

Policy Change

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/86720386) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/86720386>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Heated Rivalry (TV)
Relationships:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander/Original Male Character(s)
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov , Original Male Character(s) , Montreal Voyageurs Montreal Metros Team Ensemble (Game Changers)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence , Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov Situationship , Mutual Pining , Hockey Captain Shane Hollander , No Rose guys sorry , Jealous Ilya Rozanov , Jealous Shane Hollander , Angst , HEA , Mental Health Issues
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-07-12 Completed: 2026-10-07 Words: 177,819 Chapters: 25/25

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Summary

Four months post Sochi, four months of being ghosted by Ilya Rozanov, the Metros are bought by Petrov 7, a multi-national corporation headed up by Mikhail Petrov, an openly out billionaire who has plans to transform the MLH, starting with the Metros.

Chapter 1

“Have you heard the news?”

His mom was fiddling with the coffee machine Shane had given them for Christmas. She sounded vague and distracted. None of them had entirely got to grips with the machine as it had about eight-thousand buttons and dials and levers. Shane had bought it because the reviews said it was the best. This did not apparently apply to the user experience.

Shane, who had been purposefully living without any news whatsoever, had in fact got into the habit of periodically hiding his cell phone from himself, shook his head. He was at his parents for bye week which was marginally better than being in Montreal and stewing. “I’ve heard nothing.”

Nothing. For nearly four months.

What a fucking asshole.

The big knife parted the watermelon very satisfyingly under some not-inconsiderable pressure from Shane.

“The sale has gone through.”

Shit. No, actually, Shane didn’t live under that big of a rock. He *had* heard something about this. There had been rumors before Christmas that a big corporation was circling the Molsons, the family group who had owned the Metros for nearly twenty years, looking to buy them out.

Shane himself didn’t feel particularly sentimental about that. He’d only met the Molsons once for a photo op in his rookie year and then when he’d signed his (record breaking) extension. They had never been the type of owners to get involved, rarely even came to games. He genuinely wouldn’t have been able to pick any of them from out of a crowd. All rich people in hockey looked the same to Shane.

Though he thought the point of this was that they weren’t so rich. Anymore. They owned some brewery that wasn’t doing so well. The beer was shit, everyone said so. Even the old guys who drank it because it was ‘local’. His mom had always said they didn’t know how to diversify, that the most exciting thing about the business was their association with hockey.

“Who is it? Some corporation?” Shane wasn’t sure how he felt about that. The Metros made a lot about being a local team, owned by a local family. Being bought by some anonymous holding company who owned lots of things felt a little impersonal. The fans wouldn’t like that, even if Shane didn’t particularly care. Optics were important in Montreal.

Shane rotated the first half of watermelon and began to slice it into neat sections. He had been cutting up watermelon with his mom Saturday morning since he was old enough to handle a sharp knife. It was monotonous and familiar. Shane loved it.

“It’s a French multi-national. The guy who runs it is actually very interesting. Young – late thirties. Inherited the business when his grandfather died. You might have heard of him. Mikhail Petrov?”

Shane grunted. “Sounds really French.” The fans wouldn’t like that either. “And I haven’t heard of him.”

“I think he *was* born in France. His father was Russian. He’s, ah, gay.”

Shane nearly lost a finger, the word ‘gay’ coming from his mom’s lips sending a spasm through his hand. Was he crazy or had his mom said that in a really *loaded* way? He glanced over at her, fearfully, but she was just adding more coffee beans to the grinder.

“Haven’t heard of him,” Shane repeated, firmly.

*

Shane Googled him later. Most of the news was about the reaction to the sale – Shane had been right, the fans were *not* happy. Mikhail Petrov had bought the Metros for an absolutely ridiculous sum of money and issued one of those statements that talked about ‘values’ and ‘investing’ but all anyone could talk about was the loss of ‘local culture’.

But Shane wasn’t interested in that. He dug a little deeper until he found what he was looking for, more of a biography that talked about the person rather than his apparently extensive and lucrative business interests.

Mikhail Petrov. Thirty-seven-years-old. Born in Paris, son of a wealthy Russian immigrant and French socialite, who in turn was the daughter of a wealthy businessman whose wife was Canadian. There were various invasive news stories about his teens and early twenties accompanied by blurry shots of him – tall, well-built, dark hair – in and out of European clubs with women *and* men. He was ‘outed’ with a confirmed boyfriend, son of some designer Shane had never heard of, in his late twenties. They were papped kissing outside of a restaurant late at night.

He zoomed in on that photo a bit. Just out of academic interest. It was the kind of kiss that couldn’t be mistaken for anything other than passion, Petrov’s hand cupping the guy’s jaw in a way that was unfortunately a very physical memory for Shane. He did not go to YouTube to see if there was a video.

Shane read the only quote Petrov gave in response to being gay. *Yes, not sure why everyone cares about this, do you not have anything better to do?*

Up until this point, this ‘research’ Shane was doing could conceivably be considered work related. He was informed about the sale now. He wished the Molsons the best and looked forward to developing a good relationship with the new owner, yada yada yada.

Going to see if Mikhail Petrov had an open Instagram page was probably not relevant to the kinds of questions he might get asked about by the press or fans. He was sure he would be

sent some talking points from media anyway. He didn't need any more information. Or photos. Or whatever he was looking for.

But he scrolled over to the app he rarely used and typed in Mikhail Petrov anyway.

Nothing was particularly forthcoming. There were a few names that might be his but they were all private pages with those tiny pictures. Maybe Petrov didn't have a page at all. He was a billionaire. There was probably some kind of secret social media for billionaires.

Actually – *wasn't* there some kind of work social media thing? Some kind of network. Yes. *LinkedIn*. His social media team had set one up for him ages ago but it wasn't updated that often. The last time had been when he'd been made Captain. He never looked at it.

With some trial and error, Shane downloaded the right app and then logged in with the password formula they used for different accounts to ensure he was never part of a mass password breach. Once in, he sighed heavily as each social media app had a totally different UX and – wow – he had a lot of messages here. His social media people clearly weren't that bothered.

He skim-read a few of the messages – it gave the whole reason for downloading the app some verisimilitude – and they were mostly requests to connect, birthday wishes from various members of the management, including, hilariously, Theriault, who had never even bothered to wish Shane a happy birthday in person.

This done, Shane carefully typed Mikhail Petrov's name into the search bar and, boom, there he was.

Shane wasn't massively sure what he expected. There was a professional photo but a candid one, not the staged one that was on his own LinkedIn profile. He had reposted the press release announcing the purchase of the Metros along with a bland comment. He scrolled down, finding more reposts and news stories from his company – Petrov 7 – and their various acquisitions and mergers and it was all pretty dull until he came to the repost of an article, published by the New York Times about Petrov 7's commitment to DEI.

Shane was well aware of DEI. He and J.J. were often front and center of the Metros DEI offering, along with Sharif in Ops and Nisha, who had been the social media intern. She'd left to go to some company that sold wonky fruit and now the kid of someone senior in management – possibly the GM's son – was doing the job. Her photo was still on the Metros website though.

He clicked on the New York Times article. And, yeah, there was a photo with lots of ethnicities right there at the top but it wasn't just that. The guy to the left of Petrov wore a rainbow flag pin on his lapel. There was a woman – maybe? – with a pink buzz cut. And a guy in eyeliner. According to the article, Petrov 7 had above-average diversity and inclusion metrics and those metrics were rolled out across the businesses they acquired, no exceptions.

Shane snorted and closed the article. "Well. Good luck with that."

He returned to Petrov's profile page and, sighing at himself, clicked on the profile picture so it enhanced.

Shane didn't think it was necessarily gay to acknowledge that Petrov was really hot.

But it probably was a bit.

*

Beyond the generic announcement email that he was sure most of the team deleted, no one actually said anything about Petrov, not for weeks and then, in March, they all received an email introducing the new DEI department. Well, not *new*. They'd had someone. Alison. Part-time. She'd popped up every year for photo ops and had once asked him if he could speak Chinese. Not even Mandarin. *Chinese*.

Not only was there a new department. There was a *team*. There was a confidential helpline open 24/7. And there was... mandatory training which seemed to involve regular seminars.

"Coach, you're going to get us out of this bullshit, right?" Comeau asked, waving his cell phone around. He had a particularly ugly expression on his face, made uglier by the swollen nose he was sporting. He'd broken his nose after dropping the gloves with Damian Thane, a Tampa defenseman known for throwing punches at the slightest provocation. And Comeau could be provocative. "We don't have time for this shit."

Theriault was pissed. "That shit is *mandatory*."

Twenty minutes later during practice, Theriault called O'Connor a *fucking pussy* and Shane wondered if their coaches would be in the training with them or would have some kind of separate session. He had a mind that was attuned to mapping the different scenarios and couldn't quite picture this going well either way, but at least if Theriault wasn't in with the team there was half a chance that he wouldn't poison the well so obviously.

Maybe Shane could message that confidential hotline and suggest it.

Ha. Fucking. Ha.

Unfortunately for Shane this moment of levity was captured by his coach. "What are you fucking smirking about Hollander? Two blue lines and back!"

The first introductory DEI training was scheduled in the twenty-four hour window between their games in Pittsburgh and Columbus, which was shit because they flew in the night before and flew out the following evening and this additional hour-and-a-half in their schedule was awkward for their routine. Well, Shane's routine.

Still. He was there, early, in one of the meeting rooms they usually used for tape. The room was set up theatre-style with those shitty chairs with the pull-out tables that weren't big enough for anything other than a coffee.

He took a moment to assess the room. As Captain, he would normally sit at the front. Not to put himself forward – though he was called upon a lot in the room to add his views – but

because he knew he had to set a certain standard of commitment.

But this was a slightly different situation. He wanted to look engaged but not too keen.

Shane decided on a seat in the third row, near the door in case a quick exit was required, and waited. He'd brought his iPad and had loaded up the last three games Columbus had played. If he was subtle about it, he reckoned he could keep his notes app open and play the games on silent if the meeting began to lag.

The rest of the team filtered in, yawning, holding coffees, protein smoothies and carb-heavy pastries. There were a few chirps from the vets about Shane's 'eagerness', which he responded to with a blank-eyed stare or a middle finger, depending on who it was.

Hayden dropped down into the seat next to him with a sigh. "How's the ankle?" Shane remembered to ask.

"Fine. Swelling's gone down." Hayden demonstrated, sticking his leg out and rotating his foot in his Adidas sneaker. "Should be good for tomorrow."

"Good." Hayden, Shane noted, had brought a Metros branded notebook that was covered in Moana stickers, and a Princess Elsa pen. His mouth twitched. Both at the sign of Hayden's Dad-ness and also that Shane himself recognized all the characters. He had seen Moana maybe more times than *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift*. Which he had seen *a lot*.

J.J. wandered in, a bag over his shoulder and a tiny espresso cup in his hand. They both nodded at him.

"Did you hear?" Hayden asked.

"I haven't checked my phone this morning." This was a Lie with a capital 'L'. Shane had checked his messages, that *one*, silent message thread, and then he had checked Twitter. Boston had played St. Louis last night. The Raiders had won 5-2. Rozanov had two goals and two assists. The second goal had actually taken Shane's breath away, a top corner snipe at full speed. Smooth as anything.

Rozanov's post-game interview had been, as it typically was, shirtless, sweaty and infuriatingly attractive. Someone had managed to shoe-horn in a question about Shane, to which Rozanov had responded with 'who?' and then winked, a hand coming up to flick away a damp but perfect curl from the center of his forehead. What an asshole. Shane would probably jerk off to that video later.

J.J. slumped in the seat in front of them and turned. "Is this about the GM?"

Shane used his stylus to pause the game on his tablet. "What about the GM?"

"Word on the street is he's getting—" J.J. gestured, a finger across his neck and pulled a face.

Shane had never exactly warmed to their GM. He had large, slightly sweaty hands and whenever they spoke 'call me Phil' always made some comment about his mom that tweaked Shane's is-this-a-microaggression-or-just-awkward radar. But this wasn't about the GM. It

was about the possibility that their new owner was going to make more waves than a potentially performative DEI program.

“Huh,” said Shane.

*

They were out of the playoffs – and Boston was *in* – when Shane received the meeting request. An ‘informal’ 1-2-1 with their new owner at his office in the Bell Centre and the Captain of his newly acquired team.

Everyone seemed to know about this invite before Shane received the actual email in his inbox.

“There’s no such thing as an ‘informal’ 1-2-1. Make sure he knows that you generate the most merchandise income,” his mom told him on the phone. “And wear your Rolex.”

“Ask if he has a hot, rich sister,” was J.J.’s input. “Don’t care if she’s older.”

“Don’t fuck up,” was Theriault’s incredibly helpful advice, as if Shane had ever let him down before. “And tell him that training was bullshit.”

Shane, who had been trained from his early teenage years to produce bland statements on request, figured he could handle the actual work aspect of this meeting but struggled to squash down the anticipatory terror of meeting any actually *out* homosexual in or around the workplace.

For this reason he wondered if he needed to choose his outfit carefully. Was there some outfit that didn’t say ‘I have impure thoughts about men occasionally’? Would Petrov be able to *look* and Shane and see this?

