happily.

He is still flicking through channels when he hears Shane's voice, and he frowns, clicking back to ESPN.

"When the demands of the season are over, this is where Shane Hollander comes to relax and recuperate: his five-thousand-square-foot lakefront cottage."

Ilya sits up, staring intently at the screen. This is not the Hollander family's cottage, Ilya has never seen this house before, it looks brand new, not like—

"This is my favorite place on Earth," says Shane, sitting in an adirondack chair with the palatial cottage behind him. "I just finished building this one a couple of years ago. My family's cottage, the one I spent my summers at growing up, is just over there. I was still spending my summers there until this was finished."

“What the fuck,” Ilya whispers to himself, standing up to get closer to the television.

“It’s really soul-healing to be in nature,” Shane’s voice says, over a clip of him kayaking alone on the lake. Ilya does not recognize that kayak. It must be new. It is somehow more upsetting than the entire cottage.

Ilya collapses back onto the sofa as the program shifts to the interior of the cottage; it is gorgeous, all high ceilings and sleek, modern finishes, mixed with some of the woodsy decor that reminds Ilya of the cottage he knows and loves. Shane built this a few years ago? *Years?* Why did he never mention it? Why is Ilya finding out through fucking ESPN? There is a gym, a game room, a gorgeous raised deck, even a fucking synthetic ice rink. Ilya wants to go there so badly he could cry; in fact, he might cry.

“I got into yoga last year,” Shane’s voice says, as the program cuts to a clip of him moving through a very impressive flow down on the dock. “It’s really helped me focus, and it’s definitely increased my flexibility.”

Yoga? Ilya has never heard Shane talk about yoga in his life. What else has Shane taken an interest in that Ilya has no idea about? Does Ilya actually know him at all?

He thought he did. He thought they were doing well, growing close again, learning how to be around each other in more than casual contexts, learning to fall back in—

No. They are not falling in love. Clearly, Shane does not value Ilya enough to even tell him about his fucking gorgeous new cottage that he designed and had built himself. His *favorite place on Earth*. What is Ilya’s favorite place on Earth? Any room that Shane Hollander is in, probably. Fuck.

He does not realize that he is crying until after he has turned the TV off, sniffing loudly in the darkened living room. He does not know Shane at all. He loves Shane so deeply it makes him sick to his stomach to think about, and Shane keeps his entire life separate from him.

This is Ilya’s fault, and he knows that. He has ruined things with Shane beyond repair. Shane will never love him, will never invite him to that cottage, will never stay the fucking night if he does not have to. Ilya would do anything for him, would die for him on a whim, if Shane wanted him to. Ilya is so, so fucked.

00:31

Shane: I’m home! Goodnight ☺

Ilya’s bedsheets smell like Shane. He should change them, or sleep in the guest room, or burn the fucking house down with him in it. He curls up in bed, head on the pillow that Shane was biting on just a few short hours ago, and cries himself to sleep.

November, 2016 – Ottawa, Ontario

There are so many brands of chips. So many flavors. Potato? Corn? Ilya frets for a while, until the middle aged woman waiting to get through the aisle starts huffing a little more pointedly at him, and then grabs several different options, just to be safe.

He wants everything to be perfect. Shane agreed to come over tomorrow, on his day off, before their game against each other the following afternoon. Ilya has spent a lot of time and mental energy over the past month deciding how he feels about their situation, how he wants to proceed, and what he needs to do in order to get to where he would like to be. He was so sad after he found out about Shane's cottage, spent a few days moping about it before the sadness turned to rage. He was so angry at himself, at Shane, at the world, for the seemingly irreparable damage to their relationship; even outside of their romantic relationship, Shane is the best friend Ilya has ever had, and still is, and Ilya cannot stand the wedge that they have driven between themselves.

So, it starts with chips. Shane was always a classic kettle-cooked kind of kid, but has that changed as he has gotten older? Does it fit into the crazy macrobiotic bullshit that he does? Probably not. This is a symbolic offering, if nothing else, a subtle reminder that Ilya remembers Shane, knew him as well as he knew himself, at one point, and would like the opportunity to do so again.

That is what this is, after all. This is the conclusion all of his thinking and soul-searching has resulted in. He wants Shane back, in whatever capacity Shane is willing to be there. He wants *Shane*, not Hollander, not even Shane Hollander. He wants his Shane. He is going to test the waters, see if they can still be compatible outside of the bedroom, if Shane is even willing to entertain it. He is more anxious for tomorrow afternoon than he has ever been before any game.

Tuna melts. They used to eat them all the time at the cottage in the summers; David taught Ilya to make them, one summer, when Shane was down and out about an injury on his foot from a sharp rock in the lake, and they have been a staple in Ilya's homecooking ever since.

Ginger ale. Shane loves ginger ale, is so well-versed in ginger ale that he can tell the difference between brands with his eyes closed. Ilya picks up a twelve-pack, just in case, just so that if— well, he will not get his hopes up yet. Shane might need a few days' worth of drinks, is all.

He buys far too much food to impress someone who barely eats, but it is the best Ilya can think to do. If he can feed Shane, then he can prove to them both that he can take care of Shane, and if he can take care of Shane, then Shane will trust him again, and the rest will fall into place.

Ilya is getting himself inside of that cottage, literally and figuratively, if it is the last thing he ever does. He needs Shane's trust, more than anything else. Ilya has been caught in too many lies and omissions of the truth, he needs to be someone who Shane can count on, can turn to, can confide in. He needs to let Shane know that it is safe to open up to him, to be genuine and

honest with him. He needs to let Shane know that he cares about him, for more than his body. He needs Shane to need him back.

He takes great care in putting his groceries away when he arrives home, and then sets about tidying up; Shane hates mess, always has, and if Ilya is going to convince him to stay over tonight, he needs to make his house somewhere that Shane is willing to stay. He spends most of the afternoon cleaning, even though his weekly cleaning service only came yesterday.

Irina is away for the week; she has volunteered for some kind of outreach program for the mental health organization that ran her mandated therapy meetings and groups after her incident a few years ago. She credits the organization with saving her life, alongside Ilya, and has begun doing charity work with them to give back. Ilya is so proud of her it hurts. Ilya is so jealous of her he can hardly stand it. Ilya is rather happy to have her out of the house for the week, as her chronic optimism has been rather grating in Ilya's tumultuous brain over the past few weeks.

Ilya used to tell his mother everything. She was his greatest ally, his most trusted confidant. She never judged him, and she always knew what to do; even when Ilya doubted her at first, her advice always returned very good results. Ilya is not sure when that changed— actually, yes he is. The day he fucking moved to Boston. And he has been trying every day since to get back to the version of himself that was not so deeply laced with shame and guilt that even his mother did not feel like someone he could talk to.

Maybe life will not hurt so badly once he has Shane back. Maybe everything else will come together once he has Shane back. Maybe he will no longer be such a miserable fuck once he has Shane back.

He tosses and turns most of the night, worrying about his plan. He is putting a lot of eggs into the basket where Shane agrees to stay over, where Shane agrees to eat the food Ilya bought for him, where Shane does not immediately run screaming from Ilya's open arms. What happens if Shane says no? What happens to Ilya then? Ilya cannot even begin to consider it, and certainly could not bear it.

Shane's flight from Toronto is delayed the next morning. It takes longer for the plane to arrive than it would have taken to just drive from Toronto to Ottawa. Ilya spends almost the entire morning in his home gym, but it is not enough to work off the nerves, watching Shane's plane on the flight tracker on his phone as it sits on the tarmac for hours. It is early afternoon when the Voyageurs finally touch down in Ottawa, and Ilya has already showered twice when Shane finally texts to let him know that he is on his way.

He shows up with a suitcase, which takes Ilya by surprise. Ilya's eyes fall upon it immediately, before he even tells Shane hello, and hope swells in his stupid chest.

"Hey," Shane says, fidgeting with the handle of his suitcase. "Sorry, uh, I came straight from the airport. I told the team I was going to visit my parents and I told my parents I was doing stuff with the team, so I didn't have time to drop this anywhere yet—"

"It is okay," Ilya says, taking the suitcase from Shane's hand and carrying it into the house.

“Oh, I can carry–”

“No, I got it,” Ilya says, stowing it gently inside the foyer. He can carry it upstairs later, after Shane agrees to stay, after–

“You look good,” Shane says, eyes sweeping over Ilya’s body as he closes the door behind him.

Ilya is fresh out of his second shower of the day, shirtless with his hair still dripping, slicked back from his face. He smiles at Shane, winks suggestively, and Shane chews on his lip. Ilya is not sure if he should kiss him, if it is too soon, if he should let Shane get settled, first, to prove to him that Ilya is not just looking for–

“Hey, uh,” Shane says, blushing high on his cheeks. “Um, this is super awkward, but...”

Oh no. Ilya’s stomach drops, but he plays it off, breathing in slowly and leaning casually against the doorway to the living room. It is a defense mechanism, the casual stance, the guarding of emotion on his face. “What?”

“Is it okay if I use your shower?” Shane asks. “I showered after the game last night, but then we were stuck in the plane on the tarmac for longer than the actual flight, and I just feel gross.”

Ilya could sing. “Yes, of course,” he says, trying to keep his smile in check as he picks up Shane’s suitcase again and carries it up the stairs. His hands shake a little as he sets the suitcase down in his bedroom and fetches Shane a towel from the linen closet, presenting it to him proudly. He is so caught up in the elation of Shane using his shower, in his home, like they are– like they are *something*, he does not even offer to join him; it only occurs to him when Shane takes the towel with a curious tilt to his head, but Ilya has already showered twice today, after all, not that Shane needs to know that.

“Are you hungry?” Ilya asks, before Shane can disappear into the ensuite. Shane blinks at him. “I could make us some lunch.”

“Uh,” Shane says. He blinks again. “Sure, I guess.”

It is not *no*, and therefore it is music to Ilya’s ears. It is all going according to plan. Shane is using his shower, and Ilya gets to feed him after. Ilya is taking such good care of him already, Shane is going to be in love with him again before the end of the day, he can feel it.

It feels like crack, listening to the shower run while he assembles two tuna melts in the kitchen. It is nothing compared to the feeling of seeing Shane come down the stairs, soft and clean and smelling like Ilya’s bodywash, like Ilya’s shampoo, like Ilya. Like *Ilya’s*.

“Go,” Ilya says, nodding toward the sofa. “Sit. They will be done in a few minutes.”

Shane meanders over to the sofa, looking awkward and out of place in Ilya’s periphery. He sits down on the far side of the sofa, stiff and upright, until Ilya brings two– rather beautifully plated, if he might add– sandwiches and a can of ginger ale to the sofa.

“You made tuna melts?” Shane asks, eyeing the plate as Ilya places it on the coffee table in front of him.

“Your favorite,” Ilya says. “Or, they used to be. I did not know if—”

“No, it’s— that’s— cool,” Shane says, but he is still just staring at the plate.

“I can make something different, if you—”

“No! No, no,” Shane says quickly, picking up half of the sandwich. He takes a small bite, and Ilya tries not to stare, but he cannot help the way he watches Shane’s jaw tighten as he chews. “It’s really good,” Shane says, as if that is what Ilya is worried about.

“Just like your dad makes them,” Ilya says quietly. “He taught me.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Shane says. He sounds kind of far away. “It’s good.”

Ilya turns the TV on to dispel some of the anxious energy that has begun seeping into the air between them. He flicks through the channels until he lands on ESPN, the Buffalo and Carolina game happening live. Shane eats an entire half of his sandwich, which Ilya will accept as high praise from Shane Hollander’s eating habits, but he does not touch the chips Ilya spent so long picking out for him, does not crack open the can of ginger ale.

“You still like ginger ale, yes?” Ilya wonders quietly.

“Yeah,” Shane says, quickly picking up the can and taking a sip. “Perfect. Uh, thanks.”

“Is good? Cold enough?”

“Perfect,” Shane says again.

Ilya looks away. He is doing too much, he is going to freak Shane out, and it is going— well, it is going well enough. He settles against the back of the sofa, careful not to encroach too much on Shane’s space, and continues to watch Shane out of the corner of his eye. Shane has relaxed slightly since sitting down, leaning against the arm of the sofa with his ginger ale in hand, eyes glued to the game happening on the television.

He makes comments every now and again, and Ilya answers to the best of his ability, but he is not paying attention to the game. He is paying attention to the way Shane’s foot taps against the floor, the way his fingers are tight around his can of ginger ale, the way he is not relaxing fully against the sofa. Ilya gets up during a commercial break, brings their dishes to the kitchen, and ponders for a moment, watching Shane from behind the kitchen island.

Shane is nervous. He is confused, out of his depth. He is not used to spending time with Ilya like this, he is unaware of Ilya’s intentions, and he does not know how to relax because he does not know that Ilya expects him to. After a lifetime, Ilya can read him well enough to understand this, but not well enough to know exactly how to proceed.

When he gets back to the sofa, he sits down much closer to Shane, close enough that their thighs touch. Shane does not react, but the can in his hand crinkles a little. Ilya does not let

himself lose momentum; he leans back against the sofa, wraps his arm around Shane's shoulders, and pulls Shane into his chest. Shane goes stiffly, and for a moment, Ilya thinks he is going to pull away, but then he melts, resting his head against Ilya's chest and shifting his hips to slot into his side better. Ilya could cry, it feels so good; he has to resist the urge to press a kiss to the side of Shane's head, does not want to push too far too fast.

It feels like they are seventeen again, cuddling together on the sofa. When Ilya cannot help it anymore, he moves the hand on Shane's shoulder up to his head, massages his scalp gently, reveling in the way Shane purrs and nuzzles into his touch.

And then Shane puts his hand on Ilya's crotch. Ilya's heart sinks a little, but he does not stop him; he has never, will never, and could never say no to Shane touching him, but that is not what this was supposed to be about, it was supposed to be sweet, simple, just spending time together, like they used to—

Shane bends at the waist, presses his entire face into Ilya's crotch. Ilya sighs and drops his head back against the sofa, smoothing the hand that was in Shane's hair down his back, instead. Shane mouths against him until Ilya gives in and moans, and then Shane is pulling himself up, turning himself around, and straddling Ilya's waist. Ilya adjusts himself so that Shane can sit comfortably on his lap, but Shane is already grinding himself against Ilya's stomach, hunching down to kiss Ilya sloppily.

Ilya lets Shane lead, holds his hips for support but does not offer much else. All Ilya truly cares to do is kiss Shane, which he does, even when Shane breaks away to look at where he's shoving his hand down the front of Ilya's sweatpants; Ilya kisses across his cheek, down his neck, bites into his shoulder a little bit to hear Shane whimper and then kisses his way back up to Shane's mouth. Shane has gotten them both out of their pants and is working them both over in one hand, but he indulges Ilya's kisses, and Ilya directs his moans into Shane's mouth. Ilya moves his hands from Shane's hips to his face, holding him gently to kiss him deeper, until Shane pulls back to breathe.

"You gonna come for me, Rozanov?" Shane pants, eyes boring into Ilya's, challenging, expectant.

Rozanov. Ilya growls. "Fucking make me," he says.

And Shane— god, Shane does. He redoubles his efforts, planting sloppy kisses all over Ilya's face, his neck, down to his chest, and Ilya is— he cannot fucking—

"Oh fuck, Shane," Ilya groans, as he comes into Shane's hand.

Shane gasps— whether at the feeling of Ilya's release or the sound of his name, it is impossible to say— and curls in on himself, breathing hard against Ilya's cheek as he finishes low on Ilya's stomach.

"Ilya," Shane whines, and Ilya would float away, probably, if Shane was not on top of him, could fly if he jumped high enough. "Ilya, Ilya..."

Ilya gets his hands back on Shane's face and drags him up, kisses him so hard that Shane whimpers against his lips. He does not stop for a long time, until it has become lazy and sloppy and tired, and Shane finally pulls away.

Ilya grins up at him, expecting some kind of grand revelation, but Shane is looking everywhere except at Ilya's face. His eyes are darting around the room like an animal being hunted, and before Ilya can start to deduce what he is feeling, he is clamboring off of Ilya, tucking himself back into his pants, and stumbling off the sofa.

"I have to go," Shane says quickly, quietly, to the wall behind the sofa.

Ilya blinks, his smile long gone. It may never return. "Go?"

"I have— uh, I forgot, there's—" Shane tries, valiantly, to lie to him, but he gives up in the end. "This is too much," he says, voice breaking. "I'm sorry, I have to go."

"Hollander," Ilya says, desperately, like it will override the thing that pushed Shane over the edge.

Shane turns on his heel, all but runs up the stairs. Ilya cannot move from the sofa. Shane comes down less than a minute later with his suitcase in his hands, and goes straight for the front door.

"Hollander," Ilya calls, but he cannot turn around, cannot watch Shane leave him. Again.

"I'm sorry," Shane says, and then he is gone, like he was never here at all.

Except, he was here. There is a wet towel in Ilya's ensuite bathroom to prove it. There is a dirty plate in Ilya's kitchen, a half eaten sandwich. There is a sticky, cooling mess on Ilya's stomach.

Ilya does not move from the sofa for a long, long time.

Fuck. *Fuck*. What the fuck? What the *fuck* was that?

Shane? Ilya has not called him Shane since— Shane does not want to think of the last time. Not since they have become casual. Not during sex, anyway.

Ilya was so sweet to him. He seemed so happy, so at peace, just sitting on the sofa and watching a game with him. He made Shane a tuna melt, and cared very much whether or not Shane enjoyed it. He let Shane jerk him off and said Shane's name when he came.

Shane stops pacing around his hotel room in favor of rushing to the bathroom, heaving over the toilet until he is empty, all traces of Ilya and his fucking tuna melt gone.

Things have been so good with Ilya lately. Shane was just starting to think that they'd really gotten this whole casual thing down to a science, they'd finally worked out all the kinks, figured out how to make it work for them both. Shane was just starting to think that this really could be a sustainable thing between them. He's been working on turning his brain off, like Ilya does, and just enjoying the sex for what it is, without letting all of his complicated, annoying feelings get in the way.

Now, he's doubting everything. That was intimate. That was domestic. It was way too intimate and domestic to be casual. Right? That was crazy, right? The way Ilya kissed him, the way Ilya held him, the way Ilya *looked* at him, like he was just so happy to be near him, so happy to let him use his shower, so happy to make a sandwich for him, so happy to sit on the sofa with him... none of that felt very casual.

So, what? Does Ilya *want* this to be casual, or not? They've never really discussed it, apparently, and maybe they should. Is Ilya developing feelings for Shane, again? Did he ever... *undevelop* them? Years ago, when Shane made a fool of himself by telling Ilya he still loved him, Ilya did say something along the lines of not *not* feeling the same way. Fuck. Shane *just* started to get over the whole thing, he *just* started to make his peace with it, and now what? What the fuck is he supposed to do?

He loves Ilya, that much will never not be true. But even if, in some fantasy land, Ilya does love him back, it doesn't matter. They can't be together, not really. They live two hours apart, they see each other four or five times a season, if they're lucky, and the summers are never anything more than a tease. And then there's the NHL of it all, the bigots who run their little world. The league would never allow it. The fans would turn on them immediately. It would be social, professional, and financial suicide.

But... they would be together. But they would be together, and in love, and... and maybe that would be enough. Maybe that could be everything. Maybe Shane was wrong, back in high school, when he told Ilya that they could have it all. Maybe they can only have one or the other. Maybe they will have to choose.

What will he choose?

What will Ilya choose?

January, 2017 – Tampa Bay, Florida

Ilya is already three Corona and limes deep when Shane fucking Hollander walks into the bar. Ilya lowers his eyes, sucks down the rest of his drink, and braces for impact.

Shane looks good. Really good. He would look a little silly, if he was anyone else, in a paperwhite suit with a black undershirt, his pants cuffed a little around the ankle, shiny loafers and no socks, his hair combed just right over his forehead, but he is Shane, and he looks fucking *edible*. Ilya wants to smash his empty bottle over his own head.

It has been almost two months since they have spoken, since Ilya bared his heart and soul and Shane ran away screaming. Ilya almost did not come to this stupid event over it, but he is honored to even be considered an all-star at this point in his career, and turning it down because he did not want to face Shane felt a little too pathetic to indulge himself in. He has been rather pathetic for the past two months, if he is honest, but he has got to get up at some point, dust himself off, and carry on, or else he will just sink into the Earth and cease to exist.

At this moment, that last option does not sound so bad.

In fact, he would quite like to expedite the process, as he looks up to see Shane heading straight for him, eyes locked on Ilya's face.

"Fuck," Ilya breathes, staring intently at his empty beer bottle.

"Hey," Shane says, as he drops into the chair beside Ilya.

Ilya stiffens, and does not look up.

The bartender comes over immediately. Shane glances over at Ilya's empty bottle and asks for the same, and Ilya gestures to the man for another before he walks away.

"It's beautiful here," Shane says, glancing around the bar. It is full of other NHL all-stars, all chatting and laughing and basking in the Florida sunshine.

Ilya still says nothing, sniffs loudly and angles his face away from Shane.

"How are you?" Shane asks. It is Ilya's least favorite question maybe ever.

"Fine," Ilya grits out.

Their drinks are delivered. Ilya knocks back half of his beer immediately.

"Good," Shane says. "Um, how's your mom?"

Ilya clenches his jaw. "Fine."

"Good," Shane says again. "Um, listen—"

Ilya turns to face him, finally, leveling Shane with the coldest gaze he can muster, and Shane loses his nerve instantly. Ilya watches him try to regain it, and this time it is Shane who cannot make eye contact.

"Can I— can we meet up later?" Shane asks quietly.

Ilya waits for him to laugh, for the rest of the bar to laugh, for the camera crew to show themselves. “You must be joking,” he says flatly.

“No, it’s not like– not like that,” Shane blushes. “I just– I think we should talk. We need to.”

Ilya’s stomach drops. Here it is. The final blow. Shane is going to call this off for good. He is going to tell Ilya to never contact him again, to lose his number completely, get the fuck out of his life forever. Ilya looks down, memorizing the shape of Shane’s hand on the bartop.

“What the fuck are you wearing?” Ilya asks.

Shane pauses a moment, and then looks down at himself. “Is it too much? I hired a stylist.”

Ilya would laugh, if he remembered how to. “No fucking way.”

“I just wanted– I hung out with Rose, during Christmas, and she’s so stylish, and she has this friend who’s trying to make a career as a stylist, so I just thought–”

Ilya drains the rest of his beer, and puts the bottle down. “I have to go.”

“What?” Shane frowns. “Oh. Okay. Um, well, can we meet up later? You didn’t–”

Ilya stands abruptly, squeezing himself between his chair and Shane’s body to get out. Shane does not follow him as he stalks straight out of the bar.

He walks along the beach for a while; the sun will begin to set soon, but he cannot go back to his hotel room, not yet. It is too sad. He is too sad. He walks until he cannot walk anymore and then turns around to head back to the resort, but he only makes it about a hundred meters before he runs smack into none other than Shane Hollander.

“Are you following me?” Ilya asks lowly.

“Yes,” Shane says. “Can we talk, please?”

“I do not think so,” Ilya says.

“I’m sorry,” Shane says quickly. “I know I–” he drops his voice, mindful of the other people milling around on the beach, “I know I hurt you. And I’m sorry. I freaked out. I want– I really need to talk to you.”

Ilya watches him as he speaks, heart aching in his chest. Shane does sound terribly sorry. His eyes are shining in the golden light of the setting sun, and Ilya loves him so much it feels like he is being stabbed repeatedly in the chest.

“Okay,” Ilya says.

Shane sighs in relief, closing his eyes for the briefest of moments. “What’s your room number?”

They walk back to the resort in silence; their hands bump every now and again, but neither of them dares latch on, and not only because they are in public.

Ilya showers when he gets back to his room, just to have something to do. He does not know when Shane will arrive, but Shane assured him, before they left the beach, that he would. Ilya does not get long to sit and stare at the wall before there is a quiet knock on his door, and he drags himself over to let Shane in.

Shane marches right to the bed, sits down hard on the edge of it, and stares at the floor. Ilya lets the door fall shut and sits down on the desk across from the bed, crossing his arms over his chest and waiting for Shane to start talking.

“I’m sorry,” Shane says, finally, to Ilya’s feet. “I’m sorry about– last time.”

“So you have said,” Ilya says.

“I freaked out.”

Ilya rolls his eyes. “Yes, you already said–”

“Can you stop?” Shane says. “Can I just get through this?”

Ilya shuts up, stares blankly as Shane collects himself.

“I’m just confused, Ilya.” *Ilya*. “I don’t know what we are, or what you want, and– I don’t know what I want either, so it’s not fair of me to ask you to know, but, I guess I’m gonna do it anyway,” Shane says, and then sighs, and finally looks up at Ilya’s face. “What is this?”

Ilya takes a moment to consider. Here is a line drawn carefully in the sand, but Ilya does not know which side of it he is on, nor which side Shane is on, but on one side is everything he has ever wanted, and on the other, soul-crushing despair. He does not want to give the wrong answer, piss Shane off enough to leave for good, but he does not want to be too much, either, too honest, lest it scare Shane off entirely.

“It is casual,” he says, shrugging one shoulder. “We fuck. It means nothing. It is simple.”

Wrong answer.

Shane looks devastated. Ilya immediately wants to take it back, wants to fall to his knees and beg forgiveness and admit to his lie, but Shane is already standing.

“Okay,” Shane says, his voice surprisingly strong given the anguish etched into his features. “Thanks for clearing that up.”

Ilya cannot move, cannot breathe. “Is that,” he says, watching Shane carefully, “okay?”

“Yeah, no, it’s perfect,” Shane says quickly. “It’s awesome.”

It is not, clearly, but Ilya is too chickenshit to take it back now.

“Okay, well, this is a waste of a hotel room, then,” Shane says. “So come over here and fuck me.”

Ilya could sooner vomit than get hard, probably, but Shane is already stripping down, and even as miserable and frustrated as he is, there still is no version of Ilya who could turn Shane down.

Shane is wild. Ilya has never seen him like this before, much less in a hotel. He begs for it, sobs with pleasure as Ilya fucks him into the mattress. Ilya does everything in his power to turn his brain off, but he has never been very good at that, so he settles for pressing his face into the back of Shane’s neck and hammers into him so hard, so fast, so good, Shane is sobbing into the pillow by the time they both finish.

It is good, mind-numbingly good, but Shane— Shane does not stop crying, even as Ilya pulls out and cleans them both up. Ilya smooths a hand down his spine, and Shane cries a little harder; Ilya frowns, pushes at Shane’s shoulder to roll him over, and Shane surges up and kisses him so hard their teeth click together, Shane’s tears transferring to Ilya’s cheeks.

“Shane,” Ilya says, as he pulls back. Shane’s face screws up with a new wave of tears. “Fuck,” Ilya breathes, cupping his face. “Did I hurt you? Did I do something wrong? I am so sorry, I thought you wanted it, I—”

“No, you didn’t,” Shane says, wiping furiously at his face. “You did nothing wrong.”