And then he decided to put on a pair of sweatpants, a T-shirt and a hoodie, looked in the mirror, and called it a day.

He was a fucking athlete after all and being gay didn’t give you telepathy.

At 11.30am on the dot, Shane made his way up to the owner’s suite, following the little signs that he’d noted before but never needed, and found himself in front of Marlene, the new owner’s PA.

She was in, fact, the old owner’s PA and she glanced disapprovingly at Shane from above some wire-rimmed glasses. “May I help you?”

“Shane Hollander. Captain?” he said, as if he was asking her if that was, indeed, who he was.

She blinked beadily at him. “Do you have an appointment?”

The door to the owner’s suite opened. “He does, thank you, Marlene,” said Mikhail Petrov drily.

Oh fuck, thought Shane as the anticipatory terror became, you know, actual terror.

He was even hotter in person.

*

Shane had never been in the owner's suite before. It had very springy carpet which was a nice easy thing for his fluttery brain to focus on. And not say the sweep of thick dark hair of the new team owner. The deep, ocean blue eyes framed by dark lashes. The reassuring breadth of his shoulders.

Not gay. Not at all.

"Can I get you something? Water? Coffee?" Petrov gestured to a well-equipped refreshment bar.

"Water would be great," Shane said, taking a seat opposite the desk as directed and wondering if maybe it was Marlene who should have been getting him a drink. Or should Shane offer?

Petrov bent to grab a bottle of water from the drinks fridge and Shane urgently averted his eyes from the well-fitted suit pants to look around the office. There were windows on his left, overlooking the main parking lot. And then windows behind the desk that looked down onto the ice. He'd had no idea. Had the Molsons' watched them practice from here? It was a pretty good view if so.

"So, Shane— can I call you Shane?" Ice clinked.

The strangest urge to giggle overcame him. He pressed his fingers into his thighs. "Sure, Mr. Petrov."

Water glugged from an icy-looking bottle. "You can call me Mikhail."

Yeah, there was no chance of that happening.

Shane accepted the water he was given with what he hoped was close to a smile. Their fingers did not touch. Petrov's shirt was a crisp whisper-pale mint and he wore no tie, the top three buttons of his shirt were undone showing skin that had recently seen sun. Thankfully for Shane's heartrate, he didn't wear a necklace. "Thanks." He took a polite sip instead of the gulp he wanted to take.

Petrov returned to his desk and dropped into the chair. He checked his cell phone briefly and then put it down. "I asked for this meeting as a bit of a get-to-know-you. My predecessors were rather more hands off as I understand it, but I don't intend to be. This is an Original Six franchise and it would be remiss of me not to spend the next few months soaking up everything I need to know to ensure that we continue on the upwards trajectory that started with your draft."

Shane took another, big gulp of water. His mom had been right then. This was not 'casual'.

“As you are the captain and have a much better on-the-ground understanding of my team and the business than I ever would do, it’s important to me that we’re on the same page.”

“Yes, sir.”

Petrov’s dark eyebrows rose. “*Sir* is worse than *Mr. Petrov*, you know.”

“Sorry,” Shane said, flushing. Was it weird that Petrov didn’t have an accent? He was expecting him to sound like Rozanov. Was maybe a little disappointed he didn’t. Or was that relieved?

Maybe not getting a Pavlovian hard-on in the owner’s office was for the best.

“I’m going to be putting in monthly catch-ups with you, your As and the head coach. Is there anyone else you’d suggest be added to that list?”

Monthly catch-ups?

“You look surprised.” Petrov’s blue eyes narrowed. “I think. You’ve got a good game face, Shane.”

The use of his first name was... a thing. “Ah. You’re right, typically owners don’t get that involved with the teams.”

“No, I know that’s normally the GM’s role.” Petrov’s gaze seemed to harden, then.

Shane decided to be brave and demonstrate that he wasn’t just a big guy with a hockey stick. He had his finger on the pulse. Or J.J. did. “There’s— there’s a rumor that the GM’s role might be at risk.”

“Is there? That’s good to know.” He tapped long fingers on his desk. “Do your best to squash that. Consistency is important, at the moment.”

“Yes, sir. Mr. Petrov.”

“Mikhail.” His lips quirked in a way that reminded Shane that not once had he smiled during this conversation. “Or if that’s too hard, Petrov will do.”

Shane nodded. He thought about Petrov’s original question. “I would also add one of the rookies to your list.”

“A rookie. That’s an interesting idea.” Petrov picked up a pen – it looked like a Mont Blanc; they’d approached Shane once – and made a note on his jotter. “Why?”

“Maybe give you a more well-rounded view of the roster,” Shane said, then admitted, with his Captain’s helmet on, “And it would be good practice for them.”

“Anyone in mind?”

“Peetie. Peterson,” he amended. He was talented and comparatively – *really* comparatively – the most level-headed. He was consequently the one Shane was hardest on. In the limited ice time he’d had, he’d performed well on the third line this season and Shane expected good things of him in the next. And he had told him so. Peetie had looked a little scared by this, no idea why.

“That would be Wesley Peterson.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll add him to the list. How did you find the training the other day?”

“It was informative,” said Shane.

The corners of Petrov’s eyes crinkled. “Any push-back?”

Not in the room – the team were idiots but they weren’t *idiots* - but there had been plenty of conversations outside it. He’d shut down some locker-room talk but he’d been sent screengrabs from the very active Cap-free chat group where Comeau and others had unloaded on the ‘liberal-agenda bullshit’.

To be honest, Shane was surprised anyone knew what a ‘liberal-agenda’ was. It wasn’t as if his people were well-read. Knowing them, there was probably some shitty Podcaster out there they were all following that they were repeating verbatim. He’d have to ask J.J..

Shane tread carefully. There was a hierarchy for a reason and he knew tattling on his team to the owner was a pretty basic betrayal. He would be interrogated by Coach after this. And, fuck, he would need to warn Hayden, J.J. and Peetie now. “It’s an unfamiliar space for the team. A lot of new language to absorb. I think it’ll take time to settle but they’re open-minded.”

Petrov looked at Shane for a long moment. “Someone told me you started getting media training when you were fourteen.”

Shane blinked at the abrupt change in conversation. “I did, yes.”

“Hmm.” He tapped his Mont Blanc pen and continued to look at Shane penetratingly. It was... not comfortable. In kind of a sexy way. “We’re going to be rolling out more sessions. Smaller groups. Quarterly.”

Fuck. Really? He smiled. “Understood. It’s an important initiative.”

“It is. The MLH is pre-historic. I’m not expecting miracles, but I want everyone to understand that this is the first of many long-term organizational change initiatives, not a performative one-off HR project.”

“Understood,” Shane said again. No, this meeting had *not* been casual and he suspected this message was something he was going to have to bring back to the team.

There was a soft knock on the door.

“And our time is up, Shane.”

They stood. Petrov held out his hand and, convulsively, Shane took it. His hand was dry, his grip firm. It was a perfectly normal interaction. Except. An electric current – like a real, physical sensation – ran up from where their bare palms touched, right down to his dick. There was a very apt French word for it. A *frisson*.

Fuck.

*

Shane summoned Petrov’s chosen few to a smoothie place that he didn’t hate. There was a lot of grumbling about this as they were out of the playoffs and the foot had come off the gas a bit. But the season technically hadn’t ended, at least, not for Shane, who viewed the awards in a week as his final bow, and he expected everyone to still be in working distance.

In the smoothie place, Shane got something with spinach and kale and wheatgrass that was significantly more expensive than making it at home, and he took up a booth in the corner. No one used the booths because why the hell would you linger in a smoothie place? It wasn’t a café. It didn’t even sell coffee. Not that Shane drank coffee.

A harassed-looking Hayden arrived first, with a grizzling Arthur and carrying a diaper bag and a backpack. He dumped the backpack with Shane, without a word, and disappeared into the bathroom. He returned after five minutes and handed Arthur to Shane, again without a word, and went to order.

Arthur tenderly took hold of Shane’s earlobe and said something that sounded like ‘blorbo’. In a kind of devastating way. Arthur had really big, soulful eyes.

“Yeah, exactly,” said Shane, jiggling Arthur up and down sympathetically.

J.J. arrived while Hayden was having his smoothie blended. He took a photo of Shane with Arthur. “Can I post this? The social media chick will love it.”

“Nisha’s gone.”

“Shit. Really? She was nice.”

“Yeah. She went to that wonky fruit place.”

“Oh yeah. I love that place! My *maman* gets their boxes on subscription.” J.J. shrugged. “I’m gonna post it anyway. I always get more engagement when I post photos of you.” Head down, typing away, J.J. headed to the counter.

Shane sighed, not certain what a picture with a baby was going to do for his public image. Nisha *had* briefed them to create more ‘lifestyle’ content, back when she’d been working for Montreal. *Lifestyle, Shane, means photos of your life outside of hockey*, she had explained at his corresponding blank look. *A nice walk. Photos of meals with friends. A sunset*. More often than not he forgot. When he saw a sunset, he thought ‘that’s a nice sunset’, not ‘I must take a photo of that sunset and share it with my followers’. Because they followed him for *hockey*.

Nisha wasn't there now and her boss had always been fine with the exclusively hockey-focused content Shane or more specifically the nameless, faceless team of social media people his mom had hired saw fit to post. It was a world away from the kind of sophisticated, sexy content Rozenov posted. Not that Shane looked at that.

"Blorbo," he repeated back to Arthur. Encouraging babies to speak was good for them. Hayden had told him that when they'd had the twins.

Arthur sighed and rested his forehead against Shane's cheek, his little hand resting on Shane's chin. Shane's heart did a little *fwump-fwump*. He really loved the Pike kids but he had a particular soft spot for Arthur, who was less frenetic than the girls and was kind of soothing to hold.

Peetie arrived late and flustered, with his large Louis Vuitton bag over his arm.

Peetie was an enormous guy – on the ice, graceful as the proverbial swan but off it very much hockey-player-in-a-China-shop. He nearly knocked someone out with his bag, apologized, swung around and nearly did it again, and then stumbled over to Shane in the booth. "Really sorry, Cap, couldn't find somewhere to park." He dropped the bag and ran his hands through his fluffy peroxide hair. He still had his playoff beard which was a sort of gingery-brown. "Do you want something?"

"I'm good," Shane said, gesturing to his half-finished smoothie. "But if you're quick you can probably get J.J. or Hayden to get you something."

"Yeah. Awesome." Peetie paused and pointed a finger at him. "Hey. Is that your kid?"

"No, Peetie," Shane sighed, feeling as if he'd somehow failed his rookie if he thought he was a dad. He was twenty-three years old, for God's sake. "This is Hayden's. Arthur. This is Peetie."

Peetie beamed. He leaned over and stuck his finger out, which Arthur looked at but made no move to take, too involved in holding on to Shane's chin with all his might. "Ah. No worries. See you're busy there. All good. Nice to meet you, little bud."

Once everyone had their smoothie of choice, and Arthur had been returned to his father, Shane explained his reason for calling this totally casual and absolutely off the record meeting.

J.J. grimaced. But that might have been from the smoothie, which he delicately put back on the table. Judging from the color it was some kind of berry and Shane knew from experience they were sour as fuck. "Yeah, I got the meeting invite this morning."

"Me too," said Hayden dourly. "We're having to put off going to Jackie's parents by a couple of days. Couldn't it wait until September or something?"

Frowning, Peetie thumbed through his cell phone. His screen was so smashed up Shane couldn't imagine how he could see anything. "Oh yeah. Is that what that is? Thought it was spam."

“You thought you’d got spam from the owner of our team?” Shane asked.

“I didn’t know he was the owner.”

Shane wondered if he’d made a horrible mistake in proposing Peetie. But he was, comparatively, a better bet than Franks, who was about as bright as a melted crayon. Good defenseman though. Knew how to take instruction. Shane appreciated that in a teammate.

“If your meet-and-greets go like mine does, you’ll be prodded a bit about that training we had. I have written some suggested responses for you.” He pulled out his notes which he had typed up and duplicated. “Feel free to, you know, adapt as you see fit. Think we’re going to need to be very cautious here.”

“So it’s not some kind of PR thing?” J.J. wanted to know, taking Shane’s notes and perusing them.

“I don’t think so. I think he’s serious.”

“Coach will lose his mind.”

“Yeah,” Shane lowered his voice, “and I think he won’t last long if he voices that.”

Hayden bounced Arthur. “Fuck, that serious?”

“Swear jar,” Shane and J.J. chorused, to the visible confusion of Peetie.

“Do you mean the DEI training? I thought it was good,” Peetie said thoughtfully.

The three other men looked at him with varying levels of surprise.

Peetie shrugged his massive shoulders. “My uncle is gay. And, you know, married. To a man,” he added, as if this needed confirmation.

Shane was simultaneously blown away by this statement – Gay? Uncle? Married? Wasn’t Peetie from somewhere in the American Midwest? Did they have gays in the Midwest? – but also truly *thrilled* with his admittedly accidental prescience. Peetie was *perfect* for Petrov. Practically a poster child for one of the diversity pillars that had been presented to them in the training.

He had stumbled on a little goldmine.