Ilya strokes his thumb over Shane’s damp cheekbone, much gentler than Shane did himself. “Then what?” Ilya asks, but he already knows, heart sinking to his toes.

“I can’t do this anymore,” Shane says through a rough sob. “We can’t keep doing this.”

Ilya sits up, scrubbing his hands over his face.

“It’s not casual, not for me,” Shane admits. Ilya crumples into himself. “It never was. Even from the beginning. And it never can be. So, if that’s all it is to you, then I have to stop.”

Ilya says nothing for a long few minutes, until Shane gets up and starts to get dressed. “You—” Ilya starts, but he cannot find the words. *You fucking ran away from me when I tried to be more than casual, and now you are running away from me when I try to backtrack.* Too harsh. *You are the love of my fucking life and I am going to throw myself out the goddamn fucking window if you leave this room.* Too crazy. *You are breaking my fucking heart and my mind and my soul.* Too pathetic. His mind will not move fast enough, and Shane is at the door before Ilya can figure out what he can say to make him stop.

“Goodbye, Ilya,” Shane says, and then he is gone, closing the door behind him with the quietest of clicks. Ilya lies down on the bed, stares at the ceiling, and begins to accept the reality that he will never speak to Shane Hollander ever again.

almost there i promise <3

Chapter 25

March, 2017 – Ottawa, Ontario

“Where are you?”

“At home,” Ilya says. He is always at home, unless he is at work. Svetlana should know this by now; she knows his game schedule better than he does.

“Good,” Svetlana says. *“I thought you would like to know your father is dead.”*

Time stops, only for a moment, and then resumes.

Ilya sits up on his bed, jaw dropping open. It has quite literally never occurred to him that his father would die one day, or that Ilya would or would not be aware of it, but, here it is, presented plainly and simply, like something that is possible, like something that could happen. *“What?”*

“He was sick,” Svetlana says, just as simply. *“He had dementia. It was slow, and awful, and your piece of shit brother just kind of let him go.”*

Ilya cannot wrap his mind around the concept. *“He is dead?”*

“Yes,” Svetlana says. *“The wicked witch is dead, Ilyusha. Congratulations.”*

His father is dead.

Ilya wants to be happy. In a way, it is a huge relief, knowing that Ilya will really never see him again. He has escaped, well and truly, permanently. He no longer shares the Earth with the man who so dearly regretted bringing him into it. He will never get an apology. He will never get to kick his father’s ass in return. He will never earn or gain his father’s respect. It is not that he expected or even really wanted any of those things, but they were possible, before, if improbable, implausible. His father is dead.

It is such a complicated, bizarre feeling; Grigory Rozanov has caused so much pain, and so much grief, and so much suffering, and in the end, his reach really did make it to Ottawa. Everything that is going on right now, all of Ilya’s pain, all of Irina’s pain, even Shane’s pain—it can all be traced back to Grigory, the consequences of his actions spreading like estuaries from the river that was his abject cruelty and rage.

And now, he is just gone, like he was never there at all. He could have died at any point in the past 15 years, and Ilya could have never known, and it would not have changed anything, it would not have made any difference. It is all his fucking fault; Irina’s mental health, Ilya’s mental health, his inability to trust, to love, be be trusted and loved. Alexei, too, is a product

of Grigory, an agent of his abuse, a continuation of his evil. Ilya was never able to protect Shane from any of it, nor his mother; he simply absorbed it all, and delivered it by proxy.

Ilya is relieved, yes, but he is also angry; he is angry that Grigory can just die without being held responsible for everything he has done, he is angry that, at the end, Grigory probably could not even remember all the damage he caused, and he is angry that Ilya will never, ever get to change the way it all happened.

"Ilyusha?" Svetlana asks down the line. *"Are you okay?"*

"When?" Ilya asks. *"When did it happen?"*

"A week ago," Svetlana says carefully. *"His funeral was yesterday. I would have told you sooner, but I only just found out. I am home to visit."*

Ilya thinks back over the past week, but for such an earth-shattering event as this, he cannot recall perceiving any kind of cosmic shift in the universe when his father left it. *"Thank you,"* Ilya says. *"Fuck him."*

"Fuck him," Svetlana agrees. *"Are you okay?"*

"Yes," Ilya says, and means it. *"I love you, Sveta."*

"I love you, Ilyusha," Svetlana says softly.

Ilya should walk across the house, find Irina, and tell her the news. He should bake her a cake, probably, to celebrate with, buy her tickets to Disney World, and a congratulatory greeting card. Instead, he hangs up with Svetlana, and immediately calls Shane Hollander.

Shane does not answer, of course. Only half of Ilya is shocked by this. The other half of him squeezes his eyes shut at Shane's adorably professional sounding voicemail message, and waits for the beep.

"Hi," Ilya says, his voice low. *"Ah, I just wanted... My father is dead. Um. You do not have to call me back."*

He sits with it for a while after he hangs up, feeling stupid. Of course Shane did not answer the phone. They broke each other's hearts very thoroughly only a few weeks ago. Shane never wants to speak to him again, and the feeling is mutual. Ilya is so hurt, so exhausted, so confused by that final night they spent together, he has tried everything in his power to erase it from his memory, to forget Shane entirely, and he has made progress in that, really. Except that upon finding out that his father died, Shane was the first person Ilya wanted to talk to. Except that every morning when he wakes up, Shane is the first thing he thinks of, and every night when he goes to sleep, he does so thinking about Shane. Except that Ilya will never have a single thought for the rest of his life that he does not ache to share with Shane.

His father is dead. *Fuck.* What a strange and lovely concept. Ilya feels a little lighter than he did half an hour ago.

Irina is in the kitchen when Ilya makes his way down. She is singing softly to herself, floating about the kitchen in a way that, at least as far as Ilya has ever known, is exclusive to Ottawa. His mother did not sing in Moscow, at least not loud enough for anyone but Ilya to hear as she sang him to sleep against his ear. His mother did not float about the house in Moscow, she cowered, and crept, and ran. His mother did not smile in Moscow. His father is dead.

He almost does not want to tell her. She seems happy today, as she does most days as of late; she is so healthy, so strong, has worked so hard to get to this point. Ilya has no idea how she will receive this news, but she needs to know, and he needs to be one to tell her.

"Papa is dead," Ilya blurts out, before Irina even knows he is in the kitchen with her. She does not flinch. She pauses, turns slowly to face him, and blinks.

"Dead?" she says.

"Yes," Ilya says. *"A week ago, but Svetlana just found out. She called me."*

"Dead?" Irina asks again.

"Yes, Mama," Ilya says quietly.

Irina's eyes fall to the floor, and then back up to Ilya, shining with tears. *"I outlived him?"*

Ilya starts to cry immediately, nodding vigorously. Irina rushes to him, wraps him in her arms, and cries too, her face buried in Ilya's shoulder. Ilya holds her tight, does not let go even when both of their tears have subsided, when they both have switched over to laughter.

"I love you, Mama," Ilya says, smiling down at her. *"More than you could know."*

"Oh, Ilyusha," Irina sighs, smoothing her palm over his cheek, *"everything I have done in my life, I did for you. You are my world, my moon, and my stars."*

Ilya laughs brightly, ducking down again to wrap her back in his arms. His phone lies forgotten in his bedroom for the rest of the afternoon.

The same day – Montréal, Québec

"Jackie, are you sure I can't do anything to help?"

"Nope, no, I've got it," Jackie mutters, carrying the stack of dirty dishes out of the living room.

Shane elbows Hayden hard, glaring at him. “Go help your *very* pregnant wife,” he hisses.

“I’ve tried!” Hayden says. “She won’t let me!”

“Hayden,” Shane scoffs.

“Watch!” Hayden whispers, getting up and following after Jackie to the kitchen. A few moments later, he is chased back out, and Shane raises his eyebrows. “She won’t let me!” he says again.

“This is what they call willful incompetence,” Shane mutters, getting up off the sofa and walking into the kitchen.

“Get out,” Jackie says, without turning around.

“It’s me,” Shane says. “Let me—”

“Get. Out.” Jackie says over her shoulder. “I said I’ve *got it*.”

Shane scurries out of the kitchen immediately, wide eyed and blushing as he returns to the sofa.

“See?” Hayden laughs. “She gets mean toward the end of the third trimester.”

“You should try to stop knocking her up every year, then,” Shane says.

The twins are playing on the rug, and Hayden’s fourteen-month-old is napping upstairs. Hayden rolls his eyes, and then the commercial break ends, and Jackie rushes back from the kitchen to scold Hayden for one thing or another. Shane’s phone buzzes in his pocket, and then buzzes again, and he pulls it out to find—

Incoming Call – Ilya Rozanov

Shane’s blood pressure spikes. He shoves his phone back in his pocket, mind racing, but he has gained the attention of both Hayden and Jackie.

“Everything okay?” Hayden asks.

“Yeah, fine,” Shane shrugs. “I’m gonna go use the bathroom.”

He hurries to the powder room off the Pikes’ living room, and locks the door. When he checks his phone, Ilya has left a voicemail.

Shane has not spoken to Ilya since Florida, despite the urge to call him and beg him to reconsider his feelings for Shane, which strikes every day, sometimes more than once. He never expected Ilya to be the one to reach out, to call and leave a voicemail, of all things, and no text. Shane can’t listen to it here, but he can’t not listen to it as soon as possible, so he doesn’t think as he rushes back to the living room.

“I have to go,” he announces.

Hayden and Jackie both frown. “Are you feeling okay?” Jackie asks. “You look pale.”

“Jackie,” Hayden whispers. “He just came out of the bathroom, obviously—”

“I’m fine, actually,” Shane says quickly. “I just— something came up. I’ll tell you later. Thanks for lunch, Jackie, it was great, really. I’ll text you later, Hayd.”

“Okay,” Hayden calls, as Shane runs for the door.

“It’s not my fault,” Jackie says quietly. “He barely even ate anything, it’s not my cooking—”

Shane nearly trips over his own feet as he hurries down the driveway, mind racing. He drives all the way home, but he cannot make it out of the car before he digs for his phone. He hesitates before he presses play on the voicemail, preparing himself for the most painful scenario, but all he hears is a sharp breath, and then—

“Hi. Ah, I just wanted... My father is dead. Um. You do not have to call me back.”

Shane has to replay the message a few times before he believes it, before he can comprehend it at all. Ilya’s father is dead. Ilya’s father, who was a real human, and not just some mystical dark cloud of fear and anxiety, is dead. And Ilya called Shane to tell him that.

Shane does the only thing he can think to do, and calls Yuna.

“Hi, sweetheart,” Yuna hums. “Can I call you in a little bit, I just have—”

“Ilya’s father is dead,” Shane says quickly.

Yuna says nothing.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yes, I heard you,” Yuna says quietly. “Wow. When did he die? Was he sick? What was—”

“I don’t know,” Shane says. “Ilya— called me.”

Yuna is quiet again.

“Mom?”

“He called you?” she asks. “I didn’t know you guys still talked.”

“We don’t,” Shane says. As far as his mother knows, they have not spoken in years. “So I was surprised he called me. He left a message.”

“You didn’t pick up?” Yuna asks.

“I was with Hayden,” Shane says.

“Wow,” Yuna says again. “I wonder what they’ll do now.”

Shane frowns. “What do you mean?”

“Well, Irina always said she could never go back to Russia because of that man,” Yuna says. “I wonder if she’ll go back now that he’s gone. And anywhere she goes, I guarantee Ilya follows. He’s miserable in Ottawa, have you noticed? He works so hard, and that team just won’t stay behind him. Maybe he’d be better off going home, back to—”

“*This* is his home,” Shane says sharply, without really meaning to. “He loves Ottawa.”

“I don’t know,” Yuna hums. “I wouldn’t be surprised at all if they moved back.”

Shane is spiraling. He puts his car in reverse, and barrels out of his driveway as quickly as he pulled into it.

“Are you driving?” Yuna asks.

“Yeah,” Shane says. “I’m just, uh, on my way to the grocery store.”

“Oh, good,” Yuna says. “You should get some grapefruit, it’s really good for you to have in the morning. I was reading about—”

“Sure,” Shane says. “I have to go.”

“Okay, me too,” Yuna says. “I was just on the phone with your grandmother. Did you know that—”

“Tell Grandma hi,” Shane says quickly. “Bye, Mom, love you.”

“Love you!” Yuna manages, before Shane hangs up on her.

It has been weeks since Shane and Ilya have spoken, and though Shane has made a concerted effort to accept that they will probably never speak again after the way he acted last time, Shane can’t—he can’t fathom the idea of Ilya going back to Russia, of Ilya being gone, like, *actually* gone, forever. Part of Shane wants to never see him again just out of self-preservation, but a bigger part of him still longs to meet Ilya on the ice, the only worthy opponent he’s ever had. The only person Shane has ever loved. Ilya doesn’t want him, and that’s fine, Shane can deal with that. Shane can deal with it when he’s in Montréal and Ilya is in Ottawa. The space between those cities is bearable. The space between Montréal and Moscow, however—Shane could never bear it.

And Ilya—Ilya said it was casual, sure, but it wasn’t. It never was, for either of them. There is just no world in which they could ever be casual with each other. Maybe they can’t be together, maybe they can never be truly in love ever again, but they will always be something, they will always mean something to each other. Ilya called Shane to tell him that his father died. He called *Shane* about it.

What would have happened if Shane had answered? Would Ilya have told him that he was going to move back to Russia? Would Ilya have told him that he’s miserable in Ottawa, has been the whole time? Would Ilya have opened up to him at all, or would he just have

apologized for calling him in his moment of shock and weakness, laughed at Shane for still answering when he calls, and hung up?

No. Shane can't accept any of that. He can't accept it and he can't hear it over the phone, he needs to see Ilya, needs to touch him and look at him and hear his voice with his own ears. Ilya can't go. He can't leave. Shane doesn't care how desperate it makes him seem, how pathetic— maybe it's selfish, to keep showing up at Ilya's house like this, crossing his boundaries and begging for things Ilya has expressed time and time again that he is not interested in, but he has to try, one last time, one last chance.

He makes the two hour drive in just over an hour and a half, parks crooked in Ilya's driveway, and runs to the front door. It does not occur to him how crazy this is until he's already pounding on Ilya's front door, his hands shaking as he curls them into fists and closes his eyes to pray that Ilya will answer.

After the initial shock of the news has faded, Ilya and Irina have settled into comfortable silence on the sofa; the only sound in the room is that of Irina's pen working madly over the pages of her journal. Ilya watches her face as she writes, as she drifts between contemplative smiles, frustrated frowns, and teary eyes.

Ilya is not quite sure what to do with himself. Irina does not seem to want to chat; they have cried, laughed, danced, and now they sit, and Irina writes, and Ilya watches.

Some days, Ilya is so miserable he cannot get out of his own way. On those days, Irina hand delivers him food, water, offers to sit with him, to lay with him, to sing to him. Ilya almost always turns her down, cannot accept her kindnesses as something he should be allowed. She never stops offering.

She has come so far in the past five, almost six years. Ilya almost does not recognize her as the same woman he knew in Moscow, but her heart is the same, her gentle hands, her beautiful eyes, the eyes she shares with Ilya. He should try harder, probably. For her. He should try harder to be better, to be happier, to be more appreciative of this life that she worked so hard to give him. He is not sure where to start.

But he will start. He will figure it out. He will do better, be a kinder person, a better son, a better friend. He will find things to live for, the way Irina has, with her journaling and her cooking and her dreams. He will—

They both jump when someone begins pounding on the front door. Ilya looks confusedly at Irina, who looks confusedly back at him, both waiting a beat before the pounding starts again. Ilya hurries to the door before whoever is outside beats it down, pulling it open cautiously to find a rather crazed looking Shane Hollander on his front steps.

“Don’t go to Russia,” Shane says immediately.

“Shane?” Ilya mutters, but before he can step outside with Shane to spare his poor mother whatever is about to happen, Shane shoves him back a step, and wrestles his way through the door.

“Don’t go,” Shane says, desperately. “You belong here, not there. Don’t go back, please, don’t leave.”

“What are you talking about?” Ilya asks, his voice low, to hopefully inspire Shane to lower his voice, too. It does not work.

“You— you could go back,” Shane says, as if that makes any sense at all. “He’s gone, you could— but don’t, please, don’t.”

Ilya is stunned into silence. He watches Shane’s face as he talks, trying to decide how to respond, but Shane must take his silence as confirmation that Ilya plans to leave Ottawa, because he crumples, launching himself into Ilya’s chest.

Ilya holds him, smoothing a hand down his back. “Shane,” he says, so, so quietly. “I am— I am not going anywhere. I do not know what you are talking about.”

“You’re not leaving?” Shane asks hopefully. “You’re happy here? In Ottawa? You don’t want to go back?”

“I will never go back to Russia,” Ilya says. “Ottawa is my home, my only home.”

Shane breathes a sigh of relief against Ilya’s chest, but he does not pull away. Ilya holds him tighter, because it seems like Shane needs it, because *Ilya* needs it— he still is not completely sure what is going on, why Shane is here unannounced in the middle of the afternoon to beg him not to leave Ottawa, but up until a few minutes ago, he thought Shane Hollander hated his guts, so he will take what he can get.

“I hate Russia,” Shane murmurs into his sweater.

“Me too,” Ilya says.

Shane starts to pull away, not quite meeting Ilya’s eyes, blushing high on his cheeks. He is coming down from his panic, Ilya can see it in his eyes, and he is embarrassed. Ilya does not let him get far, pulls him back in before Shane can start to feel silly about driving all the way from Montréal just to— to make sure Ilya does not leave the country? Why did he come here?

“Sorry,” Shane says, arms wrapping low around Ilya’s waist. “I just thought— I listened to your message, and I kinda panicked, and—“

Shane is here. Shane listened to Ilya’s voicemail, worked himself into a spiral about it, got in his car, and drove all the way here. Shane, against all odds, is giving him another chance to fix this, to turn this around, and Ilya will not waste it again, he will not let Shane’s efforts be for naught, he will not disappoint him again.

“Do not be sorry,” Ilya says, smoothing his hands down the curve of Shane’s spine. Shane relaxes under his touch; it is addicting. When Shane pulls back to look up at him, Ilya touches his face, his jaw, his neck, cannot help himself. He runs his hands over Shane’s shoulders, his chest, his stomach, his hips. Shane lets him explore, watching him curiously, but he jerks back when Ilya leans in to kiss him.

“What are you doing?” Shane asks lowly.

Ilya freezes, fingertips digging into Shane’s hips. He does not know what the correct answer is.

“Are you fucking serious?” Shane breathes, pulling back until he has pressed himself against the door.

“Shane,” Ilya says.

“No, I don’t— I didn’t come here for—“

“Shane.”

“No! Fuck you! I have been *dying* trying to get over you, you don’t get to—“

“I love you.”

Shane freezes, gasping belatedly. “Don’t,” he says, so quiet, so broken.

“I do,” Ilya insists. “I love you, Shane, if you would fucking let me *talk* I will tell you—“

“No,” Shane whimpers. “You said—“

“I lied,” Ilya says. “You made me guess, I did not—“

“I didn’t make you *guess*,” Shane spits. “I asked you to tell me the *truth*—“

“And I am now,” Ilya says. “I love you. I have always loved you. I will always love you. I have been miserable without you, I was willing to do whatever I had to do to have you in any way, and I should have been honest with you earlier, but I was scared. I was so scared. But I am not scared anymore. I need you, Shane. I need you, and I want you, and I love you. For years, Shane, I have been dying, and I have been stupid. Since the day I met you, I have loved you, and everything I have ever done has been a stupid, misguided attempt to make you happy, to keep you safe, to take care of you, and I am so sorry that I have failed over and over and over but please, *please*, let me try again, let me—“

“Fuck you, Ilya,” Shane hiccups.

“I know,” Ilya breathes. “I know that I do not deserve this, I know I have let you down so many times. I am so sorry, Shane. I never meant to hurt you, never once. I have made so many mistakes, but I have learned from them, I have grown, and I am not— I am not going to lie anymore. I love you. My life is pointless without you. I was created to love you, and if I

never do anything else in my life, I will still love you until the day I die. I do not deserve you, and I do not expect you to forgive me, but I am *begging* you to believe me.”

Shane shakes his head, but he collapses back into Ilya’s chest like he cannot hold himself up for another second. “Fuck, I love you so fucking much.”

Ilya presses Shane back against the door, holds him by the jaw, and kisses him, slow and sweet, no rush, no hurry, no pressure, no escalation— Shane melts into him, kissing Ilya through his little hiccuping cries. Ilya gets his arms around him to hold him up, breathing his love in every available language into Shane’s mouth.

There is a crash and a clatter from somewhere over Ilya’s shoulder, and Shane startles back, eyes wide. Ilya holds him protectively, instinctively, and turns around, finding Irina hunched over, trying to silence the lamp she knocked over while trying to creep out of the room undetected. “*Fuck, shit,*” she mutters, looking sheepishly over her shoulder. “Do not mind me,” she hums, quickly wiping the tears from her eyes. “Carry on, as you were...” She scurries off down the hall, and then her bedroom door slams.

“Oh my god,” Shane breathes, dropping his forehead against Ilya’s shoulder.

Ilya laughs brightly, drawing Shane up and into another kiss. Shane fists Ilya’s sweater so tight the fabric threatens to rip, but Ilya does not care, has never cared about anything, maybe, before he cared about this, this kiss, this man, this chance.

“Shane,” Ilya says, when they finally break apart, breathless. “Can I come to your cottage this summer?”

Shane’s eyes go wide, cheeks pinking. “Um. I have to tell you something.”

“I watched the documentary,” Ilya says flatly.

Shane sighs. “I didn’t tell you because—“

“I do not care,” Ilya says, kissing his lips sweetly, and then his cheek, his nose. “Just bring me there, please.”

“Okay,” Shane murmurs, catching his lips again. “I’m probably gonna win another cup this year, so, it’ll be a while, probably—“

“Oh, fuck you,” Ilya grins, digging his fingers into Shane’s ribs to make him laugh. Shane does not disappoint, pitching forward to bury his giggles in Ilya’s chest. “I hope you do win another cup,” Ilya says, squeezing Shane tight. “You deserve it.”

“So do you,” Shane hums. “You’ll do it, someday. I know it.”

Ilya hums noncommittally; he will not, but that does not matter, not when he has this. This is all he needs. All the Cups in the world could not compare to this.

“Hey, um,” Shane says, pulling back to look at Ilya’s face. “Are you—“

“I am fine,” Ilya says, smiling softly at him to prove it. “I am more than fine. We have been celebrating all afternoon.”

“Good,” Shane says. “So you’re not— I don’t know, I think this could be a very complicated mix of emotions, you know? So if you’re—“

Ilya swallows the urge to lie to him; he will not do that anymore. “It is,” he says, shrugging one shoulder. “I am still figuring it out. I am angry, mostly, right now. But I am happy. I am relieved. I am proud of myself, and of Mama.”

Shane reaches for his hand, squeezes gently. “Why angry?”

“Because he—“ Ilya sighs, looking down to play with Shane’s fingers. “He fucked everything up— me, my life, Mama’s life, our heads— and then he just got to die without any consequences. He was sick, Sveta said, and he suffered. He did not suffer enough.”

Shane frowns. “What was he sick with?”

“Dementia,” Ilya says.

“Jesus,” Shane breathes.

“I do not want to talk about him anymore,” Ilya says, backing toward the stairs and pulling Shane along with him. “Can you stay?”

“I have to be back in Montréal in the morning,” Shane says, but he does not resist. “Early.”

“So, can you stay?” Ilya asks, leading him backwards up the stairs.

“I probably shouldn’t,” Shane says weakly.

“I did not ask if you should,” Ilya grins. “I asked if you can.” He tugs Shane into his chest at the top of the stairs, grips his hips and kisses him.

Shane shivers. “Yeah,” he breathes, when they break apart. “Yeah, I can.”

They do not do much besides lay on Ilya’s bed and talk, touching every now and again as if to make absolutely sure that the other is real. Shane falls asleep on his chest, eventually, and Ilya spends a while watching the rise and fall of Shane’s back, the occasional twitch of his hand, the flutter of his eyelashes. He does not know what will happen next, what things will look like from here on out, but so long as he does not lose this, he will do whatever he needs to do.

Chapter 26

The next day

It is stupidly early when Shane begins the trek back to Montréal. Ilya begged him not to leave, shirtless, sleep-soft, and pouting, all tangled up in his bedsheets; Shane almost relented, almost called out of practice, almost quit hockey altogether to crawl back into Ilya's bed and never leave. He is the captain, though, and they have a game tonight, and calling out of practice to have very quiet sex so as to not traumatize his boyfriend's mother downstairs is not—

Wait, boyfriend?

Ilya is not his boyfriend. At least, Shane doesn't think so. They didn't really talk about it. Which was stupid. They talked all fucking afternoon, mostly about pointless shit, the type of shit they never really talked about when they were trying to be casual. They're not casual anymore, that much Shane knows for sure. He loves Ilya, and Ilya loves him back. They're in love. But are they... together?

Probably, right? Yeah, probably. Most likely. But. But what if—

Shane grabs his phone to call Ilya, but he's driving, and it's six in the morning, and Ilya probably crawled right back into bed and went back to sleep after Shane left half an hour ago, and Shane shouldn't bother him with this right now anyway, and, and, and...

And what if he asks if they're together, and Ilya says no? What if he asks what they are, and Ilya says they're still nothing? They're in love, but that doesn't mean anything, they didn't agree to anything, they didn't decide anything, they didn't fucking *talk* about *anything*.

By the time Shane gets back into Montréal city limits, his spiral has come full circle. Ilya may not be his boyfriend, but there's no way he'd say no if Shane asked. Ilya may not be his boyfriend, but he definitely wants to be, and intends to be. Still, Shane feels the need to enlist some help, so he presses the bluetooth button on his steering wheel and asks his car to call Rose Landry, please.

It is not even eight in the morning, but Rose is in Europe somewhere filming a movie, and she answers almost immediately.

"Shane Hollander," she says cheerily. "What brings you to my call log this fine day?"

"You need to leave Europe, you're starting to talk like them," Shane mutters.

"I am in character, my dear," Rose sing-songs.

"I have to tell you something," Shane says. "And I need you to not judge me. And then I need advice about it."

"Yes, darling, go on," Rose says.

"I think I'm back together with Ilya."

There is a long pause down the line. Shane is about to check that the call hasn't dropped when he hears the crash of a door closing, and then Rose hisses, "Ilya *Rozanov*?!"

"Yes," Shane frowns. "How many Ilyas do you know?"

"You broke up with him *six years ago*," Rose says. Shane feels a little bad that he has already made her break character, but he is relieved to hear her real voice.

"Yeah," Shane says, noncommittal. "Um. About that..."

"Shane Hollander," Rose bites.

"We've been sleeping together on and off for, uh, about five years now."

"Shane Hollander!" Rose screeches. "Why the fuck am I just finding this out?!"