Almost breathless, Shane said, “Then you should say that to him.” Shane pulled out his pen from his hoodie pocket and added ‘gay uncle’ to Peetie’s notes, in capital letters. “You should say you are genuinely supportive of his initiative.”

“Because I am,” Peetie said slowly, blinking owlishly at Shane.

“Yes. That.”

“Hey, I didn’t hate it,” Hayden pointed out, as if he didn’t want to miss out on Shane’s approbation. “But I haven’t done the survey yet. That shit is long.”

Yeah, Shane had opened the Employee Sentiment Survey (ESS) and scrolled through the questions. At school you were always supposed to read all the questions first before you started work. It was a rule Shane had lived by.

The questionnaire was supposedly anonymous but there were enough profiling questions at the beginning that you could work out what ‘department’ of the organization you were from. That felt risky.

Still, from what he’d seen, *most* of the team would be giving the Metros pretty high scores across the board. Guys like Comeau and Drapeau sure as hell *feel comfortable being themselves at work*, except when Shane asked that they tone it down. And given everyone gave everyone shit about their backgrounds, whether they were from Ohio or of Japanese extraction, the answer to the question *people from different backgrounds are treated fairly here* would be unanimously fair because no one was safe.

But he wasn’t really concerned about the Likert scale questions. These were jocks. For the most part they’d probably all click ‘mostly agree’ or ‘neither agree or disagree’ and leave it at that.

What he *was* concerned about was the open-ended ones where apparently they had free reign to write whatever they wanted. *Is there anything you would like the management to know?* and *If there was an area of improvement what would it be?* Because he could totally see some of the guys going off on one there. *Our Captain is a robotic bitch*, maybe. *Or that training shit is gay*.

Shane opened the Metros group chat and fired off a message both reminding everyone to fill in the survey but also that it was only anonymous in the sense that it would be clear they were part of the hockey team and they should consider their answers in light of demonstrating their cohesion as a unit.

Then, thoughtfully, Shane clarified what ‘cohesion’ meant.

Just, don’t be assholes, he finished.

There were a series of ‘thumbs up’s and a couple of ‘yes, cap’s and one eyeroll from Drapeau and Shane considered it as good as he was going to get.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Lily: Who are you talking to

Lily: He is old but he is hot

Shane lost MVP and then got railed by Rozanov in his penthouse suite in Vegas.

As he travelled up in the elevator, Shane watching the numbers go past, he wondered whether Rozanov had booked the penthouse confident in the knowledge that he was going to win or if this was just how he rolled. Shane had booked a standard city-view, with a king-size bed, though God knew he hadn't actually expected to speak to, let alone fuck Rozanov. After six months of silence, he'd assumed that whatever they had been doing was over.

Hours later, ass throbbing, Shane found himself slumped in the corner of a different descending elevator, and his phone in his lax hand, sort of stunned at what had happened to him.

The whole evening had almost been an out of body experience. He had never—he had *never*. It was almost an entire statement in itself. He had never. Never, never, never. He would probably never again. Never behave like that. Never feel like that. It was as if an alien had taken over his body. Possessed by the spirit of Ilya Rozanov.

Possessed *by* Ilya Rozanov. His hand on the back of Shane's neck. His big dick splitting him open. At some point he'd spat in Shane's open mouth and *Shane had liked it*.

Fuck. At some point, Shane had said *again* – unclear whether he meant the spitting or the fucking – and Rozanov had said something explosive in Russian and fucked him even harder, sweat pouring down his face.

The doors opened and Shane pushed himself up and then blinked, expecting to have arrived at his floor, a few short steps from crashing onto his bed, and instead he was faced with something almost as inconceivable as the sex he'd just been having.

"Shane," said Mikhail Petrov, looking up from his own cell phone with equal surprise.

"Um." Shane, panicked, looked around at the marble floors and the big potted plants. This was the first floor. Reception. He must have not pressed a button, so absorbed with sending his final message to Rozanov for the season. Something that didn't scream 'I am emotionally compromised' and instead conveyed his absolute chill with the show he'd put on, the fucking, the spitting, the lingering taste of vodka and the lack of kissing.

He was super casual. He was a chill guy who touched himself intimately in front of his rival. That was a thing Shane did. So chill.

“Going out? Or—” Petrov’s looked Shane up and down. There was something knowing in his gaze, an infinitesimal shift in the muscles around his eyes. Something that made Shane feel, suddenly, both very young and very exposed.

God. Could Petrov see what he’d been up to? Well – what else could it be, right? It was past three in the morning. He was either coming or going from somewhere.

But could he *tell* that Shane had been with a man?

No. No, that wasn’t possible. Why did he keep thinking this? Just because he was gay didn’t mean he had some kind of sixth sense. That was insane.

Petrov’s mouth turned down at the corners, his neat, dark eyebrows practically meeting in the middle. “I think you should be in bed, Shane.”

Shane’s face flamed red with the implied disapproval. “Yes. I— was. Will be. Was going to. I maybe didn’t hit the right button.”

His voice was a little croaky. At some point between rounds one and two Rozanov had fucked his throat. He’d called it a little lesson in deep throating, after forcing Shane to confirm that he’d never done it. He hadn’t laughed when Shane had gagged, instead he’d held Shane’s head gently and told him to tap his thigh if it got too much.

Shane had pretty much resolved to practice. The next time – if there was a next time – he was going to blow Rozanov’s mind with his technique.

Petrov stepped into the elevator. Like Shane, he was wearing a tux, unbuttoned, his tie draped around his neck, but it was there the similarity ended. Shane’s tux was Tom Ford, which made this the most expensive thing he’d ever put on his body. Until this moment, he’d thought it fit reasonably well given he’d lost a bit of weight towards the end of the season.

Petrov’s suit, on the other hand, fit him like a glove. It was tight in the right places, defining his broad shoulders, tapering down to his waist. There was some kind of quality to the material, too, that made it look *lustrous*. In the poor lighting of this elevator, Shane could see it wasn’t even black. It was a deep, dark blue, like his eyes.

The owner of Shane’s team pulled his keycard from his perfectly fitting pants pocket, held it over the reader and then pressed the button for the penthouse floor where Shane had just come from.

“Perhaps you want to choose your floor, Shane?” Patiently, Petrov held his hand out, keeping the elevator doors open. His crisp white shirt stretched tight over his chest. For a guy who sat behind a desk he was very fit. Very.

Maybe Shane shouldn’t be looking at the way Petrov’s shirt stretched.

“Oh, yeah.” Shame fumbled for the keycard in his pocket. His fingers closed around two. One was his. One was for the penthouse floor, slipped in his pocket by Rozanov earlier. Fancy hotels didn’t just let anyone access any of the floors.

Fuck.

“Um. One of these doesn’t work. It got too close to my cell phone,” he said, glad his face was already on fire because otherwise the lie would have been even more obvious. He swiped the first card and pressed the button for the ninth floor.

No dice.

He tried the other card, feeling like an absolute dick now. And the button lit up. Thank fuck for that.

Shane slumped against the wall as Petrov let the doors close. The elevator began to move. Slowly, but it was going in the right direction. He just had to survive nine floors of responsible, mature silence.

His nose twitched as he became aware of some kind of scent. Must be Petrov’s aftershave. Shane didn’t really like aftershave, or perfume, or any kind of strong smells really, but this was kind of pleasant. Like a really musky vanilla. Shane probably smelled like the hotel shampoo, which was lemongrass. It was *always* lemongrass. Which was better than what he had smelled like before, which had been come. His. Rozanov’s. Was it weird that he knew what Rozanov’s come smelled like? Was it weird that he liked it? His cock twitched.

God. He needed to stop thinking about sex while sharing an elevator with his boss.

Because he wasn’t having an emotional meltdown like Shane was, Petrov was looking at his cell phone. It looked like— some kind of news site. One Shane didn’t visit. He shouldn’t be looking at someone else’s cell phone. Shit.

His eyes swiveled away. Fifth floor. Oof.

The silence began to make him twitchy. His mom was always on at him to make conversation with stakeholders. “Good night?”

“Reasonably.” Petrov did not look away from his cell phone. “The food was awful.”

“Oh, yeah. Always is.” This was not Shane’s first MLH awards ceremony so this was a subject he could embrace. “Everything’s fried.”

Petrov’s long thumb swiped up. He wore a gold ring around the base and had very neat nails. “Yes, you’d think given it was an event for athletes there would have been a more balanced offering.”

“*Exactly.* Maybe something not swimming in butter and cream.”

This perhaps over-impassioned exclamation had Petrov lifting his eyes, which crinkled a little at the corners. “Did you get the vegetable frittata?”

“Yeah,” Shane sighed. Potatoes weren’t normally part of his diet but it had been the lesser evil. He’d ordered extra sides of broccoli. “I asked if they could do the fish without the sauce but it was apparently pre-prepared.”

The elevator finally arrived at Shane’s floor. He let out a breath. Phew. It was done. He was free. “Have a good, ah, rest of your night.”

He stepped out onto the vivid striped carpet and turned right.

“Oh, Shane?” Petrov held open the doors once more as Shane swiveled. “I’m going to have to reschedule our 1-2-1. I need to be in London.”

Shane nodded, weirdly disappointed. “Oh, no problem.”

“Actually,” Petrov winced, “I don’t suppose you can do tomorrow morning? Breakfast?”

“Tomorrow. Um. Sure. My flight’s at midday.”

“8am?”

Shane managed not to grimace as a wave of pre-emptive exhaustion suddenly swamped him. He guessed he could sleep on the plane. And the payoff of having this meeting early was that he could head to his parents’ sooner. “Okay. I’ll see you downstairs at 8am,” he repeated, more for his own benefit. He’d need to set an alarm.

“Downstairs,” Petrov repeated thoughtfully.

“Yeah. The restaurant? It’s pretty good. They make smoothies fresh and don’t mind adding your protein powder.” Wow. Why did he keep talking about food?

Petrov nodded. “Okay. The restaurant downstairs. Yes. I suppose— yes, that’s probably a better idea.” He let go of the doors. “See you there.”

*

Shane set his alarm for 7.15am and jolted out of sleep like he’d been electrocuted. As he made his way to the shower, various parts of his body complained in increasingly confusing ways. His ass, naturally. Inside and out. His inner thighs. His right wrist? Why his wrist— oh. His head? Was he hungover? He’d barely drank anything. One glass of tepid champagne and a couple of mouthfuls of vodka. He wasn’t a drinker but he was a two-hundred-pound athlete; he could have a drink or two without the side effects.

It was probably just dehydration. And, oh yeah, four hours of sleep.

After blasting himself with hot water, Shane gingerly sat on the edge of the bath as a test. Oh fuck. Yeah. That was— the flight was *not* going to be comfortable.

Nor was sitting down for breakfast with Mikhail Petrov.

Shane groaned. He rooted around in his toiletries kit to find the tube of hemorrhoid cream he'd ordered off Amazon late one night, at Rozanov's lewd suggestion. Shaking his head – this was his life now – he gingerly applied it, sighing at the immediate, cooling relief. He didn't like the greasy sensation but it would get him through breakfast. Maybe on the plane he could sit on a cushion or something.

Rooting through the slim pickings he'd brought with him, Shane dressed in a new white t-shirt and a pair of dark jeans and stuck his cell and his room key into his back pocket. A room key that he then checked at his door to make sure it was the *right* key. He wondered if Rozanov had left yet. He couldn't imagine he had an early flight. Would he be going home to Boston first? He hadn't sounded happy about going back to Russia but why? From what Shane could see, his summers in Moscow were one long party. He was never more active on social media than he was in the off-season.

The doors of the elevator opened and Shane caught his reflection in the mirror. For a moment, blink-and-you'd-miss it, he didn't recognize himself. It was as if his features had shifted around just a little. There was a disconcerting softness to his eyes. His mouth – was it redder? Fuck. Did he have beard burn?

"Excuse me," someone said, jostling past him.

Shane hurried to take his position in the corner, fingers reaching up to touch his skin. It didn't feel rough. Rozanov had been clean shaven last night, freshly so, his skin baby-smooth. Maybe it was he'd just spent so much time *face down on the fucking bed*.

He could not account for the softness in his eyes, though.

On the second floor, Shane loitered in front of the *Please wait to be seated* sign for a moment. He was a few minutes early and didn't know if he should find a seat or maybe wait for Petrov. His mom hadn't prepared him for this kind of thing. When he'd met management before it was usually in someone's office or holding a glass of champagne.

He was about to just take the bull by the horns and find somewhere quiet to sit when a stocky guy with ash-blonde hair in a grey suit came up to him. "Mr. Hollander? Mr. Petrov is this way."

Shane followed him, weaving through the tables and past the buffet to an area of the restaurant that had been cordoned off. Grey-suit-guy scooted around the roped off barrier and Shane, casting a look around to see if any of the restaurant staff might have issue with this, followed him.

Petrov was sitting in the corner by the window on a round table big enough for six. Unlike the rest of the restaurant, this had a tablecloth on it and a little vase of flowers. There was one other guy, dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt, seated two tables away, no tablecloth. He stared at Shane as Shane and grey-suit-guy approached and then resumed looking around the restaurant as if Shane was no longer of any interest to him.