"It was casual," Shane says. "Except that it wasn't, really, we were both just scared of how we felt, and how the other felt, and so we both lied and said it was casual but it never really was... but then his dad died, and he found out yesterday, and he called me, and I just—I panicked, I drove all the way to Ottawa and begged him not to go back to Russia and then he kissed me and..."

"I am so confused," Rose says. "But I'm happy for you? I think?"

"Thank you," Shane says. "I think so, too."

"Just one question," Rose says. "Are you completely fucking insane?"

"We've been in love the whole time, Rose," Shane says. "It was just really complicated and— and some stuff happened to him that I can't really tell you because he probably wouldn't be too happy if he found out I did, but like— he never stopped loving me, and I never stopped loving him."

"Jesus Christ, Hollander," Rose says. "This is so sad."

"I know," Shane says. "So what do I do?"

"Why do you have to do anything? It sounds like a happy ending," Rose says.

"But we didn't talk about it," Shane says.

He can practically hear Rose rolling her eyes. "What do you mean? Talk about what?"

"I mean, we love each other, but we didn't, like, get back together or anything."

Rose huffs a laugh. “Didn’t you?”

“I don’t know, maybe we did,” Shane says. “But I don’t really know. We just said ‘I love you’ a bunch, but like— that doesn’t necessarily mean we’re back together, right?”

“Shane,” Rose deadpans.

“It’s so complicated, Rose,” Shane insists. “There’s so many things we have to figure out before we can be together!”

“Like what?” Rose asks patiently.

“Well, hockey, for one thing,” Shane says. “We’re rival players, in the most homophobic sport in Western civilization. And the distance, too— I mean, the distance is workable, probably; that wasn’t the problem when he was in Boston, it was more about the lying and the being an asshole to me and not telling me why...”

“Jesus Christ,” Rose mutters.

“It’s fine, we’ve moved past that,” Shane says, waving his hand in the air as if Rose can see him. “But the NHL is never gonna accept us. We can’t come out, we can’t tell people, we can’t be together publicly.”

“Okay, fair enough,” Rose says.

“And, like, what are we gonna do? It’s not like we can live together, we play for cities two hours apart— or, like, what? Get married? We’ll have to wait until we retire, and at that point, who knows what will happen—”

“Okay, slow down,” Rose says, as Shane works himself into another spiral. “You only got him back yesterday. Let’s take this one step at a time.”

“Fuck,” Shane groans. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Hey, breathe,” Rose says. “Just talk to him! It’s gonna be fine, you’ll work something out.”

“But, like, what?”

“That’s up to you two,” Rose says. “The world is changing, Shane, people are getting more accepting.”

“Yeah,” Shane scoffs, “but not the NHL. Not between two supposed rivals.”

“Fuck ‘em,” Rose says. “Who cares?”

“I fucking care, Rose!”

“You’re really raining on my allyship right now,” Rose says drearily.

“Oh, sorry, is my tragic life bumming you out?” Shane says.

“Yeah, actually,” Rose says. Shane can already feel his heart rate slowing, Rose’s easy-going nature giving no validation to his admittedly useless panicking. “Tell me something nice,” Rose says.

“Like what?” Shane mutters.

“Like,” Rose says suggestively, “how good was that makeup sex?”

Shane blinks. “We actually didn’t even have sex,” Shane says, like he’s just realizing it. “We just cuddled and talked and napped all day.”

“I should fucking hang up on you,” Rose says sharply. “What am I getting out of this?”

Shane laughs, shaking his head at his steering wheel. “You’re a good friend, Rose.”

“Thanks,” Rose hums. “You make it very difficult.”

“Hey,” Shane frowns.

“Love you, you stupid idiot.”

“Love you, Rose,” Shane says.

They hang up just in time for Shane to pull into his garage, and then Shane is left with his thoughts as he makes his way up to his apartment. He just has to talk to Ilya. Easy enough. He did that for most of the day yesterday, he’s been doing it most of his life, he knows how to talk to Ilya. But, then again, does he?

And, like, playoffs are starting soon. And unless something very drastic happens between then and now, it looks like both the Voyageurs and the Centaurs will be playing in the playoffs. That’s a lot of pressure, a lot of people are counting on both of them, they don’t need the pressure of a new– new?– relationship weighing on them right now. They have time, anyway, it’s not like any of this needs to be figured out and labeled in any specific period of time, right?

In a way, it’s a relief, when he gives himself permission to postpone this conversation with Ilya. Ilya loves him, and that’s all he needs to know right now, anyway.

May 2017 – Ottawa, Ontario

Ilya: Good luck tonight ❤️

Shane: Thank you ❤️

Shane: How are your ribs?

Ilya takes a deep breath, wincing at the sharp twinge in the right side of his ribcage. He frowns as he readjusts the heating pad Irina has carefully arranged over his torso, and then picks up his phone again once the pain has subsided.

Ilya: Sore, but I will be ok.

Ilya: Now go make Scott Hunter cry.

Shane: Not gonna do that.

Shane: Love you

Ilya: Love you ❤️

He presses down on his ribs over the heating pad just to feel the dull ache, smiling at the reminder of Shane's love. It was game six of the first round of playoffs; Shane had been in control of the puck, and Ilya had forced him into the boards, pinned him there for a moment too long, before skating away with his prize. He had been so pleased that he did not notice Boiziau coming for him, shoving him into the boards much harder than he had done to Shane. Ilya had thrown the first punch, reflexively, but Boiziau had finished it quickly, landing a solid punch to Ilya's side that left him falling to his knees on the ice, gasping for air. Shane was there immediately, abandoning his chance for the goal that would have tied up the game; he pulled Boiziau back, screamed in his face in a way that left Boiziau stunned, and Ilya grinning through the pain.

The Centaurs had won that game.

Ilya tried to play in game seven, had really given it his all, but he had downplayed his injury to the medical staff and it was catching up to him. The Voyageurs won game seven by a landslide, and had advanced to round two of the playoffs, sending the Centaurs home just happy to have been there at all.

Tonight is the final game of round two; the Voyageurs and the Admirals have been running each other ragged over the past two weeks, and it all comes down to this. Scott Hunter has, to Ilya's chagrin, been having a truly excellent season, but so has Shane Hollander, who has his heart set on a true dynasty for Montréal.

"Is he anxious?" Irina asks, settling down on the opposite end of the sofa with a bowl of popcorn. Ilya makes grabby hands for it, and Irina takes a handful, and then places the rest of the bowl in Ilya's lap.

"More than he admits, probably," Ilya says, and then shoves a handful of popcorn into his mouth.

"He will win," Irina says. *"I hope he wins."*

“Me too, or we are going to have a very morose vacation,” Ilya says. As soon as Shane’s season is over, whether it be tonight, or a month from now, Ilya will go straight to his cottage for the first time. They have planned to spend two weeks together, just the two of them, to rest, relax, and relearn how to be around each other. Ilya is well aware that Shane is nervous about the trip, about letting Ilya into his space, into his soul again, into his heart, but Ilya has no reservations. He will make damn sure that Shane never feels unloved or unappreciated again in his life, and that starts with two weeks— or, hopefully longer— of uninterrupted, undivided quality time.

Shane will tell his parents that he is doing some kind of silent meditation thing for two weeks, which Ilya finds ridiculous, but Shane thinks is a very believable excuse to keep them away from his cottage. Irina has also very graciously agreed to not say anything to Shane’s parents about the excursion; if Shane had it his way, she would not know at all, but she was in the room when Shane came pounding on the door like a crazy person, and she is quite possibly happier than both of them combined about this newest development in their relationship.

They still have not defined what exactly they are to each other, as Shane pointed out very awkwardly on the phone the other night while he was in a hotel room in New York, lamenting the Admirals’ win earlier that evening. It is part of why they are going to the cottage; Shane wants time to hammer out the details of exactly what they are doing, probably to avoid another Tampa Bay situation, and until they have it figured out, he waits it to be a secret. According to Shane, his parents are still not among Ilya’s biggest fans, and he does not want to share this with them until he has all the facts ready to present Ilya’s case.

Ilya loves him so fucking much. Ilya would love him even if Shane’s parents never looked at Ilya again. Ilya would love him even if Shane never looked at Ilya again.

“Oh, he is so cute,” Irina says, as Shane skates out onto the ice on the TV. *“Do you know how lucky you are, Ilyusha?”*

“I do,” Ilya hums, grinning at Shane’s nervous tapping of his stick against the ice as he bends to take the first face-off of the game against Scott Hunter. *“He is so good, I do not know how I—“*

He freezes, sits up so quickly his rib twinges. Irina is on the edge of her seat, too, staring in shock at the TV. On the screen, Shane fucking Hollander has just thrown a punch at Scott fucking Hunter, and now the two nicest guys in the league are being held back by refs, screaming at each other as they are dragged away.

“What the fuck?” Ilya mutters, as Shane is sent to the penalty box. The game has not even started. Ilya is bewildered.

“What just happened?” Irina asks, just as confused. *“Hunter must have said something. Look! There! He said something, and then Shane— oh, no.”*

The slow motion replay restarts, and Ilya watches Hunter’s mouth closely; he is smirking around his mouth guard, but whatever he says is impossible to make out, and then a moment later, Shane’s gloved hand makes forceful contact with the side of Hunter’s helmet. Hunter

rears back, uninjured but shocked, and then launches himself forward, pushing Shane hard with both hands against his chest. The refs intervene before Shane can regain his footing to go after Hunter again, but they cannot stop his shouting, his face red with anger as he snarls at Hunter over the ref's shoulder.

God, he is unthinkable hot. Ilya has to shift the bowl of popcorn in his lap as the slow motion replay starts again from a different angle, this time capturing the way Shane's eyes flash and darken, his mouth tightens, and he drops his stick to start swinging with no hesitation. Ilya is not sure he has ever been more attracted to Shane.

Irina whistles lowly. *"Wow, I did not know he had it in him,"* she says, equally impressed. *"I wonder what Hunter said."*

Ilya cannot even imagine. He never took Scott Hunter for a racist, or a homophobe, but those are the only things that Ilya can imagine would make Shane react like that. Except—Ilya's mind flashes back to the Ottawa Community Rink, circa 2003. Could Hunter have said something about Ilya? Could Shane have been defending him?

Shane is out of it for the rest of the game. He plays well, but not as well as he usually does, and not as well as he needs to. The Admirals clinch the win by one point, but Ilya remains glued to the TV while Irina tuts in disappointment and gets up to clean the kitchen from the dinner she made between the second and third periods.

The media coverage is mainly of the Admirals, who have just advanced to the third round of the playoffs. Scott Hunter is a smug bastard, wishing Shane well and brushing off the reporter who asks what happened before that first face-off. Shane, for his part, manages to evade the media entirely, sending Hayden Pike, of all fucking people, to smile sadly for the cameras and answer their boring questions.

Ilya goes to bed as soon as the game coverage ends, sitting back against the headboard and scrolling aimlessly through Twitter while he waits for Shane to call, as has become their routine over the last seven game nights. The internet cannot stop speculating about what made Shane Hollander lose his cool like that, but no one is more curious than Ilya, who has to press the heel of his hand against himself a few times at some of the clips online.

His phone flickers and then switches to an incoming FaceTime call. Ilya answers before it can even ring, finding Shane blinking in surprise at his speedy response.

"What the fuck did Scott Hunter do to you?" Ilya asks, in lieu of a greeting.

Shane groans. "I don't wanna talk about it," he mutters. He is in his hotel room, shirtless in the bathroom, getting ready for bed.

"Are you okay?" Ilya asks. *Please say yes, he thinks, so that I do not feel like a monster for being so turned on.*

"I'm fine," Shane grumbles. He is not. *Fuck.*

"Sorry about the playoffs," Ilya says, frowning when Shane's lips turn down deeper.

“I don’t even care about the playoffs,” Shane says. “I just wanna— I just want you. I want to be at the cottage with you. Alone. For two weeks.”

“We will, *moy lyubimyy*,” Ilya says. Shane’s expression softens at the term of endearment.

“God, I can’t believe I did that,” Shane groans again, scrubbing his hands over his face. “I’m so embarrassed.”

“Why?” Ilya says. “Hockey players hit people all the time. I hit that dickhead from Toronto twice this season alone.”

“Yeah, but—“ Shane huffs. “It wasn’t— It just caught me so off guard, and it was so fucking rude, and he probably didn’t even think anything of it but it just pissed me the *fuck* off and I —“

“Shane,” Ilya says gently. “What did he say to you?”

“He—” Shane grunts in frustration again, snatches his phone off the bathroom counter and throws himself into his hotel bed. “He just gave me this smug little smile, like he knew something I didn’t know, and he said—”

“What, Shane?” Ilya breathes.

“He said, ‘Are you gonna take it easy on me tonight, like you do with Rozanov?’ And it didn’t even make *sense*— if anything, I have to work harder playing against you than anyone else in the whole league, but he said it like he was just *trying* to piss me off and it *worked* and I just—”

“Fucking Scott Hunter,” Ilya mutters.

“Are you upset?” Shane asks. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t gonna tell you what he said because I didn’t want you to—”

“The only thing I am upset about is that you have punched Scott Hunter and I have not,” Ilya says. “It means nothing, Shane.”

“It was just so insulting!” Shane insists. “I don’t go easy on you! You’re fucking *incredible* at hockey, you’re singlehandedly bringing the Centaurs back into relevancy, you would have fucking beat us in round one if JJ hadn’t injured you. I don’t even know why he said it, it was more of a dig at *you* than at me, and why would he do that? Unless— do you think he knows? Do you think people know that—”

“Shane,” Ilya says. “You are spiraling.”