Petrov stood, drawing Shane's attention, his hand outstretched in greeting. "Hi, Shane. Appreciate you squeezing me in."

Shane wasn't totally certain he had a choice. But he smiled and shook Petrov's hand. "No problem, sir."

"What do you want for breakfast?"

Shane carefully sat down. Had they cleared this area *for* Petrov? "Um. From the buffet?"

"Or from the *a la carte*. Kurt will order for us."

Kurt was apparently the guy in the grey suit, now standing a polite couple of meters away.

Disconcerted by someone getting his own food from the buffet, disconcerted just in general, Shane touched the packet of protein powder in his pocket. "Um. I normally get a smoothie?"

Petrov gestured to Kurt. "That's fine. Give Kurt your order."

Shane had staff now. Being on the road as much as he was, it was a necessity. He had a housekeeper. He had a guy for his apparently quite finicky house plants. He had a private chef who prepared his meals weekly. He had a personal trainer, a physiotherapist, a masseuse and a yoga instructor. With a little bit of advice from his mom, Shane had got used to delegating and explaining his requirements to the people whose salaries he paid. And then he let them get on with it. At Christmas he gave them all a generous bonus.

But giving 'Kurt' instructions to get his smoothie from the buffet of a hotel was a whole different vibe. Awkwardly, he outlined his preferred mix of fruit and vegetables and handed Kurt the packet of protein powder. The desire to apologize for this menial task he was more than capable of performing was strong.

With brusque politeness, and no sense of discomfort, Petrov ordered scrambled eggs with smoked salmon. He did not look at a menu for this. "Cucumber salad. Kimchi, if they have it. You know what I like. And an espresso. Are you sure you don't want anything else, Shane?"

"The smoothie is good. I can get some water—" He made to stand up but Petrov raised his hand. "Kurt. Some water for Shane."

Kurt nodded and left and Petrov went straight to business.

"So, I have here the raw data from the ESS." Petrov tapped his tablet. "I can't share them with you yet as the data team is going to put it in some presentable format. We had a 70% completion rate for the team which is on the higher end of the scale."

"Okay. Good." That was a relief. From the frustratingly lackluster responses he'd got from the guys, he'd begun to wonder if they'd even get halfway. "Some room for improvement but not bad."

"I understand that you encouraged the team to complete the survey, so thank you for that."

Shane's expression perhaps conveyed his wonder at how he might know that. Oh, God, were their cell phones tapped?

The corners of Petrov's eyes crinkled, which Shane was beginning to think was how he smiled. "Peetie told me."

"Oh. Oh, yeah. Oh," Shane said, cycling through various emotions. He hadn't for once considered that *he* might be the topic of any conversations between Petrov and the team.

"He respects you a great deal. In fact, that was one of the points I wanted to discuss with you. As I'm sure you've gathered, the data does give an overall sense of sentiment within each department, which includes the team, and you were mentioned – positively – several times."

Shane was regularly speechless. This was not new. But he was *rarely* speechless for good reason.

"Yes. Responsible. Great attitude. A role model." Petrov leaned over his tablet. "*Would call Cap before I'd call the emergency services in a crisis*, was one quote. Someone else said, *Team was a shitshow before he came along*."

Fuck. Was he— was he going to cry?

Thank God, a waiter appeared with their food or, in Shane's case, his smoothie. They both sat back and murmured their thanks. Shane casually ran the edge of his thumb under one eye to check for moisture. All good.

"Otherwise," Petrov continued, returning to his tablet, "sentiment in the team is generally decent. No significant concerns from my point of view."

It was a relief. With his cynical hat on, Shane wondered if the thirty percent of the team who hadn't filled in the survey had actually been his biggest detractors. Which, if this was the case, made him very lucky.

Petrov tucked into his breakfast. The hotel had arranged tiny little bowls of cucumber and kimchi around his scrambled eggs and smoked salmon. They'd also given him a couple of slices of white toast, which he frowned at and removed to a side plate.

Shane also disliked white bread. A waste of carbs.

As this appeared to be a meeting where Shane was going to be constantly wrong-footed, he was no more than two mouthfuls into his smoothie when Petrov looked up, over his shoulder and said, "Ah. And there's your arch-nemesis."

It was Pavlovian was what it was. Shane's dick twitched, even as he spun around – totally uncool – and found Rozanov studying the bacon at the buffet.

"Uh. Yeah." He swiveled back.

"Tell me, is the rivalry as intense as it's made out to be? Or is it mostly media spin to make the league money?"

"Bit of column A and bit of column B, I guess," Shane sighed, in a rare position to be truthful. An owner should know where the reality lay, after all. "We're both very competitive

and the best players in the league. Though I'm ahead in points. Right now."

This was an important detail.

"I see."

"We have very different styles."

"Yes, that's certainly true." The crinkly eyes again. "He keeps looking over here."

Shane was *not* going to turn around again. He took a big sip of his smoothie. "Probably wants to rub his MVP win in my face."

Amongst other things.

"So, his media personality is reflective of real life?"

"Oh yeah," Shane said easily, then, again, found himself compelled to be truthful, "but it's also part of the act. You know. A Masshole. They love that, in Boston. He was a good fit for the team."

Petrov tapped his tablet. "As you are a good fit for Montreal."

Shane smiled tightly. He was now too aware of Rozanov to get caught up in his earlier feelings. He took another gulp of his smoothie, ignoring the desire to turn around, to see what Rozanov was doing. He was probably at the pancake station, loading up on simple carbs. Covering everything in syrup.

His cell phone buzzed in his pocket and he pulled it out, just in case it was something important, like a notification from the airline.

Lily, said his notifications.

He slammed his cell phone face down on the table. Petrov watched him do this. "Of course, I imagine that attitude comes from his upbringing. His father is – was – a Colonel in the FSB. Tough guy."

"Oh yeah?" That was not on Rozanov's Wikipedia page which Shane may have, once or twice, perused out of purely professional interest. Shane only had the vaguest idea what the FSB was. Something like the FBI maybe? But Colonel sounded more military. And important.

Petrov took a sip of his coffee. His sharp eyes drifted over Shane's shoulder. "Lot of pressure on that kid. Lot of eyes on him. People were plenty pissed when he didn't stay in the KHL. And he was brutalized in the press for the loss in Sochi."

Shane tried to think of something relevant, and intelligent, to say, as Petrov had just educated Shane on a man he was casually fucking. Given Shane thought about Rozanov an unconscionable, *unforgiveable* amount, it had never really occurred to him to wonder why Rozanov had left Russia for the MLH to come be his personal torment. They were

comparable leagues in terms of excellence, though the style of play was certainly different. Probably the money was better in North America. Rozanov liked the money. Paid for his flashy cars.

“I did hear about some of the backlash at the Olympics,” was what Shane settled for. He had felt for Rozanov, back then. Enough to break their unwritten rules and seek him out in broad daylight. Much good that had done.

His cell phone buzzed again. He didn’t have to look to know it was Rozanov. What was that asshole *doing*?

Thankfully for Shane’s blood pressure, Petrov’s own phone rang then – very much *not* on silent – and he sighed when he looked at the screen. “I apologize, Shane, I do need to take this. I’ll be five minutes.”

He stepped away then, one hand scraping his way through his dark hair, and Shane jumped on his cell.

Lily: Who are you talking to

Lily: He is old but he is hot

Lily: Jane. Jane. Jane.

Shane wrote back, grinding his teeth. *I am in a meeting with the owner of the Metros, you asshole. Stop messaging me.*

Lily: That cannot be owner. He is too young.

Jane: I thought he was old? It’s Mikhail Petrov. Look him up.

Lily: He is Russian?

Jane: French. His dad is Russian.

Rozanov went silent and Shane risked a glance over his shoulder which was a massive mistake. Rozanov had taken a table right by the roped off area so he could watch him like a creep. Shane swung back, quickly. Rozanov had been slumped over his phone, one hand pushed into his curls, thank God, so hadn’t seen him.

His phone buzzed again.

Lily: How well you know him?

Jane: We have monthly meetings.

Jane: He’s...different.

Lily: Internet says he’s gay. You want to fuck him?

Woah. *No!!!!!!*

Lily: He want to fuck you?

Blood rushed to Shane's face. Did he? Did *he*? Shane had literally no idea how this worked. How were you supposed to tell if a guy wanted to fuck you? It wasn't as if he could see Petrov in a shower, which was the only other point of reference he had.

Petrov returned just as Rozanov's message landed and Shane's brain had exploded into crisis mode. "Sorry, Shane. That was unavoidable." He sat down. "What else did I have on my agenda? Unless you have something you want to discuss?"

"Ah. No, no, I'm good."

"Okay, then. I'll let you go. Thank you, again, for making time for me."

Shane jumped up. He shook Petrov's hand – *you want to fuck him?* – and hoped he was smiling normally and not somehow conveying how aware he was of every single millimeter of where their skin was touching. *He want to fuck you?* "No problem, sir. Mr— ah, Petrov," he said, stumbling.

Petrov's eyes crinkled. "Nearly, Shane."

"I'll see you next season."

He hurried off, mortified. And did not look at Rozanov as he walked past him.

Nearly at the elevator, Shane's phone buzzed. He checked it, with the appropriate sense of trouble.

Lily: Meet me in the bathroom. The second one at the end of the corridor.

Lily: We forget something last night.

*

Surprisingly, being thrown against walls was no new thing to Shane, whose every interaction with Ilya Rozanov seemed to expand his sexual world. Rozanov's sculpted mouth descending on his wasn't new either, nor was the thrust of that expert tongue. *Finally*, Shane thought, hungrily kissing back. Rozanov tasted of coffee and cigarettes, what a European cliché.

He probably tasted like kale.

Shane licked Rozanov's teeth and sucked on his tongue, desperately, part of his mind on making up for last night, part of it screaming about the absolute insanity of what he was doing. It was broad daylight. They were in a hotel restroom in one of the lockable cubicles. It was only a few steps up from the conference room bathroom of last night but there was only so much the potpourri could do. It was in fucking *public*.

And then Rozanov tore away and began kissing down Shane's neck and all thoughts other than pleasure went out of his brain. Total whiteout. Last night Rozanov had been smooth shaven, but this morning there was a scrape of stubble down Shane's sensitive skin. It was fucking hot, sending tingling waves of heat down his neck, his spine, curling around his dick. He might have moaned. Okay, he definitely moaned.

When Rozanov's hand reached down to snap open Shane's jeans, some vague sense of self-preservation stopped him. "What are you doing?" he hissed, squeezing Rozanov's wrist.

"What does it look like?" Rozanov's other hand palmed Shane's ass and blinked. How could he look simultaneously like butter wouldn't melt but also like the most sinful thing on earth? "I'm going to get on my knees on this bathroom floor and suck you. You not want?"

Saliva pooled under Shane's tongue. "Fuck. Rozanov." He wanted. He fucking *wanted*.

"You have to be quiet, yes?"

Shane nodded. Quiet. Yes. He could do that.

And, God, it made Shane breathless, the way Rozanov looked on his knees. He touched the soft curls reverently and then clapped a hand over his mouth when Rozanov pulled Shane's dick out of his boxer briefs and looked up, just once, a crooked, *wicked* smile on his face. His mouth – lips red, spit-slicked – opened. He took the very tip of Shane's dick between his lips, still making eye contact. And then he swallowed him down like a fucking pro.

"Oh fuckfuckfuck," Shane moaned in his hand, before he bit down on his palm, Rozanov's head bobbing obscenely beneath him.

He came unspeakably quickly, Rozanov gulping him down like he was a treat.

Woozily, Shane listed forward, his hands on Rozanov's shoulders as he tucked Shane's wet dick back into his boxers. "Um. If you give me a second—"

Behind them, the door to the men's bathroom opened and they both froze. Or Shane froze. Rozanov stood in one smooth motion and covered Shane's mouth with his hand. They stared at each other, equally horrified.

Shane's pants were *around his ankles*.

Whoever it was unzipped and sighed, peeing into the urinal. Rozanov's expression of horror morphed into amusement. He grinned.

It took maybe one-thousand-years for the guy to wrap up the longest piss known to mankind. And though Shane wanted him to fuck off quickly, he was still pretty disgusted when it was clear he hadn't bothered to wash his hands. Just swung out of the bathroom having handled his dick. Probably to get something from the breakfast buffet. *Ugh*.

Rozanov bent down and pulled up Shane's jeans.

"This was a fucking stupid idea." Shane shoved at Rozanov's shoulder and did himself up.

Rozanov snickered. “It was a fucking excellent idea.” He kissed Shane on the mouth, quickly, then again when Shane – like a dog, like a desperate dog – leaned forward for another. “Besides. You got yours.”

“Oh, yeah.” Fairness had Shane automatically fumbling for Rozanov’s fly, as if he hadn’t just had a panic attack. What was wrong with him?

This time, Rozanov was the one to stop him. “Ah. No. I think the mood is dead. Killed?” Rozanov’s brow furrowed.

“Ah. It’s more like, it killed the mood,” Shane proffered, none too sure of the grammar on this one.

“Killed the mood,” Rozanov repeated, the way he did when he wanted to commit some new language to memory. It was cute.

Wait. It was *not* cute. They were in a public restroom.

Shane swallowed. He looked at Rozanov’s lips. Sort of... missing them. “I’ll owe you one.”

“Yes. In October.” Rozanov kissed him again. And again. He paused as Shane helplessly listed towards him. “Did you check out of your room already?”

“Oh. No, actually.”

*

They ended up fucking. *Gently*. Rozanov eased himself inside of Shane like he was made of fucking glass, whispered check-ins with him with every inch Shane took of his dick. His nose nudged Shane’s to keep his attention, his fingers squeezing Shane’s thigh over the bruises he had left the night before.

When he was fully seated, his mouth found Shane’s, tongue diving in first, tasting of the mouthwash he’d briefly used when they got back to the room. “Okay?”

“Mmm,” Shane said, lost to the sensation of fullness, which seemed to surprise him every time. The gentleness was a direct contrast to last night. It reminded him of the first time.

Rozanov’s nose nudged Shane’s again. “Words, Hollander.”

“S’good. Doesn’t hurt.” It did, a little. More like a burn. He’d used so much lube, though, that it was by no means bad. *Good* feel.

Rozanov began to move and, safe in a room with doors and proper walls, Shane let out a moan as Rozanov’s dick stroked against his prostate. Slowly. His eyes rolled back in his head at the building sensation. “Fuck, Rozanov.”

“Is good? Hmm?”

“*Fuck*.”

“Words, Hollander.”

“Yes, God, yes!”

Rozanov huffed out a breathy laugh. His mouth found Shane’s. “You are so tight, Hollander. Even after last night.”

He felt tight. Or Rozanov felt big. Deep inside him. They were pressed so close. Skin so hot, their chests kissing, Rozanov’s cross dangling between them. A bead of sweat crawled down Shane’s temple and Rozanov licked it. “You want to touch yourself?” he panted, keeping up his steady, rolling thrusts.

Oh *yeah*. His dick was right there. Flushed full and leaking on his stomach. Rozanov had given it a few lubed-up strokes earlier and Shane hissed as he fumbled down to make contact. He stroked once, twice. Fucking electric. “M’gonna come,” he said, because he was.

“Good boy.”

He could never know what that did for him. Never, never, never. “Harder, Rozanov.”

“Nope,” was the crisp reply, perfectly articulated.

“Please,” Shane whispered.

“You’ll come like this,” Rozanov said, licking into his mouth, unbearably coherent, “or not at all.”

*

Afterwards, Rozanov flipped him and parted his cheeks so he could inspect Shane’s asshole. Too fucked out to do anything about this, and feeling weirdly touched by the attention, Shane instead tried to smother himself with a pillow to hide from all the feelings.

Rozanov hummed. “Is not too bad. Maybe a little sore.” He blew a jet of cold air onto Shane’s tender flesh and Shane clenched down, shivering a bit. It was sensitive in a way that wasn’t entirely horrible. “You have cream, yes?”

Shane’s face burned hot. Maybe hotter than his asshole. “Oh my God.”

One eye peeking out from under his pillow, Shane watched as, confidently naked, Rozanov prowled to the bathroom and rifled through Shane’s things. He returned with the tube Shane had used before, looking pleased.

Then Shane’s archrival delicately painted hemorrhoid cream on his hole.

This really was a *wildly* different experience from last night. Like Rozanov was a totally different person. “I was hard on you last night. I’m sorry.”

What a weird morning this was turning out to be. “I wasn’t complaining,” Shane said into the pillow.

“No. You were begging for it, as usual.”

“Asshole.”

Smirking, Rozanov screwed the cap back on. He patted Shane’s butt and wiped his finger on the ruined bedsheet. “You have a few months to recover.”

Shane rolled onto his side. They’d never exactly explicitly verbalized the continuation of this... whatever this was... into the next season. He studied Rozanov’s profile. The long eyelashes. The artful lips. That straight – at least from this angle – nose and cut-glass cheekbones. He withheld a sigh. “Maybe I’ll fuck someone else.”

Rozanov snorted. “Maybe you will.”

It wasn’t a denial but it didn’t sound convincing. Hayden and J.J. and he had vaguely discussed taking a trip to Cabo that summer. Maybe he’d fuck someone there. He could do that.

Shane narrowed his eyes. “*You* certainly will.” Did that come off bitter? He suspected it had done.

“Probably.” A crooked smile. “But maybe not men. Not in Moscow.”

“Dangerous,” Shane whispered, struck suddenly by a shiver of fear. *FSB*. “Don’t... don’t do that, then.”

“I won’t, Hollander.” He leaned down to kiss him and pressed their foreheads together. “If you let someone fuck you, you be careful. Safe. Yes?”

His cheeks warmed. “I’m not a fucking child, Rozanov.”

“Okay, okay.” Rozanov sat up and held his hands up. “But I like this asshole. I have... vested interest? That’s expression?”

Shane nodded. He dropped down, suddenly exhausted. “Yeah... that’s the expression.”

Rozanov stood. “I must go or I’ll miss my flight.”

“Back to Boston?”

“Yes.” He began to dress, picking up his clothes from the floor. Shane’s were neatly folded on the chair.

“And then to Moscow?”

“Yes,” he said, in a completely different – worse – tone of voice.

Shane cuddled his pillow, watching as Rozanov pulled on his jeans. Petrov’s words from earlier lingered, nudging at Shane to be curious. “Your dad is tough on you?”

Rozanov glanced over, suspicious. For a very, very brief moment, he looked young, like a boy. Then it went and he was all sharp angles again. “He is Russian.”

“And military – or something?”

Dark blonde eyebrows rose. “Police. How you know this?”

“Someone mentioned.”

Rozanov’s eyes narrowed suspiciously but he didn’t comment further. Just made a noise that Shane associated with Russians – because some of his Russian teammates also did it.

“*Hmph.*”

“Does he know—”

“Fuck, Hollander. *No.* He would murder me. My body would never be found.” He yanked on his T-shirt. “Bad enough—” Whatever he had been going to say, Rozanov stopped himself. His mouth was set into a hard line. He ran his fingers through his curly hair. “Is enough, Hollander.”

“Okay,” Shane whispered, fairly wounded by this response. If an imaginary Shane ever told his dad, or his mom, that he might be in to imaginary boys, he knew his parents would still love him. Maybe they’d be disappointed that he wasn’t the poster-child for wholesome values – maybe they’d be sad about grandchildren and worried about his career – but murder wouldn’t be on the table. He didn’t think Rozanov was joking, either.

Dressed, Rozanov came to loom over Shane on the bed. All in black, he looked edgy, dangerous. The ill humor of the night before had returned thanks to Shane’s questions.

Shane wished he’d put some clothes on instead of lying there, vulnerably naked.

But also... it was kind of sexy. Lewd. He found himself tilting his head up. Just a little. *Kiss me*, he thought.

Almost as if he had read his mind, Ilya bent down. He caught Shane’s mouth, soft, tongue slipping inside. They kissed for a long minute, long enough that Rozanov’s knee came to rest on the bed, long enough that Shane twisted around so he could grab a handful of curls. His dick gave a hopeful twitch.

“*Blyat,*” Rozanov cursed, wrenching away and grabbing his bag, not looking at him as he headed for the door. “You are the worst, Hollander. See you in October.”

Dazedly, Shane reached up and wiped the spit away from his smiling bottom lip and then – fuck – realized he needed to catch a plane, too.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

“Fuck, he wants to make hockey gay,” Rozanov laughed, wiping the tears from his eyes.
“That’s fucking hilarious.”

Chapter Notes

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

That summer was exactly like all his other summers, with the exception of two things.

The first was the public destruction of the Metros leadership. Starting with the GM. Oh, it was couched in pretty terms. The public statement was that Phil was retiring – sure, Shane thought, ‘retiring’ with a fat pay off – and the team wished him well for his years of service, attributing the Metros current position to his ‘leadership’ and ‘guidance’. Which was obviously bullshit because he’d *also* been in charge for the fifteen years when the Metros hadn’t moved the needle.

But anyway. The GM wasn’t the only one who left. Three weeks later, the *President* moved on to new pastures – which did shock Shane. From what his mom could gather the reason for the delay between announcements was that his leaving was significantly more acrimonious.

The AGM was staying – but in his current position, not promoted – and for the time being someone was being brought in from Petrov’s organization to support in the gaping void left behind. That someone Shane recognized from the article he’d read, the person with the pink buzzcut, who was identified as Alex Gauthier, from Montreal. The press release used ‘they/them’ pronouns.

That got screen-grabbed and shared in the Metros chat along with some truly offensive language that had Shane putting his phone down and performing some deep breathing exercises. Shane made them delete it, but a couple of last season’s rookies shared screengrabs of the *other* group chat to show him that the conversation had just moved elsewhere.

Keep an eye on that for me, he asked them.

There wasn’t much else Shane could do about that. He couldn’t police personal chats he wasn’t even in, but he made a mental note of the usual suspects – for what purpose he didn’t know. He had no intention of telling on his teammates to anyone – and who would he tell? Theriault? Who probably had his own chat somewhere saying exactly the same shit? – and it didn’t exactly change his view of the perpetrators, either, because they were already classic jock assholes.

He did tell his mom about it though.

“Hmm,” she said. “This is a tough one.”

“Yeah.”

“Obviously if the organization is moving in this more,” she paused delicately, and checked her mirror as she overtook someone, “inclusive direction, that’s good news. Very good news.”

“Sure.”

“But it’s a radical step change for the MLH.”

“Yup,” Shane muttered.

“And while your team is certainly representative of the MLH in general, they’re a good group of guys and you’re their captain, so they’ll listen to you. They already did, doing that survey. And all that positive feedback, sweetheart, that’s amazing.” Yuna reached across the console to squeeze his leg. “We’re so proud of you.”

Shane smiled because that was the expected response, not because he was totally convinced. His mom had a perception of the Metros that was maybe a little rose-tinted. Same as his perception had once been, back before he was a rookie. Which was fine, he loved the guys now, even despite their less positive traits.

But he didn’t want to burst her bubble. “Thanks, Mom.”

“I think you’re doing the right thing. Your responsibility is to protect the team, protect the room. Nudge the guys in the right direction but don’t be too political. That’s not your responsibility,” Yuna said sternly. “Mr. Petrov is ambitious but he’s obviously intelligent enough to know that he’ll need someone like you on the ground. He can’t expect miracles, though. And certainly not from you.”

His mother’s gaze sharpened as she looked from the highway to Shane and back again. They were on the way to look at some land Shane was thinking of buying, not far from his parent’s cabin. This had been a dream of his for a long time. “Do you think we’ll have the opportunity to meet him?”

This was a vaguely terrifying prospect that Shane hoped to put off for as long as possible. His mom could be *blunt*. “Why, so you can give him a piece of your mind?”

She laughed. “No, he just seems interesting. He must be so pleased to have you on the team. You represent everything he is fighting for.”

“Sure,” Shane muttered, looking away and out the window, his skin prickling with the sensitivity he associated with the Big Lie.

As if summoned by Shane’s thoughts, his cell phone buzzed on his lap. He didn’t need to turn it over to know it was Rozanov. This was the second big difference to his summer. Over the past couple of years, Rozanov’s messages had been sporadic, at best, over the summer months. Maybe a message every few days, even when Shane replied promptly.

This summer they had been in near constant contact. Sure, a lot of it was the same kind of stuff as always: sexts and chirps and dick pics (from him). But a lot of it was commentary on the meltdown of the Metros management. This morning Rozanov wanted to know if Shane thought his Coach might be next. He seemed to find this very funny.

Shane wasn't sure how to respond to Rozanov. Talking about it outside of the team seemed kind of traitorous. He was basically revealing state secrets with his literal rival.

But Rozanov was very interested and part of Shane *liked* that there was something about him, or adjacent to him, that Rozanov found interesting. Something that wasn't his ass or his mouth which Rozanov had made very clear were his best features.

"So," his mom said and he could tell from her tone of voice that she was going to change the subject, "tell me about this trip to Mexico."

*

He fucked a guy in Mexico. Or rather, the guy fucked him, if you wanted to be really pedantic about it.

And he liked it. Maybe not as much as he liked getting fucked by Rozanov, but that made sense, right? The guy in Mexico was a literal stranger. It was a weird thing to have a stranger stick their dick in you, weird for them to see your come face, though Shane had been on his front because it had felt too personal to be on his back like he often was with Rozanov.

Then he'd snuck home just after dawn and J.J. and Hayden had crowed with laughter, assuming he'd been with a girl.

He'd now had sex with two guys and the needle that sat between 'gay' and 'straight' moved a little more towards 'gay'.

So. There was that, too.

*

In October, there was an 'incident' at training, though it only became an 'incident' after the fact because up until that point it had been no different than any other training Shane had attended.

Theriault had been on a tear since the season started. It was clear the Metros had momentum. He had told them he was going to push them hard – and taken Shane aside and said he was going to push Shane even harder – and he followed through on that immediately.

His motivational tactics had always leaned into the old-school, verbal abuse side of leadership. He had that in common with some of the coaches Shane'd had in the past. Maybe it was because young men needed a bit of tough love? In any case, Shane had heard it all by this point and was reasonably inured to hearing 'get a move on cocksuckers' across the ice as well as a variety of other colorful expressions that tied being gay with being slow, backwards, incapable or an underperforming specimen of masculinity.