“Yeah, I fucking am,” Shane spits. “Ilya, what if—”

“Shane, no one knows anything,” Ilya says. “Scott Hunter is a fucking idiot. It was a stupid comment that made no sense, and his stupid elderly brain has probably already forgotten what he even said. Stop worrying about it.”

“Scott Hunter isn’t that old,” Shane says, but he sounds less panicked, which is what Ilya was hoping for.

“Remember the first kid you ever laid out for me? Back in middle school?” Ilya grins.

Shane groans, rolling onto his back. “Yeah, fuck that kid.”

“What was his name?” Ilya hums. “Timmy?”

“Tommy Peterson,” Shane grumbles.

“I like that you still defend me,” Ilya says, grinning wider when Shane’s eyes soften. “But you do not have to, Shane.”

“I know,” Shane sighs. “But I can’t help it. I didn’t even think, I just hit him.”

“Can I tell you something?” Ilya says lowly.

“What?”

“It was the sexiest thing I have ever seen you do,” Ilya says. “And I have seen you do a lot of very, very sexy things.”

“Really?” Shane says, cracking a smile for the first time.

“Really,” Ilya says. “I almost had to leave the room, Shane.”

Shane laughs, blushing at his phone. “You were watching?”

“Of course, I was watching it live, with Mama,” Ilya says. “We watch all of your games.”

“That’s really sweet,” Shane says. “And kinda weird that you got turned on with your mother in the room.”

“She is not in the room now,” Ilya says suggestively.

“And what would you like to— oh, fuck. My mom is calling.”

“Talk to her,” Ilya hums. “Sveta just sent me an hour long loop of the slow-mo replay on YouTube, I am going to jerk off to it.”

“You’re sick,” Shane mutters.

“And twisted,” Ilya winks. “Goodnight, Shane, I love you.”

“I love you, Ilya,” Shane says, with a hint of a twinkle in his eye.

Two days later – Lanaudière, Québec

Ilya is here. At Shane's cottage. Ilya is here at Shane's cottage and he looks like the fucking sun, golden and bright and glowing, and he can't stop looking around, taking it all in, and Shane can't stop looking at him.

Ilya had driven to Montréal this morning, left his car at Shane's apartment, and then they drove up here together, talking and laughing and singing along to the radio like old times, like they were kids again. They're not kids, though; Ilya is here, in the house that Shane owns, and Shane has loved him forever, will love him forever. Ilya keeps touching things, smoothing his hand over the kitchen island, running his fingers along the wood paneling on the walls, tapping his fingernails against the glass of the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the lake. His eyes are wet when he finally looks back at Shane, standing dumbly in the foyer, but he is smiling like he has never been happier, cocking his head at Shane.

"You built this?" he says.

"Not myself," Shane says. "I hired someone."

Ilya rolls his eyes, but his smile does not falter. "It is perfect, Shane."

"Do you want the full tour?" Shane asks. He doesn't know why he's so nervous— it's Ilya, he knows Ilya inside and out, and Ilya knows him just as well, but this— it feels different, somehow. Heavier. It feels like there's a lot riding on this vacation.

"Later," Ilya says, beckoning him closer.

Shane obeys without consideration, walks close enough that Ilya can grab his hips and pull him the rest of the way in. "Should we talk?" Shane asks, but Ilya is already kissing at his jaw.

"Later," Ilya says again, muffled against his skin this time.

"Can we— wait," Shane murmurs, shrugging Ilya out of his neck. "Can we make a promise?"

Ilya's eyes sparkle with amusement. He holds one pinkie up. Shane grins, links his own pinkie in Ilya's, and says, "I promise, for the next two weeks, to be completely honest about what I'm thinking, what I'm feeling, and what I want."

Ilya watches him for a long moment, eyes searching Shane's face. His smile fades into something more serious, and when he speaks, his eyes fall to Shane's lips. "I promise."

"Mm-mm," Shane shakes his head, hooking his index finger under Ilya's chin to lift his gaze. "Say it. And look at me while you say it."

"Is this turning you on?" Ilya teases.

“Ilya,” Shane warns.

“I promise,” Ilya says, eyes locked on Shane’s. “I promise to tell the truth. I promise to hide nothing. I promise, Shane. Forever.”

Shane grins and releases Ilya’s pinkie. “Okay,” he says, tipping his head back to offer his neck to Ilya. “As you were.”

Ilya grins, grabbing Shane’s hips again and turning them both around until Shane is pressed against the window. Shane is on his knees before he has even decided to be, Ilya looming over him with his hands planted against the window, smudging the pristine glass, but Shane doesn’t have it in himself to care, not right now.

Vacation is off to a wonderful start.

They spend the rest of the day by the water, laughing like children and making out on the beach in between rounds of stupid games that Ilya makes up on the spot. It feels so good, so natural, so easy to just slot back into each other, to just exist around each other, without the pressures of hockey and their parents and the world weighing on them. They’ve never been alone together like this as adults, relaxed and carefree and without a looming time limit. In some ways, it feels like nothing ever changed between them, like nothing ever drove them apart. In other ways, it all feels brand new, like Shane is getting to know Ilya for the first time again.

Later, when their hands are pruned and the afternoon sun isn’t warming their skin quite as effectively, they head back up to the house. Shane starts dinner while Ilya goes to take a shower, and while Shane stands over the grill, he wonders if they really need to talk at all.

This is perfect, just the way it is. Maybe they don’t need labels; they can just have this, whatever this is, and it will be enough to know that this is always waiting for them when they’re apart, when they’re in different cities, when they’re supposed to hate each other. Maybe they don’t need to define anything at all, maybe Shane needs to let go of his need for perfect order and just let a good thing be.

Ilya comes out to the deck dressed in Shane’s clothes, despite the fact that he did bring a suitcase full of his own. He wraps himself around Shane’s back, hooks his chin over his shoulder, and mouths at Shane’s neck until Shane shrugs him away.

“I’m trying to cook, Ilya,” Shane says, awkwardly flipping a burger with the arm Ilya has partly pinned to his side.

“Can I not watch my boyfriend cook my dinner?” Ilya pouts, pressing his face into the back of Shane’s neck instead.

Shane has a quip ready to go, he really does, but it dies in his mouth. “Boyfriend?”

Ilya does not answer for a moment. “Yes,” he says eventually, kissing sweetly at the back of Shane’s neck. “I think so. Probably.”

Shane flips the rest of the burgers. “I think we should talk.”

Ilya loosens his grip immediately. “You do not want to be my boyfriend?” he says, voice low.

“No! No, that’s not what—” Shane turns around, coming face to face with Ilya’s downturned lips, his sad eyes. “I do want that. So much.”

“Okay,” Ilya says, shrugging one shoulder. “Me too. So what is there to talk about?”

“Is it— I don’t know, does it make sense? For us?” Shane says.

Ilya looks sick. “Does it not?”

“I don’t know,” Shane says. “It’s just— we play in different cities, and it’s not like we can be together publicly, y’know? And the whole world thinks we hate each other, our careers are kinda built on that, what if—“

“It will not come between us,” Ilya says. “I will not let it. I will not make that mistake again.”

“I just don’t know how we can be together,” Shane says. “It just seems so complicated, so risky.”

Ilya sighs. “So what is other option, then? We break up for good? We both quit hockey and move to the woods?”

“No!” Shane says quickly. “I don’t— I don’t know. That’s why we need to talk about it, so we can figure it out.”

“We are talking about it,” Ilya says gently. “I will not lose you again, Shane. I will do whatever I have to do, I will wait however long I have to wait. I will go anywhere, I will make any change, I will do *anything*.”

“So, we keep it a secret?” Shane says. “We just meet up when we’re in the same city, spend our summers together, and wait til we retire?”

“Will not be so different from before,” Ilya shrugs. “Except that you maybe could spend the night when I ask instead of running away screaming.”

“I did not run away screaming,” Shane says. “I didn’t know what it meant. You were giving me mixed signals, I got scared.”

“Ah, yes, because you are Mr. Perfect Communication,” Ilya mutters.

“You really think we can do it?” Shane asks.

“I really do,” Ilya says, pulling Shane in by his hips to plant a chaste kiss to his lips. “I also think your burgers are on fire.”

“Fuck,” Shane hisses, whirling around to slam the lid of the grill down and cutting the heat. “Goddamnit, Ilya, you distracted me.”

“You are the one who insists we talk,” Ilya says, but he’s laughing, grinning when Shane turns to glare at him.

“Fuck you, that was supposed to be dinner,” Shane grumbles.

“What will we do now? Hunt?” Ilya says.

“Fuck off, Ilya,” Shane sighs.

“I could catch a loon. Maybe pizza would be easier,” Ilya says. “Faster, too.”

“I can’t eat pizza,” Shane says, turning back to the grill to inspect the damage.

“What is wrong with pizza?” Ilya asks.

“I’m on a performance diet, Ilya. No dairy, no bread, no sugar, no—“

“You are so boring,” Ilya says. “Season is over, Shane, eat a pizza.”

“No.”

“Okay, so, what? You have pucks in the rink we can eat? Or are the burgers any better?”

“I have more food in the house, Ilya,” Shane says. “We can make salmon bowls, or—”

“I am ordering pizza,” Ilya says, pulling his phone out of his pocket. “I will get you gross veggie one. You will like.”

Shane doesn’t argue, opens the door when the pizza is delivered, and pays for it. Ilya crushes most of a meat-lover’s pizza in less than ten minutes, and though everything in Shane’s mind and soul is screaming, he manages to get down two full slices of the gluten free, vegan, sauce-free veggie pizza that Ilya ordered for him. Ilya looks so pleased with him, it almost makes breaking his diet worth it.

Ilya drags him out to the firepit after dinner, curls up with him on the patio sofa, and as the sun sets over Québec, Shane strokes his hand down Ilya’s spine.

“We’re good, right?” Shane asks, his voice hardly louder than the crackling of the fire.

Ilya twists to look up at him from where his head is pillowed in Shane’s lap. “Good?”

“Us,” Shane says. “You and me. We’re gonna be okay? Secret, long-distance, professional rival boyfriends?”

Ilya grins, twisting back around to press a kiss to Shane’s kneecap. “We are good,” he says decisively. “I love you, Shane.”

“I love you so much,” Shane says, tracing his fingers over the curve of Ilya’s jaw.

It's not ideal, obviously, and it's going to be hard, but Shane can't lose this, would rather have this once a year than not at all, if that's what it comes down to. It won't come to that, he knows that much for sure, but any amount of Ilya is better than none of him, and Shane will take whatever he can get.

"Bed?" Ilya asks, kissing at Shane's fingertips as they pass over his lips.

"Yeah," Shane says. "Bed."

Shane wakes up first the next morning, their first morning here, together, golden sunlight streaming through the windows that Ilya insisted they leave uncovered when they went to bed last night. Ilya is dead to the world, mouth hanging open, arms stretched out wide, so Shane peels himself off of his chest and slips carefully out of bed. After he has brushed his teeth and gotten dressed, Ilya is still exactly as Shane left him, so Shane creeps out of the room and out to the kitchen.

He's craving eggs. And toast. And— hm, maybe bacon. He bought bacon, because he knows Ilya likes it; Shane likes it, too, but he doesn't eat it, because he isn't supposed to, but maybe— maybe was Ilya right. It's the off season, anyway. Shane can want bacon. He's allowed.

Maybe this crazy performance diet that he's been following to the letter for the past few years is a bit much. He doesn't feel terrible all the time, not like he did when he first started, but the pizza last night didn't make him feel terrible, either, and these eggs probably won't, either, nor will this bacon. Maybe it's more about the control, than anything. Maybe it's more about proving to himself that he can restrain himself when he wants to, when he needs to, he can say no, he can be self-disciplined.

Maybe it's time to ease up on the reins. Just a little.

He's doing a rather excellent job managing a large skillet of scrambled eggs, a smaller skillet with bacon sizzling away, and the toaster with some fresh sourdough bread, when he hears the chime of the security system alerting him of a car coming into the driveway. He barely has time to panic when he hears the pleasant chirping of the keypad on the front door, and the sweet little jingle of the lock opening.

There are two mugs set out for coffee on the kitchen island. There are two beach towels hung over the railing of the deck just outside the sliding glass door behind him. Ilya's dirty Adidas sneakers are just inside the front door. There's a battered old Boston Raiders hoodie which Ilya wore last night slung over the back of the sofa. Shane does not have time to fix any of this when the door cracks open; the best he can do is rush to position himself strategically to block most of it with his own body, and pray to whoever that it's his dad coming through the door.

It's his mother. Fuck it all.

"Oh!" Yuna says, grinning at the sight of him. "Good morning! You're usually on your morning run at this time."

Fuck. Shane's fucked. Yuna Hollander is the most observant human being who has ever lived. Shane is absolutely fucked.

"Uh, yeah," Shane says, shrugging one shoulder in what he hopes is a casual gesture. "I slept in."

"Whose shoes are those?" she asks, frowning at Ilya's sneakers. "You don't wear Adidas."

Fuck.

"What are you doing here, Mom?" Shane asks. "It's six in the morning."

"I thought you'd be out," Yuna says simply.

"Okay," Shane frowns. "Same question."

"I just wanted to bring over some groceries," Yuna says, ducking back out to the front step to retrieve a tote bag.

"Thanks, but I have groceries," Shane says.

"Oh, you're cooking!" Yuna gasps, as she carries the tote bag into the kitchen. She leaves it on the island and peers into the skillet on the stove, frowning. "Wow, that's— that's a lot of food."

Shane is so abysmally fucked. "Well, you're always on me for not eating enough." It comes out too defensive. Yuna looks shocked when she turned to look at him.

"Well, I'm—" her eyes fall somewhere behind Shane's back. "Is someone here?"

Fuck!

"No," Shane says quickly. "Why?"