He didn't take it personally. Even though, before his experiments in Mexico, Shane had known that he was probably, maybe, not entirely straight. Straight guys – impossible as this seemed – didn't get off to videos of Ilya Rozanov's top ten goals.

Shane skidded to a halt next to one of their new rookies as they watched Theriault go for Cornice who, yes, *had* fucked up a fairly simple drill three days running but probably didn't deserve to be called a 'fucking pansy retard' for doing so.

"Um. Is it always like this?" the kid asked, after a full five minutes. Everyone on the ice had stopped to watch, the assistant coaches not even bothering to keep up the other drills.

And Shane had looked at him, this kid, with his big brown eyes and sweat sticking his hair down onto his forehead like he had micro-bangs and something in Shane just sort of sighed. He'd been this kid once. Those first few practices had been brutal.

Resigned, Shane skated towards Theriault, who was still going, gesticulating wildly in front of Corny, who was staring down the ice but looked up hopefully when Shane's skates came into his eyeline. "Hey, coach?"

Theriault spun. "Fucking *what*, Hollander?"

"Think Corny got your point, that's all." Shane smiled sweetly at the red-faced man, plenty experienced with looking stupid and friendly in front of people who wanted something from him. "I can work on the drill later with him. Sure we can bring him up to scratch. Can't we, bud?" He slid closer so he could slap a hand on Cornice's padded shoulder and lean against him. Corny nodded frantically and listed gratefully towards Shane.

It wasn't the first time Shane had tried to de-escalate an issue like this. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't.

Today it didn't. Shane barely batted an eyelid as Theriault's ire turned on him. In a way, it was better because Shane could take it. He sort of phased Theriault out, focused on that little skin tag that clung to the corner of his left eye, wobbling about. He knew that the more experienced members of the team were mentally ticking off the curse words that were flying about to recount in the group chat later. Wow, was that the 'c' word? He must be really pissed. Oh, and he just called the whole team a bunch of fags. And *that*, my friends, was Theriault bingo, which meant he now had to take the team out for drinks tonight.

Goddamnit. He'd been hoping for an early night.

"COACH THERIAULT!"

The enraged voice travelled across the ice like a foghorn, freezing them all in place.

"*Marde*," J.J. said, somewhere behind Shane.

Oh shit indeed.

Because the voice had come from the tunnel entrance, where Mikhail Petrov and half a dozen other smartly dressed individuals were standing. Petrov looked pissed. They *all* looked

pissed.

“Fuck,” breathed Theriault.

*

“So what did he do?”

Shane sighed. He didn’t even have to guess who Rozanov was talking about. It was all anyone was talking about. “Do we have to do this now?”

Rozanov was lying on his stomach, faced propped up on his hands. Behind him, his legs were kicking up in the air, like an excitable kid. “Come *on*, Hollander. You have work gossip. You have never been this interesting.”

That stung a bit. “You seemed to find me pretty interesting a few minutes ago. *Fuck Hollander, you’re so good Hollander, I’m going to come, Hollander,*” he said, and he felt he did a passable attempt at mimicking the way Rozanov pronounced his name in his incredibly hot Russian accent.

The chirp landed and Rozanov’s face split with a wide ridiculous grin. Shane would have been mortified to have these words, said in the heat of passion, thrown back at him but Rozanov just crowed with laughter. “Hollander! That was so shit. I loved it.” He grabbed hold of Shane ankle and *yanked*, pulling Shane down the bed. He was fucking strong which was a massive turn-on. Ugh. “But I do not say those things. Is lie.”

“You do,” Shane said smugly, flat on his back. “Plus a bunch of stuff in Russian which I’m sure is fucking disgusting.”

“Mmm, yes, very.” Rozanov crawled sinuously over him. His half-hard cock dragged over Shane’s thigh as he began to kiss Shane’s chest. “I tell you what a good hole you have. So tight and welcoming.”

Shane bit his lip, flushing from more than just the filthy words that flowed so easily from Rozanov’s tongue. Once again, Rozanov had added something *new* to Shane’s sexual repertoire this evening when he’d pulled Shane’s legs over his shoulders and *stuck his tongue in Shane’s ass*.

It had fairly blown Shane’s mind. He’d heard about it, of course, but the actual concept had seemed pretty far-fetched. He’d had absolutely no idea there were a bunch of nerves around there that could be stimulated by someone’s tongue. Or that someone – Ilya Rozanov in this case – would be willing to do said stimulation.

Obviously, Shane was diligent with his personal hygiene – and Rozanov knew that. But still. Wow. He’d nearly come from that alone, that wet little muscle probing down there, the noises Rozanov made. And then Rozanov had brought their dicks together and jerked them off simultaneously and Shane had lasted about a nano-second before he had come all over his abdomen. Thankfully Rozanov hadn’t lasted much longer and his come had joined Shane’s moments later which had also been hot.

Look. It was all hot. Always.

Rozanov kissed his way up Shane's chest and neck to his mouth. Their tongues tangled, both of them tasting of the hotel mouthwash they'd used after they'd showered. His hand reached behind Shane, finger stroking the still-damp hole. "You want?" he whispered.

Shane *wanted, wanted, wanted*. He'd been hard pretty much since Rozanov had yanked him down the bed and now he wanted so much he couldn't speak for wanting.

Understanding passed across Rozanov's expressive face. Shane got another kiss. "On your front or on your back? You choose."

For the briefest moment, Shane thought of that guy in Mexico, of being anonymously face-down on another hotel bed. It was good like that, probably better, and he knew Rozanov could go harder in that position, but— "On my back, please."

"Please," Rozanov whispered, smiling as he kissed him again. "*Takoy khoroshiy mal'chik.*"

God. Whatever that was, Russian was sexy.

*

As it happened, Shane's next 1-2-1 with Petrov was postponed. Nothing to do with the Metros, instead there was some big deal in Europe that required his attention for a solid month.

The next time they met, it had been six weeks since Theriault had been placed on administrative leave and, when Shane questioned when their coach might be returning, he was told, point blank, that he wouldn't be.

"It has emerged that our HR department has received about a dozen formal complaints about Coach Theriault over the last five years." Petrov's voice was clipped. In fact, he'd been pretty damn *clipped* since Shane had walked in. He was pissed about something.

Shane's mouth dropped open. "From the team?"

"The team. Ops." Petrov gestured tightly with his Mont Blanc. "One of your former assistant coaches. And a social media intern who left shortly afterwards."

"*Nisha?*" Shane sat up straighter, and he'd already been sitting up pretty damn straight. "Holy shit."

Shane's reaction seemed to break Petrov's inscrutable visage. "No one came to you with any complaints?"

Shaking his head, Shane pulled a face. "I mean – we all complain about the coaches. That's standard. No one has ever told me that they wanted to go to HR about it." Thank God. The only person he really knew on any level in HR was Elaine, who dealt with their benefits package. Everyone liked Elaine. Comeau in particular: he'd asked her out several times but she kept saying no.

“And if they had?”

“Well, that’s a process.” A process Shane had been officially trained on, as Captain of the team. And he wasn’t going to let Petrov think he would let something like this slide. “If someone came to me with a complaint, I would escalate it appropriately.”

“And if it was about the Coach?”

“I would go to HR. Or depending on what it was, even the Players Association. I would do my job.”

Petrov looked at Shane for a moment and Shane looked back, unwavering, sort of pissed that he was being questioned about this. “I believe you, Shane. And most of the team complaints were before your time as captain, from what I can see.”

Well, that was a relief.

“That language on the ice, is that common?”

Shane didn’t want to lie, but equally didn’t want to confirm either. “It’s very common language across the MLH.”

“Yes, but on *my* ice, Shane?”

Sighing, Shane sat back. “Yes. It’s pretty common.”

“And you are okay with that?” Petrov’s dark eyebrows rose into his hair. For the first time, Shane observed that it was a little more mussed than it normally was, some falling on his forehead like bangs. Like he’d been running his fingers through it. He wondered what it felt like. It was very shiny. Not as straight as his own and not curly like Rozanov’s. It had a bit of a wave, though, and was pleasingly thick.

“It’s what I’ve grown up with,” Shane said thoughtfully, still fairly transfixed by Petrov’s hair. “Which doesn’t make it right.”

“You skated over to your teammate to help him out. And then you deflected him.”

Shane said nothing.

“Do you do that a lot?”

“With Theriault?” He shrugged. “Yes, if it’s a teammate I know can’t handle it. Or a rookie. It’s not a big deal.”

“Hmph,” said Petrov and for the first time he sounded Russian to Shane. “I’m beginning to see why your team rates you so highly.”

“Not all of them. Some of them think I have a stick up my ass.”

And then, for the first time, Petrov laughed. It seemed to take even him by surprise. He rubbed a hand over his face tiredly. “What a week.”

“Sorry about that.”

“Nothing to be sorry for, Shane, as it has nothing to do with you.”

“Regretting buying us now?”

“No. If anything, it’s things like this that demonstrate *why* we bought the Metros.”

Shane chewed his bottom lip. It wasn’t exactly news to him that Petrov’s move to buy a hockey team hadn’t been to just make money. This was a large-scale PR initiative. “Are you looking for new coaches?”

“Yes. We have our eye on someone. We’re also recruiting a new head of HR if you know of anyone.”

All Shane knew were hockey players. Though J.J. was currently dating a med student. “Um. I’ll keep my eye out?”

Petrov laughed again.

*

In and amongst the usual messages, Rozanov and Shane started to make plans for the next Boston-Montreal game two weeks out, which was becoming standard practice for them. Shane had purposefully kept the night clear until forces beyond his control intervened with an invitation he apparently couldn’t refuse.

His mom gasped when he told her. “This is a fantastic opportunity, Shane. You *must* do it.”

“I have a game!”

“And you’ll be done by seven.”

“This is ridiculous, Mom.”

Under the impressive glare of his mother, Shane emailed Marlene back, accepting Petrov’s very kind invitation to dinner.

Shane left telling Rozanov until a couple of days before, some sense that this was going to be problematic but not knowing quite why or how it would manifest. He still wanted to see Rozanov and he had wracked his brain of a way of making that happen without explicitly *saying* that.

In the end, he tried to just make it a *fait accompli*.

Jane: *I’m going to be late after. Have a dinner thing.*

Jane: *I'll give you my code and you can let yourself into my apartment.*

Jane: *It's 1875*

Jane: *Please use the back entrance.*

This felt kind of brave to Shane. Letting Rozanov have access to his apartment, even if it was through the service entrance.

But to Shane's surprise – or rather, his dread – Rozanov was less interested in this and much more interested in what Shane was doing instead.

Lily: *What kind of dinner thing?*

Really, what he needed to do was lie. He could say something vague – like 'team dinner' or 'family' – but he knew Rozanov would needle him about this. He would say *fuck the team or your parents are too needy* or something. And it just wasn't realistic. He'd thrown off team dinners before. And his parents weren't even going to be at the game.

The truth was probably more palatable in this instance. Rozanov would surely see it wasn't possible for him to get out of it.

Jane: *Petrov.*

His cell phone screen lit up. *Lily calling*, it said.

Lily had never called him. He had never called Lily. He stared at the screen blankly for a moment, long enough that Hayden leaned over. "You gonna answer that?"

"Er. Yeah." Shane yanked on his T-shirt over slightly-too-damp skin and hurried out into the hallway. He answered as he ducked into an empty storage room. Well, it was a very full storage room but it was empty of human beings. "What the fuck. I'm at practice."

And – Shane realized – he could have just *not* answered.

"Petrov's taking you out now?"

Heat crawled up Shane's skin. He thought of Petrov's mussed dark hair. "*No*. He wants me to meet the new coach."

"Hmm."

"And it's right after the game, too. Did you seriously call me for this?"

"Was good gossip, Hollander. You fucking the billionaire owner of your team. Exciting."

Rozanov did not seem excited.

"You're obsessed. He doesn't want to—" Shane looked around, at the piles of paper towels and toilet paper and cleaning products. Were there cameras in here? Did they have sound?

“He doesn’t want to do that,” he whispered, trying to decide if the little black splotch on the ceiling was a sprinkler or a listening device. “He’s, like, ten years older than us.”

An adult. A real one. Rather than the one Shane was pretending to be.

“Fifteen. But who is counting,” Rozanov said, and he always sounded annoyed, a quality of the way he fired questions and comments and commands at Shane, his accent thick with languorous consonants and clipped vowels, but he sounded *actually* annoyed now. “His last boyfriend was younger.”

“What the fuck?”

“Ten years. Pretty. Like you.”

Shane had never known what to make of *pretty*. He wasn’t pretty. His mom said he was handsome all the time but when Shane looked in the mirror he didn’t see it. Guys like Rozanov were handsome. Well. Rozanov was probably more than handsome. “Is this the artist guy?”

He may have read an article over the summer.

“Ah, so you have done your research too,” Rozanov drawled. “You wanted to know about competition.”

“No, I didn’t. I don’t. It was an accident. It’s not *competition*.”

“*Do* you want to fuck him?”

Look, Shane was not experienced with relationships, let alone whatever it was that he and Rozanov had going on. But he wasn’t stupid. Rozanov calling to pester him and being overtly annoyed about dinner with an established gay guy probably indicated that whatever they had going on was not as casual as either of them were making it out to be.

Which was fucking terrifying but, more than that, and the thing Shane’s brain latched onto because it was easier to parse, it was *monumentally* hypocritical since Rozanov apparently couldn’t keep his dick out of random girls for more than twenty-four hours at a time.

So a demonic hand grabbed hold of Shane’s chest and dug in, five individual claws, points of pressure he could feel like they were real. “Yeah, sure, who wouldn’t? He’s fucking hot,” he spat.

Rozanov hung up.

*

“...and this is Brandon Wiebe. Wiebe, Shane Hollander, our Captain.”

Wiebe held out his hand to Shane. He had a nice smile. He had a nice face, actually – dark brown eyes, tan skin, faintly wavy, short light-brown hair. Good looking, if you liked— well,

handsome, athletic-looking men. Which Shane apparently did. “Of course, Shane, your reputation proceeds you.”

Shane shook the proffered hand, smiling and absolutely not having a gay crisis in public. “Good to meet you.”

He had researched Wiebe, because he was a Hollander and that was what Hollanders did. Wiebe was young, in his late thirties. He’d been a forward for Chicago until he retired a couple of years ago, though he’d moved around in his career before then.

Shane had watched a couple of his games, studied Wiebe’s technique, and he hadn’t been bad by any means. He was a decent player – dependable, which was a good quality – and seemed to have chemistry with his team. But he lacked that on-ice hockey instinct that Shane had in spades.

Suffice to say, Shane had his doubts about this hire. An assistant coach would have been more appropriate. He struggled to see how a guy this young would be able to lead them to the playoffs.

But that wasn’t Shane’s call.

They all sat. A discreet waiter arrived to take their order and Petrov deferred to him and Wiebe in that smooth way that Shane’s dad did when they went out for dinner, setting the tone for the evening. “I am going to order wine if anyone would like to join me?”

“Sounds good,” Wiebe said, looking down at the menu. It was the type of place that didn’t have prices. Shane had been here before.

Petrov looked at Shane, who declined with a shake of his head. “I don’t really drink during the season.” And he *definitely* wouldn’t in front of the owner of his team and his new coach.

Wiebe was interested. “At all?” He sounded doubtful.

When Shane prickled with the need to explain himself, explain this one, really not that strange thing, Petrov filled the gap, “Shane is extremely dedicated. And, I imagine, very hungry after that win against Boston. Shall we order?”

They ordered and Shane did his best to emulate his mom, chipping in to the obligatory conversation about the game, and remembering to be humble about his performance but not *too* critical. Stakeholders weren’t interested in Shane’s self-flagellation. The faceoff stats - twelve of twenty, sub-par for Shane. His hesitation in the second period as he tried to move the puck up the ice, giving Rozanov a gold-plated invitation to regain possession which would normally have got him a smirk but this time he’d been blanked.

No. They wanted to hear positivity. Forward-thinking. Plans for how to move on to the next win.

Petrov dabbed at his lips with his napkin. “As you can see, Coach, Shane is a master of self-deprecation.”

Shane winced. Okay.

“Yes, Hollander,” Wiebe lifted his wine glass in a salute, “you play some of the best hockey I’ve ever had the pleasure to watch. Truly, you’re the generational talent everyone says you are.”

It was nothing Shane hadn’t heard before. He opened his mouth to respond appropriately but Petrov got there first. “Shane is about to say something now about it being a team sport and how his success is due to the supporting individual roles his teammates play and the invaluable leadership from the coaching staff,” he said.

Then Petrov’s eyes crinkled at him, almost daring him to deny it, and Shane floundered. He couldn’t. “It *is* a team game,” he muttered. Both men laughed and Shane, reluctantly, joined in. He was being teased but in a weird, respectful manner. It made him feel a little young but kind of in a nice way. Petrov was... safe. That was what it was.

Wiebe grew serious. “I’m not so sure about that. You clearly outpace the team, Shane. The Metros rely on you too heavily and it’s one of the things we’re going to have to work on. Pike complements you well, but you need a stronger right wing. Your hesitation in the second period was because Michaels wasn’t where he was supposed to be. And you’re on the ice too long, consistently. It’s been creeping up since you were a rookie. The last ten games, you’ve been averaging twenty-five minutes a game, and we’re not even in the playoffs. We can’t have you burning out.” He nodded to Shane’s plate, the glass of ginger ale. “But I’m glad to see you’re taking care of yourself.”

Shane blinked and searched around for something to say. He knew, of course, that his on-ice time was high. Theriault had told him in pre-season training that it was going to be part of the strategy. That Shane would need to build up his endurance. He was handling it.

The criticism of Michaels was probably fair and paled in comparison to the lambasting his mom regularly gave Shane post-game. But Michaels was the latest in a series of attempts to complete Shane’s line from their roster and he was actually the best fit they’d found so far. The chemistry was almost there and he’d been putting in extra hours with him and he could see there was some improvement, at least.

He’d often joked about cloning Hayden; that would be the perfect scenario.

“What can we do about Michaels?” Petrov asked Wiebe, eyes shark-like, professional to professional.

“From what I’ve seen,” Wiebe said, deferring to Shane, “we’ve tried shuffling the lines.”

Shane nodded. “Michaels was comparatively the better fit.”

“Then we need to look outside the team,” Petrov said. Like this was easy. It was all just money, after all.

Wiebe agreed. “Maybe someone from the AHL,” he said as if this thought had only just occurred to him when, if he was who Shane was beginning to think he was, he already had a

shortlist. “Or perhaps we might look for a trade.”

Petrov was clearly thinking the same thing as Shane because he drily said, “I imagine you have someone in mind.”

As Wiebe began to outline some suggestions, Shane withheld a sigh and leaned back as a waiter appeared to take away his plate. Pieces were being moved around him, like they always were and he could do nothing to stop it.

He had never liked change.

*

As Shane pushed open the door to the apartment, he saw immediately that the lights were on. There were a pair of sneakers, not his, underneath the bench in the hall. A leather jacket hung on the hooks on the wall. Somehow the *air* felt different.

“You’re here,” he said to his empty hallway, his heart – or something – in his throat.

A voice returned, defensively, “You gave me the code.”

“Yes, but—” They weren’t speaking. They hadn’t exchanged a *single* message since Rozanov had hung up on him. During their face-offs that afternoon, all twenty of them, Rozanov had given him the silent treatment which had been more effective than any of the chirps he’d ever used on Shane.

What the fuck, man.

Shaking his head, Shane took his time denuding himself of his day. He had all his gear with him. He was still in his game day suit; there had been no time to change.

Obviously, Shane had hoped Rozanov would be here. The whole journey here, he had kept having these jolts of hope, bursts of *what ifs*, and had been kicking himself for every one, certain he was going to be disappointed. After being so thoroughly ignored, he’d assumed the chances that Rozanov would be interested in seeing him had been close to zero. He was so pathetic. Needy. Why did Rozanov make him so needy?

Sex. That was why. It was all sex. Having never really missed it – or wanted it – before, he now couldn’t ignore it. He couldn’t get this need out from under his skin.

Shane stripped down to his smart pants and untucked his shirt, and made his way into the living area, giving his shoulders a little shake to try and get rid of the tension.

Like a slow tease, first Shane saw a pair of socked-feet hooked over the edge of his couch. Then a pair of long legs. Then, propped up on a cushion, there was Rozanov himself. Curls in disarray, his eyes narrowed, his mouth set in a sexy, semi-pout. Shane’s breath caught in his throat.

“Made yourself comfortable,” he managed, which was a cooler thing to say than *fuck, you look so hot on my couch*.

Rozanov was wearing a slutty Raiders tank that revealed his ridiculously muscled arms and a pair of Adidas track pants. Black, with a stripe. He was lounging with a beer in his hand. Beer he had to have brought with him because Shane didn't keep any in the apartment.

Actually, he wasn't sure if there was anything Rozanov-appropriate in the refrigerator at all. Some ginger ale and some hot sauce that had accidentally come with a DoorDash order. Everything else was meal prep.

Watching Shane, Rozanov took a long and somehow provocative pull of his beer. His throat worked as he swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing. Shane's immediate reaction to this basic act of human anatomy was not logical. He moved, pulled by the invisible force that was Rozanov's mouth existing, and then he was boldly straddling him. He took the beer from his hand and shoved it on the table, putting his mouth where it desperately needed to be.

Rozanov made a noise, maybe it was a noise of slight surprise, maybe it was also of need, and he arched up eagerly, sliding his beery-tasting tongue reciprocally into Shane's wanting mouth.

God. He would never get over it. Kissing had once been so utterly uninteresting to Shane. A performative act where he mimicked what he had seen on TV, an always-on mental equation of enacting a timeline of moves: *tilt this way* and *press here* and *insert tongue now*. With Rozanov there was no timeline. There was no mental activity at all from the moment their mouths touched.

His lips and tongue kissed how and where and what he wanted. He just *wanted*.

Their clothes came off, a dance that probably looked ridiculous from the outside as they fought buttons and zippers, pushing pants and underwear down without separating their mouths. Shane ran his hands desperately down Rozanov's abs, back up to his pecs and then over his shoulders. He was so fit. So spectacularly fit.

Rozanov put his hand on Shane's ass and squeezed, pushing them and thrusting, grinding their dicks together. Shane was already leaking and it wasn't wet enough but it was still *fucking amazing*. "Good dinner?" he panted in his ear.

Shane's brain did not compute this question; it dismissed it as irrelevant. Sex was what was happening. That was all he wanted to focus on.

The cushion Rozanov had propped himself up on was annoying Shane, rubbing his face in a distracting way as he mouthed Rozanov's neck. He tossed it aside and it hit something that clattered to the floor. He hoped it wasn't the beer.

"I'm going to blow you," Shane announced, spurred on by the desire to do that. He scrambled down Rozanov's body to where his dick was bobbing about, flushed and full and Shane's mouth filled with anticipatory saliva. He met Rozanov's eyes. "But you have to fuck me after."

Rozanov raked his hands through Shane's hair, eyes dark and slumberous. "Mmm, yes, I think I can manage this."

Rozanov did manage. He managed with a degree of practiced expertise that Shane didn't really want to think about. They moved to the bedroom because Shane didn't have the foresight to keep lube and condoms in every room of the apartment, which was something he would rectify ASAP.

"I think you could go three times," Rozanov said later, slurring against the back of Shane's neck.

"Maybe." Shane's dick gave a tiny little kick as if to say 'yes, with the right incentive that would be possible, do you want to try now?'

"Maybe even four."

Okay. Well. He really wasn't sure about that. "Sounds painful."

"I would talk you through it." He kissed Shane just beneath his ear, which made him shiver, and then carefully pulled out, shushing Shane when he whimpered at the sensation. "I'll be right back."

Sleepily, Shane turned his head to have the real pleasure of watching Rozanov walk naked into the bathroom. He had an ass that should be marketable. He didn't know why Calvin Klein wasn't beating down his door.

Shane frowned. On second thoughts, he wasn't certain how he'd feel about that – the potential for Rozanov's near-naked self to be on giant billboards across the continental US. His big dick outlined in breathable white cotton. That fluffy trail of hair that trickled down his abdomen to disappear into his underwear.

Hmm, no. He wasn't sure about that at all.

Unless they did a joint campaign or something...?

This incredibly bizarre train of thought was interrupted by Rozanov returning with a damp washcloth, his chest glistening from his quick shower, the hair that led to and was around his dick damp and dark.

Aftercare, Shane thought, naming the tender way Rozanov cleaned him up. First his ass, then rolling him over and cleaning between his thighs and up his stomach. He'd read about it, before. The guy in Mexico hadn't done this and Shane hadn't wanted him to.

But Rozanov did, his eyes lowered with concentration, long eyelashes fluttering. It was the only time he looked at Shane with softness.

Normally what happened next was that Rozanov would leave. There was no excuse needed; it was just what happened. Then Shane would get up, shower himself, change the sheets. And climb back into bed and have the best sleep of his life.

What actually happened was Rozanov said, not looking Shane in the eye, "It's very late, Hollander. Can I stay?"

And Shane said, “Yes.”

*

Getting into bed with Ilya Rozanov had been surprisingly practical. He gave Rozanov a t-shirt to sleep in, one identical to Shane’s because he had kept stocked up on multi-packs, and then Shane took his preferred side and Rozanov took the other side. He turned off the lights. There was absolutely no suggestion that they might cuddle or anything like that, in fact Rozanov turned over immediately, his back to Shane.

Shane let out a relieved breath, not sure what he would have done if Rozanov had looked at him. Probably died of awkwardness. Or climbed on top of him and tried for round three.

Because of his dinner, they’d gone to bed and then actually *gone* to bed much later than normal, certainly well past Shane’s usual bedtime, and of course they’d also played an aggressively hard game of hockey. So Shane had one brief moment of thinking how strange it was to be sharing a bed with someone – something he’d never done before, never listened to someone breathe like this, never felt the heat of their body from inches away – before he lost consciousness.