"Why do you have two mugs out?" Yuna asks, nodding to the coffee mugs Shane has done a terrible job hiding.

"Oh," Shane says, turning to stare at them for a moment. "I— forgot. I already took one out. Oops," he laughs nervously, grabbing one of the mugs and shoving it back into the cabinet.

"And the shoes?" Yuna asks, walking back over to inspect the Adidas by the door.

"Some of the guys from the team came up to visit a while ago," Shane says. It's not a terrible lie for coming straight out of his ass. "Someone left those, no one claimed them."

Yuna hums, seemingly appeased.

“Well, thanks for the groceries,” Shane says, taking items out of the tote bag on the counter without even looking at them. “Tell Dad hi from me.”

“Will do,” Yuna says distractedly. “Oh, honey, do you want to come to ours for dinner tonight?” she asks. “Dad found a new recipe he thought you might like, it’s—”

“Uh, no thanks,” Shane says quickly. “I— uh, I’m doing that meditation thing, remember?”

“Oh, shoot,” Yuna says, slapping her hand over her mouth. “Oh, sorry, honey. I totally forgot. Okay, I’ll get out of your hair,” she whispers, as if to show her respect for Shane’s vow of silence which he has already totally broken, if he was really doing it. “I think it’s working,” she says, looking him over before she lets herself out the door. “You look good, Shane. Happy. Well rested.”

Shane offers her a tight smile. “Thanks, Mom,” he says lowly. “Okay. Bye.”

Yuna blows him a kiss. She steps toward the door. She reaches for the door handle.

The shower in the ensuite turns on.

So close. So *fucking close*.

“What’s that?” Yuna asks, her ears perking up like a fucking cat.

“What?” Shane asks; he can play dumb, but he can’t hide the way his ears are reddening.

“Oh my god, Shane,” she whispers, grinning. “You *do* have someone here!”

Shane scrubs his hands over his face, shaking his head. “No, uh, the shower— is broken— uh—”

“Shane Hollander,” Yuna hisses, rushing over to push at his shoulder. “Tell me everything! Who is he? Are you in love? How did you meet him? When are you going to—”

“It’s Ilya,” Shane says, too loudly.

Yuna’s face falls. “What?”

“It’s Ilya,” Shane says again, his voice much weaker. “Ilya’s here.”

Yuna blinks. “Rozanov?”

“Yes,” Shane sighs. Why does everyone keep asking him that?

“Shane,” Yuna says, blinking at him again.

“You know, I’m a grown adult,” Shane says, crossing his arms over his chest. “I can have anyone I want in my house, it’s *my* house.”

“Yes, of course, honey, but,” Yuna scoffs, shaking her head. “*Ilya?*”

“It’s not that big of a deal,” Shane lies, shrugging one shoulder. “We’ve been talking again. We’re friends.”

Yuna doesn’t buy it for one moment, Shane knows that much. “Well, I’d like to see him, then,” she says, crossing her arms over her own chest, too. It feels like a standoff. It might be.

“Mom,” Shane says, exasperated. The shower turns off. Fuck Ilya and his five minute showers.

“If you want to be friends with him, then that’s fine,” Yuna says, “but after everything he did to you, Shane—”

“Will you stop?” Shane sighs.

“I just don’t know if I can forgive—”

The bedroom door opens down the hallway. Yuna falls silent, and Shane waits for the bomb to hit.

The bomb hits in the form of Ilya Rozanov, wearing only a pair of Shane’s mid-thigh running shorts, his bare chest and neck littered in hickies, slinking into the kitchen, grinning and still glistening a little from the shower. His smile drops as soon as he rounds the corner, face going ashen at the sight of Yuna.

Shane stares at his own feet.

“Well,” Yuna says, indignant, her voice breaking a little bit. “I will see you both for dinner tonight. Six o’clock. Do not even *consider* being late.” With that, she turns on her heel, and slams the door on her way out.

“Fuck,” Shane breathes.

“Fuck,” Ilya echos. “Shane, I am so sorry, I did not know she was here, I—”

“No, no,” Shane says miserably. “She had us the second she walked through the door. *Fuck.*”

Ilya shuffles across the floor, lifts Shane's chin with one finger, and kisses his lips gently. “Is okay,” he says quietly. “We are okay. We will go to dinner, I will be charming and kind and funny, and they will love me again before dessert.”

“Fuck, Ilya,” Shane says, dropping his head against Ilya’s chest. “They’re gonna be so mad at me. I fucking lied to them, and then she just walks in here, and sniffs you out like a fucking bloodhound—”

“Shane,” Ilya cuts him off, frowning when Shane looks up. “Is something burning?”

“*Fuck!*”

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

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

The same day

“Ilyusha? Is everything okay? How is the cottage?”

“It is beautiful, Mama,” Ilya says, staring out at the lake from where he is perched on the edge of the deck. He would kill for a cigarette, but he did not bring any. “It is perfect. I want to live here.”

“How is it going?” Irina asks gently.

“Very well,” Ilya says. “We talked. We both want the same thing. It is not perfect but we will make it work. We will do what we have to do.”

“You sound sad, Ilyusha,” Irina says.

“Yes,” Ilya says. “Well.”

“Where is Shane?”

“In the shower,” Ilya says. “Panicking, probably. We were caught.”

“Caught?”

“Yuna,” Ilya says. “She came by unannounced this morning. We are going to their cottage for dinner tonight. It is not a choice.”

“Oh, Ilyusha,” Irina sighs. “I knew you should not have lied.”

“We did not lie,” Ilya says. “We just wanted privacy. But you do not have to keep our secret anymore. We will tell them tonight.”

“Tell them what, exactly?”

“That we are together,” Ilya says simply. “That we are in love, we always have been, and we always will be. That we both made mistakes we wish we could take back. That no matter what the future holds, it ends with him and I together.”

“They love you, Ilyusha,” Irina says softly. “They will remember.”

“I do not need them to love me,” Ilya says. “I only need them to understand that I love Shane. I love him, Mama. I love him enough to fight for it. For him.”

“You are a good man, Ilyusha,” Irina says. “I am so proud of you.”

There is a soft creak behind Ilya, and he turns to find Shane watching him from the open door, his gaze soft. Ilya is not sure if Shane continued his Russian studies after they broke up the first time, or how much Russian Shane understands at this point in time, but the look on Shane’s face tells Ilya he knows exactly what he just said, understood every word.

“Moy lyubimyy?” Ilya asks, cheeks flushing.

“Ready when you are,” Shane says softly.

“I have to go, Mama,” Ilya says into the phone, picking himself up off the edge of the deck. *“It is time to dive into the shark tank.”*

“I love you, solnyshko,” Irina says. *“Tell Shane I love him, too. Tell Yuna and David, as well. I am so happy to be family again.”*

Ilya smiles, murmuring his goodbye and sliding his phone into his pocket. Shane walks straight into his chest, hugging him low around the waist, and Ilya holds him for a long moment there on the deck.

“What was that about sharks?” Shane asks into his t-shirt.

“I miss when you did not speak any Russian and could not eavesdrop on my conversations,” Ilya sighs wistfully.

“Tough shit,” Shane mumbles. “Sucks to be loved.”

“Yes,” Ilya grins, pressing his face into Shane’s hair. “Yes, it does.”

“Let’s go get this over with,” Shane says, when he finally pulls away, leading Ilya back through the house and out the front door. Ilya keeps hold of his hand over the center console for the whole drive to his parents’ cottage, his heart clenching when Shane turns the car into the familiar driveway.

The cottage has not changed at all. Ilya has not been here in years, not since that very worst summer of his life, when his entire world was crashing down around him. Part of him thought he would never see this place again; he cannot help but smile as Shane parks the car and turns it off, and Shane scoffs at him.

“You’re happy to be here?” Shane asks, bewildered. “I’m about to shit my fucking pants, and you’re smiling?”

“I love this house,” Ilya says softly, grinning through the window.

Shane softens. “I love you, Ilya,” he says. “No matter what happens, even if they—“

“It will be fine,” Ilya says, squeezing his hand. “I love you no matter what, too.”

Shane lingers a moment longer in the car, but Ilya unclips his seatbelt and climbs out first. Shane scrambles out after him, chases him to the front door, and bursts in ahead of him, quickly gaining the attention of his parents in the living room.

“Hi,” Shane says, standing awkwardly in the foyer.

“Hi,” Ilya echos, standing just over Shane’s shoulder.

“Right on time,” Yuna says tightly. “Let’s eat.”

“Can we, uh, sit down first?” Shane asks, but he follows his mother to the kitchen. Ilya does not hear her response, does not follow them, choosing instead to nod politely to David. David offers him a conflicted smile, and then rounds the sofa, clapping a hand gently on Ilya’s shoulder. Ilya does not flinch.

“I’m glad you’re back, kiddo,” David whispers, and then disappears into the kitchen after his wife and son.

Ilya releases a little of the tension in his shoulders, and follows, too. Yuna is already seated at the table, her mouth drawn into a tight line while he helps herself to the dish of salad in the center of the table. David has just settled in, too, but Shane is hovering awkwardly near his own seat, eyes locked on his mother. Ilya approaches slowly, touches Shane’s back gently, and pulls his chair out for Shane to sit down. Shane does not take his eyes off of his mother as he sits down, but Yuna’s eyes track Ilya’s every move, watching the way his hand glides along Shane’s shoulders as he rounds the back of his chair to take the seat beside him.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner,” Shane says, while Yuna shoves the bowl of salad in his direction. Shane does not reach for it. Ilya reaches for it, instead, earning himself a glare from Yuna, which softens as Ilya scoops a portion onto Shane’s plate, first, and then his own.

“Tell me what, exactly?” Yuna asks, handing the bowl of pasta more pointedly to Shane this time. Shane takes it, but does not do more than hold it in front of himself.

“We’re— back together,” Shane says quietly. His hands are shaking; Ilya takes the bowl of pasta from him gently, serves him first once again, and then smooths his hand down the length of Shane’s arm once he has passed the pasta bowl off to David. “It’s— uh— it’s very new,” Shane says, allowing Ilya to pull his hand under the lip of the table and squeeze it like he does not even notice Ilya is doing it. “We just wanted— some privacy, I guess, to figure it out, to talk about it—“

“Does your mother know you’re here?” Yuna asks; if her eyes were lasers, Ilya would be in pieces on the floor. It is amazing how many traits she passed on to Shane.

“Yes,” Ilya says quietly.

“And does she know that you’re— *together?*” she asks, like the word offends her.

“Yes,” Ilya says, glancing at Shane. “She knows that we are in love.”

Yuna scoffs; David turns to give her a withering look. “Is that what you are?” Yuna asks under her breath.

“Mom,” Shane says desperately, at the same time as Ilya says, “Yes.”

It is painfully silent for a long stretch of time. Yuna eats like she is mad at the food, David eats like he is scared that he will be scolded otherwise, and Ilya eats with one eye on Shane, who does not even touch his fork.

Ilya squeezes his hand again, nudges his foot under the table with his own, but Shane does not react. He is breathing hard through his nostrils, jaw clenched, fingers trembling in Ilya’s.

“Shane,” Ilya says quietly, letting go of Shane’s hand in favor of stroking his hand over the back of Shane’s neck. Shane relaxes minutely under his touch, but not enough. “You are okay,” Ilya says, ducking down to put himself in Shane’s field of vision. Shane’s eyes snap to him automatically. “You are safe,” Ilya tells him. “I am here, your parents are here, everything is okay. You are good here.”

Shane nods, and then melts back into his chair.

“Eat,” Ilya says, picking up Shane’s fork to hand it to him. Shane takes it, but does not do much beyond that. Ilya nudges him again, and Shane stabs his fork into the pasta on his plate, takes a frustrated bite.

“Excuse me,” Yuna breathes, pushing back from the table quickly and ducking around the corner, out the door, and onto the deck.

Shane drops his fork and makes to go after her, but Ilya stops him with a hand on his shoulder, nods to Shane’s plate, and then stands up himself. “I will go,” he says softly, sharing a knowing look with David before he rounds the table to walk out to the deck.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” Yuna says, her voice thick with unshed tears, her back to the door. “I just— I can’t even look at him.”

“I understand,” Ilya says softly.

Yuna jumps a mile, turning around quickly. “Ilya,” she says, surprised.

Ilya pushes the door closed behind himself, walking over to come face to face with Yuna. She stares him down, a whole head shorter than he is, but every bit as strong.

“I know that you hate me,” Ilya says. Yuna’s eyes fill with tears immediately. “But I—“

“Oh, honey,” Yuna says, her voice tight. “I could never hate you.”

Ilya frowns. “But—“

“I love you, Ilya,” Yuna says. “I always will. But Shane is— he is my whole world. He is everything I have. He is the most amazing thing that has ever happened to me. I have dedicated my life to giving him every opportunity, every chance, everything he wants,

because he deserves it. He deserves the world. I have spent my life protecting him, trying to save him from getting hurt, but I never expected that you—“ her voice breaks, and she takes a moment to collect herself. “I never expected that *you* would be the one who would hurt him the most.”

Ilya feels it like a gunshot, but he does his best not to crumble, breathing in deep and nodding once. “I did not expect to, either,” he says quietly.

“I want to hate you,” Yuna admits. “I tried really hard. But I can’t. You will always be a part of this family, Ilya, but I— I don’t know if I can ever forgive you. I will try to move past it, I really will, but I don’t know if I will ever forgive you for how you hurt him. You *ruined* him, Ilya.”

“I know,” Ilya says. He blinks at the sky for a moment, in an attempt to dry his eyes, but the tears fall anyway as soon as he looks back down at Yuna. “I was ruined, too. I was— I will not make excuses, but just know that I will never forgive myself, either. I was so foolish, so afraid, I took the best thing in my life and ruined it so that no one could take it from me. I hurt him. I hurt myself. I hurt you, and my mother, and David— and I will never forgive myself for that. I do not deserve your forgiveness, and I know that I do not deserve his, I do not deserve him at all, but if I can make him happy, Yuna— it is the only thing I will ever strive for. I will sooner take my own life than hurt him again, I promise you that.”

Yuna sobs quietly, turning away from him. Ilya’s heart sinks— he has failed. He has failed so many times, and now he has failed again, and he does not know how to fix this, how to make her—

Yuna turns back to him, wrapping him in her arms. Ilya holds her immediately, pressing his face into her petite shoulder, and waits.

“I know that you love him,” Yuna says, when she finally pulls away. “I see it in the way you treat him, the way you speak to him. You’re good with him. You’re better with him than I ever was.”

“He loves you so much,” Ilya says softly. *Please do not make him choose between you and me.*

“Not like he loves you,” Yuna says. “He’s never loved anything like he loves you. Thank you for coming back to him, Ilya. He needs you.”

Ilya opens his mouth to speak, but all that comes out is a sob. He curls in on himself a bit, turns his face away, and Yuna steps forward to squeeze his arms.

“I know you have been through a lot,” she says quietly, not bothering to wipe away the tears dripping down her cheeks. “I know you have been hurt more than I can even imagine. I need you to know— none of that was your fault. Nothing you did caused any of that pain. But you are not a child anymore. You are responsible for the way you carry yourself, for the way you respond to hard situations.”

“I am trying,” Ilya says. “I promise, I am trying.”

“I know you are,” Yuna says. “So am I.”

It is quiet in the kitchen when Ilya makes his way back inside. Shane’s eyes are locked on him from the second he comes around the corner, and Ilya offers him a gentle smile, squeezing his thigh when he sits down.

“Okay,” Yuna says, as she re-enters the kitchen. “So, what’s the plan?”

Shane looks shell shocked. His plate has not been touched since Yuna and Ilya went outside. His gaze flickers between Ilya and his mother quickly. “The— what?”

“If you two are going to be together again, we need a plan,” Yuna says. “The world thinks you two hate each other, and that was fine when you actually did, but, what, are you just going to keep pretending forever?”

Ilya has not taken his eyes off of Shane since he sat down, but Shane turns to meet his gaze now, shaking his head slightly.

“Probably, yes,” Ilya says.

“I mean, yeah,” Shane says.

Yuna frowns. “No,” she says. “That’s sad.”

“Yeah, well,” Shane mutters.

“I think it could actually be really good for your careers, if we do this right,” Yuna says. “We’ll have to be careful about sponsorships, brand deals, products and companies you’ll represent, but if we can find the right—“

Shane is melting. Ilya squeezes his leg again, but it is not enough; Shane pushes his plate away, puts his head down on the table, and covers it with his arms. “Stop,” he croaks.

“Hey,” Ilya says, moving his chair closer so he can wrap his arm around Shane’s waist, squeezing as best he can. Shane shrinks away from him, and Ilya draws back, but keeps a firm, solid hand on Shane’s middle back. “Shane?”

“I’m okay,” Shane says miserably. “I just— I can’t—“

“We have time,” Ilya says. “We do not have to figure anything out right now. It has only been one day. We have the whole summer before we have to go back to hockey. Breathe.”

“One day?” Yuna says quietly.

“We only got back together last night,” Shane says weakly. “We just—“

“Oh my god,” Yuna breathes, hiding her face in her hands. “Last night? And then— you were cooking breakfast, and I— Jesus, I’m so sorry,” she says.

“We have not had time to figure out exactly what we will do,” Ilya says, eyes still locked on Shane. “We were hoping to have some time to work it out before we told anyone. My mother happened to be there when we first, ah, reunited... but we simply are not ready for anyone else to know.”

“Oh, I’m a monster,” Yuna says softly. “Oh, Shane, I—“

“It’s okay,” Shane says, finally lifting his head. “I just— I’m just—“

“Overwhelmed,” Ilya says softly, rubbing his back. “Is okay, Shane.”

“Yuna, can you help me with something outside, please?” David says, pushing his chair away from the table and giving Yuna a pointed look. Yuna hesitates, but nods, and as soon as they are gone, Shane implants himself into Ilya’s chest.

“I feel like shit,” Shane says.

“Yes, me too,” Ilya admits. “But everything is okay. We will take our time, we will figure it out.”

“What did you talk about outside?” Shane asks, looking up at Ilya’s face. “You were crying?”

Ilya offers him a gentle smile. “Your mother is a very good woman, Shane.”

“She has her moments,” Shane grumbles.

“She only wants you to be happy,” Ilya says. “And so do I.”

“I know,” Shane says. “I just wish we could have had more time to—“

“We have all the time in the world,” Ilya says.

Ilya is not sure if that is true, if that is a promise he can keep, but Shane looks appeased by it, and that is all that matters now. Yuna and David come back eventually with shiny eyes and fragile smiles and by the time Shane decides it is time to leave, Ilya feels quite confident that they do indeed have all the time in the world.

June, 2017

Two weeks drift into a third and fourth, May fades into June, and Ilya never so much as hints at leaving Lanaudière. It has been the most incredible month of Shane’s life, being wrapped up here with Ilya, alone, completely unbothered after the intrusion early on. Irina has been

invited to come visit at some point in the next few weeks, dinners and get-togethers have been planned in advance, and everything, absolutely *everything*, is as it should be.

Except...

September looms in the distant future like a dark cloud. Shane loves hockey, he loves Montréal, he loves the Voyageurs, but with each passing day, he grows more and more willing to give it all up, to spend the rest of his life here in this little bubble they have created, in this little home he shares with Ilya. The future seems so uncertain, but one thing is written in stone: it will not feel like this. Shane will not wake up every day bathed in sunlight and wrapped in Ilya. Shane will not spend every day at Ilya's side, with Ilya's fingers on his skin, Ilya's laughter in his ears, Ilya's lips on his lips. Shane will not eat a full dinner with Ilya's gentle encouragement every evening— though the encouragement becomes less necessary as time goes on. Shane will not fall asleep each night full, content, boneless, and smiling, safe in the arms of the man he loves. The transience of summertime has always been disappointing, but Shane fears he has become completely intolerant of the cold, that by September, he will have completely forgotten how to exist without Ilya.

Despite Ilya's assurance that they will have solved all of their problems by the time the summer ends, they have yet to have another conversation about what the future might look like for them. *We have time*, Ilya says, every time Shane tries to hint at it, and somehow, Shane is always appeased by the response, always happy to put his head back down and just keep dreaming. He has some ideas, sure, but nothing that feels terribly exciting to think about, nothing that doesn't feel like trying to fix a flooding ship with a bandaid.

"Shane," Ilya's voice floats across the room, in a sing-songy tone that implies he has already called out a few times.

Shane looks up, finding Ilya smiling at him from the other end of the sofa. "Yeah?"

"Come here," Ilya says, holding his arm out for Shane to curl into. Shane shakes his head.

"I wanna watch this," Shane says, turning his attention back to the TV.

"You have been staring at the wall for ten minutes," Ilya says. "Come on. I do not want to watch Scott Hunter win the cup."

"Why do you hate Scott Hunter so much?" Shane mutters.

"You are the one who punched him, *moy lyubimyy*," Ilya says.

"Shut up," Shane says. "He deserves this. He's had a great season."

Ilya groans, but does not protest, lowering his arm and pulling out his phone. Shane rests his head back against the sofa and lets his eyes unfocus in the direction of the TV, resuming his thought spiral.

The schedule for next season has not been announced yet, but if they are lucky, they will see each other four times between October and March, plus whatever they can work out between

road trips and other games. There will be a few days off at Christmas, a few at New Years, a few—

“Okay, it is over,” Ilya says, pushing himself up from where he has been reclined against the pillows on the sofa. “Now please, turn it off, I cannot watch him celebrate.”

“You are such a baby,” Shane says.

“Look at him! He is going to break a hip,” Ilya says. “Put the cup down, Hunter— oh, it cannot be good for him to have his arms up over his head for so long like that. He is going to have a heart attack, Shane, on live television, and you want to watch it happen? Is sick.”

“Shut *up*, ” Shane groans.

Ilya huffs, begrudgingly falling silent, watching Hunter pass the cup off to Vaughn. Shane is about to relent and turn the TV off when the camera cuts back to Hunter, zooming in on his face while he searches for someone or something in the crowd.

“What is he doing?” Ilya asks, eyes glued to the TV.

“I don’t know,” Shane mutters, sitting up to look closer. Hunter is frantically waving to someone in the stands, inviting them down to the ice— a man is making his way down the stairs, hopping over the boards, and Hunter takes him by the hand, pulls him out to where the rest of the team is celebrating.

Shane’s mouth is dry. He leans a little closer to the TV and, in his periphery, so does Ilya. Neither of them are breathing. On the TV, Scott Hunter grins, grabs the face of the man in front of him, and kisses him. *Hard*.

Shane is distantly aware that his mouth is hanging open, but he can’t find the muscles to close it, can’t feel his fingers, or his toes. His brain is full of static and white noise. His chest is full of knives.

Hunter breaks away from the *man* he is *kissing* on *live television*, says something and laughs, and then crashes into him again, kissing him like the cameras aren’t even there, like the crowd isn’t losing their minds, like his entire team isn’t just there on the ice, too. Shane comes back to his body very slowly, glances over at Ilya, and jumps when he finds Ilya already watching him intently.

“Shane,” Ilya says, his voice rough, like maybe his mouth and throat are as dry as Shane’s.

“What the fuck,” Shane breathes.

“Shane,” Ilya says again.

“No,” Shane says; he doesn’t know what he’s saying no to, exactly, but Ilya’s eyes turn desperate.

“Yes,” Ilya says. “Shane—”

“No,” Shane says again. “Ilya.”

“We could,” Ilya says, sitting a little further forward, eyes wide. “Shane—”

“No,” Shane says. “No, Ilya, we can’t—”

“We can,” Ilya says, and then he’s crawling across the sofa, lips pulling into a smile. He looks crazed, a wild look in his eyes, and Shane shies away from him.

“Good for Scott Hunter!” says the announcer through the TV speakers. “What a day for hockey!”

“Ilya,” Shane croaks.

Ilya climbs on top of him, presses him back into the sofa cushions, and kisses him so hard that Shane sees stars. “I want that,” Ilya says against his lips, hands sliding up under Shane’s hoodie. Shane shivers, whimpers his dissent. “I want that, Shane. I want that with you. We can have that. Please, Shane—”

“There’s no fucking way, Ilya—”

“Yes,” Ilya says firmly, pulling back just enough to meet Shane’s eyes. “We will find a way. *I* will find a way. We will have that, Shane. We will— I will have that with you.”

He sounds so sure, he looks so confident, his hands steady and strong when he cups Shane’s cheeks, Shane almost believes him.

“Ilya,” Shane breathes.

“I love you,” Ilya says, grinning. “I am going to love you in front of the whole world, someday.”

Shane melts into the sofa cushions, staring into Ilya’s eyes while Ilya searches his face.

“Okay,” Shane says, finally, and that’s the last coherent thought he is allowed to have for a while, the sports commentators chattering on and on in the background while Ilya gives him a preview of the rest of his life.

It is very late, or maybe very early, when Ilya startles awake, pushing himself up on his forearms where he has been sprawled on his stomach, sleeping peacefully.

“Ilya,” Shane whispers again.

“What?” Ilya mutters frantically, turning over onto his side. “What time is it?”

“I have an idea,” Shane whispers.

“What?” Ilya says again.

“We can change the narrative,” Shane says; he is excited, talking too fast, and Ilya’s brain has not fully come online yet. “We can start, like, a charity, or something— together, y’know? Finally prove to everyone that we don’t hate each other, that we are actually friends, and we have been all along, and then—”

“Slow,” Ilya mutters, rubbing at his eyes. “Slow down, Shane, I am too tired for this.”

“We put an end to the rivalry bullshit,” Shane says, pulling Ilya’s hands away from his face and replacing them with his own. “We start a hockey summer camp for kids, and we donate the money to cool charities, like, people doing important work for important causes. Everyone sees us working together, doing actual good for the world, and they stop pitting us against each other. And then eventually, you know, someday, maybe we can come out, tell everyone that we’ve been in love the whole time, and—”

“Mental health organizations,” Ilya says quietly. “And to people who are being abused.” Shane blinks, his train of thought broken, but he does not need to keep pitching the idea, Ilya is already on board. “That is where the money should go,” Ilya clarifies.

“Okay,” Shane says, smiling. “Yeah, that’s good.”

“I like this idea,” Ilya says, settling on his back and pulling Shane against his chest. Shane’s arms and torso are cold, like he has been sitting up for some time, working on this idea in his precious little head. Ilya loves him so much he could burst with it. “I like you,” he says.

“I love you,” Shane says, pressing a kiss to the center of Ilya’s chest. “So much. So fucking much.”

Ilya grins, letting his eyes slip closed again as Shane settles in his arms. The sky outside shimmers with stars, and then slowly lightens into a brand new day, bright and clear and easy, and for the first time in a long time, maybe for the first time in forever, it all makes sense.

Chapter End Notes

thank you so much for reading <3

i might do a tlg-era part 2 of this au at some point if i can think of a plot that isn't too boring, i might also pop in with a few bonus scenes and one-shots from this universe here and there.

i don't have any social media or anything, i am truly just here for the love of the game, but i really appreciate all your comments and vibe checks on here. bye for now <333

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