When he woke up, they’d migrated in their sleep to the middle of the bed and it took Shane a minute to work out whose limbs were whose. The hairy thigh thrust between his legs was *not* his own but that was his arm thrown about Rozanov’s waist, his other crushed between them. Rozanov also had a fistful of Shane’s T-shirt, clutching him the way Arthur grabbed his thumbs when he held him, like he didn’t want Shane to get away.

Thanks to his total lack of experience in this area, Shane’s sleep-addled brain leaped straight to panic. What was he supposed to do now? How could he extricate himself from this? He had no idea if Rozanov was a light sleeper. God, he was half-hard too, and getting harder just thinking about it. Was that rude? Would Rozanov want to fuck again? He needed to brush his teeth. He needed to piss. His body kind of ached.

And how would he ever get over the devastation of knowing what Rozanov looked like asleep? All the edges of his face smoothed out, the long lashes lying against his cheeks, his mouth relaxed and not poised for a cutting quip.

Thankfully for Shane’s disjointed spiral, Rozanov’s eyes opened. He looked about as surprised to see Shane as Shane had been to see him.

Then, “You should order me breakfast.”

The return to familiar territory was reassuring. Shane’s shoulders relaxed. “The fuck I should.”

“Hollander, I am *starving*.” He untangled himself from Shane, cool as anything, and stretched his long body like a large, glorious cat. Shane did not look. Much. “I did not have dinner.”

“What?”

He actually pouted. “You have nothing good to eat here.”

Well, now Shane felt like shit. “You— you brought beer. Why didn’t you— never mind, never mind,” Shane said, grabbing his cell phone. He opened a delivery app, the suggestion that he might make them both a healthy protein shake dying on his lips. “What do you want?”

“McDonalds.”

Shane scoffed automatically, not entertaining this idea for a single second. “No. Come on. You’re a professional athlete. Here. This place is nice.” He tilted the screen towards Rozanov to show him the menu of one of the chain restaurants he ordered from sometimes when his parents stayed. “An omelet maybe? The mushroom one is good. You can add ham,” he added, which he didn’t do but maybe someone who liked McDonalds would.

Rozanov rolled onto his side and took the phone from Shane’s hand. He sighed, scrolling with his thumb. One of his feet nudged Shane’s calf, rubbing. “You are so boring, Hollander.”

“You don’t want to sit on a plane after eating McDonald’s.” He grimaced at the idea, being weighed down by all that grease and fat. “What time is your flight anyway?”

“Not until this afternoon. 2pm, I think. I will have the omelet. With cheese and ham. Also, side of hash browns. And bacon. Also, this smoothie because is healthy. And iced coffee with extra vanilla syrup. Also, this selection of pastries.”

Shane bit his lip, watching as Rozanov filled up the cart. Obviously, he was being annoying but, also, this was— weirdly charming? Kind of nice? His chest was doing some odd things inside. He felt sort of mature, ordering breakfast for his casual, rival-with-benefits. For all Shane knew, this was perfectly normal. He would have to take the lead from Rozanov, who had probably done this hundreds – thousands? – of times and seemed totally chill about this.

The food took twenty minutes. Long enough for them both to brush their teeth and for mutual blowjobs in the shower. And then brush their teeth again. They ate, hair damp, at the kitchen island.

Rozanov had good table manners but he was obviously very hungry.

Shane winced. They were professional hockey players. Rozanov going to bed without a meal was shitty. He was a bad host. “Sorry. I guess I didn’t know if you were coming. I’d have got something in.”

Would he though? He’d never fed Rozanov before. Once they’d eaten a pack of peanuts from a hotel mini-bar. That had been real desperation.

“Is fine. It was... spur of the moment?” Rozanov shot him a questioning look.

“Yeah, spur of the moment,” Shane confirmed.

Rozanov made a pleased noise at getting it right. “This is good,” he said of his omelet, pointing with his fork. “Was your dinner last night good?”

“It was okay,” Shane said, watching Rozanov out of the corner of his eye, looking for any sign of annoyance. “I met our new coach.”

“Oh?” Rozanov was politely interested. He touched his nose with his thumb.

Shane figured it would be announced soon and this wasn’t technically going to be a secret much longer. “Brendan Wiebe.”

“Sounds familiar.”

“He used to play for Chicago. We probably played him when we were rookies.”

“Fuck. He’s that young?” Rozanov wiped his fingers on the paper towel Shane had laid out for them and reached for his cell phone to do the obvious thing and look him up. Shane occupied himself by staring at this one really perfect curl that was drying over Rozanov’s right ear. Wet, his hair was as straight as Shane’s, but after he’d got of the shower, Rozanov had done this sort of scrunching thing and all these curls and waves had formed.

It was kind of mesmerizing. Shane had always hated how straight his hair was. When he did sponsorship work, the hair and make-up team always put product in to make it less lifeless. He *hated* the feeling of most hair products but without it, it tended to fall flat on his forehead which made him look like a nerd. Maybe there was a haircut he could get which would solve this issue, but he’d been going to same barber in Ottawa since he was a kid.

“I don’t remember him,” Rozanov announced, picking up his fork and stabbing another hash brown while he scrolled. “He is too young, though.” Like Shane, he was judgy about this.

“Yeah, really young.” Untested. Though he’d seemed smart and knowledgeable, there were guys in the team who were only a couple of years younger than him. It was going to be tough.

Shane supposed it would be up to him to reel them in.

“Married. Has kids. I am on his Wikipedia,” Rozanov explained as he scrolled down the page. “It’s not on here. They have not announced yet?”

“No.”

“Wanted to meet you first.” Rozanov pulled a semi-impressed face. “Petrov thinks much of you.”

“You know, I think he does.” Shane heard the surprise in his own voice. “We did this survey, like a DEI initiative thing and the team sentiment scores were really good and he seems to think that’s partially down to me.”

“Hollander. I understand maybe two of those words.”

“Oh. Like, have you ever done that training? Teaching you how to talk to people, not to be wildly racist or shit about people’s differences?” Shane didn’t know if it was a mandatory

MLH thing or not. They'd done a seminar every year for as long as he'd been in professional hockey. Or at least tried to – often it was pushed or cancelled last minute.

Rozanov tilted his head to the side in remembered thought. His mouth curved up. "Ah, yes. It was very amusing."

That tracked.

"Petrov takes that shit very seriously. He's got this whole new department. It's part of the reason I meet with him every month. For 'on the ground' info. And we did this massive survey, all about how we feel as employees. They asked things like do we feel we can be ourselves at work."

For some reason, this statement, and the look Rozanov gave him, gave Shane the giggles. And then Rozanov was laughing. And then they were *really* laughing, bent over their breakfasts, snorting and hooting. It was pretty funny, as a concept, and Shane could only ever really laugh about it with someone who wasn't on his team.

"Fuck, he wants to make hockey gay," Rozanov laughed, wiping the tears from his eyes. "That's fucking hilarious."

They finished their breakfast and Rozanov helped him tidy up, obediently separating the trash into the different recycling containers. He carried his iced coffee to the couch and then began to pick up the clothes they'd left there and re-dress. "Will you tell him?"

"Tell him what?"

"About you?"

It was stupid. Shane knew *exactly* what he meant but he dug in. "What about me?"

Holding his tank one handed, Rozanov gave Shane a look. Then he shook his head and gestured. "Come over here. Let's rewatch the game and talk shit about each other."

Chapter End Notes

For Plot Reasons I had to kill the sex condo. God I love a flexible canon.

Chapter 4

Lily: *Last night I had weird dream. Those ducks in the gardens here, they came to life and invaded the ice while we were playing New York.*

Jane: *Were you scared?*

Lily: *Yes, they were fucking enormous.*

*

Jane: *I just had a cucumber flavor Gatorade.*

Lily: *Good?*

Jane: *Not bad.*

Lily: *Cheating on your ginger ale.*

Jane: *Never*

*

Jane: *That looked like it hurt*

Lily: [Image]

Jane: *Jesus.*

Lily: *You can kiss it better next time I see you.*

Jane: *It's just a bruise, right? It'll be gone by the time I see you.*

Lily: *Maybe you can kiss something else.*

Lily: [Image]

Jane: *DELETE THAT.*

*

The invitation to Petrov's charity Christmas dinner was open to everyone in the team but it was one of those things where you had to pay for a table and fill it with your guests and most of the guys couldn't be bothered with that level of organization.

Most of the guys also didn't have a mom quite like Shane did and, in no time at all, 'Shane' had bought a table for twelve and filled it.

"It's expected, Shane," she told him sternly, "you are the captain."

His mother had kindly let him have Hayden and Jackie, but otherwise it was her, his dad, his agent, and people she thought would be good networking opportunities, which meant she'd extended the invite to his new Coach and his wife, as well as a couple of sponsors and a couple of important season-ticket holders whose names she magically knew.

"Good table," Petrov told him at their 1-2-1. He had a seating plan board set up in his office. "The Bouchards were an inspired choice."

"I had literally nothing to do with it."

Petrov knew Shane a little better now. "Your mother?" he guessed.

"My mother."

His eyes crinkled. "I am looking forward to meeting her."

Shane still wasn't so sure about that. His mom was also looking forward to meeting Petrov, as she fully planned on grilling him about how the search for their new President and GM was going, and, hell, probably about their search for a new liney for Shane. There was a shortlist. She had Opinions about it. "Look, if she gets too intense, give me a sign or something."

He rarely did it, but Petrov laughed, a short bark of amusement, his head tipping back and showing the long line of his throat. "I'm sure I can handle it."

"No, seriously, tug on your ear. I've told Coach the same thing."

Petrov laughed again and turned back to his desk, patting Shane on the shoulder, the sort of manly pat that guys gave each other. Emboldened by this, and a little pleased with himself for making him laugh twice, Shane asked a question that had been on his mind since he'd first learned he'd be attending a well-publicized charity event in New York. "Um. Where do you get your suits?"

"My suits?" Petrov's dark eyebrows arched up. He dropped down into his office chair.

"Yeah. I'm— not good at buying clothes. I mean, this," he gestured to himself, his usual uniform of Metros track pants, T-shirt and Reeboks, "is what I wear. But the dress code said festive black tie and I have no idea what that means."

"Usually means black tie and maybe something red or green. Or sparkly. But to answer your question, most of my clothes are made for me."

"Oh. Like, entirely?" Shane stuck his hands in his pockets and leaned back on his heels. He'd kind of been hoping for some niche designer brand or something. There would be photos at this event and he wasn't blind to the comments he got on social media about his unadventurous sartorial style.

Or, fine, the comments from a certain Russian. *Hollander, you dress like an old man.*

"Almost. I have a few things tailored from time to time but suits, formal-wear, I have made."

“Wow.” That explained the suit at the awards. “Doesn’t that take up a lot of time?”

“It depends on what it is. My tailor has my measurements so some things are easy. Or I time it so I can go for fittings when I’m in New York.”

“Makes sense.”

“Tell you what. I’ll give you his number.” Petrov leaned forward and grabbed a post-it and his Mont Blanc. “Why don’t you message him – do *not* call, he does not like phone calls – and say I’ve given you his details. Explain what you’re looking for. He’ll bitch about the short notice but there might be something he could do. Maybe tailor something off the rack.”

“But it’s four weeks away?” Surely that was enough time? Admittedly, he had no idea how these things worked.

Petrov laughed again. “You’re really on a roll today, Shane.” His pen paused as he wrote out the last digit and he glanced up at Shane, briefly, through his dark eyelashes. “Ah. Send a photo with your message.”

“Of what I’m looking for?” Would it be weird if he said it was the suit Petrov had been wearing? It would be weird, Shane decided.

“Mmm, no, send him one of the photos of yourself from the MLH awards.” He shook his head and handed Shane the post-it. “It’ll help him visualize what he has to work with. Might... smooth the way.”

“Oh. Okay. Makes sense. Thanks. I really appreciate this.”

“Have you ever had anything tailored before?”

“No.”

“It can feel a little... intimate. Just as a warning. And Richie takes no prisoners.”

“Right.”

Shane didn’t know what that meant.

*

Shane: *Hi, this is Shane Hollander. Mikhail Petrov gave me your details. I was wondering if it was too short notice for you to help me with something for his Christmas gala in four weeks.*

Shane: *He said to send a photo of myself.*

Shane: [Photo]

Sargent, Richard [Tailor]: *Absolutely not.*

Sargent, Richard [Tailor]: *Are you one of his hockey players?*

Sargent, Richard [Tailor]: *What are your measurements.*

Sargent, Richard [Tailor]: *Absolutely not.*

Sargent, Richard [Tailor]: *You look tall. Are you tall?*

*

The address Shane had been given took him to a converted narrow brownstone just off Madison Avenue that he walked past twice because the sign was so discreet he missed it. It was hanging on the railings: *R. Sargent. Appointments Mandatory.* And then there was an arrow pointing down the outside steps to the lower floor.

Thankfully he was always chronically early, so while he was late by Hollander standards, he was on time.

Shane trotted down the stone steps and pressed the brass bell in front of a dark burgundy door. He looked up, wondering if the whole building belonged to Sargent or if it was just this basement part. He liked the style of brownstones – he'd heard older properties like this had good bones, too, built during a period when construction was a time-consuming labor of love.

They were impractical for Shane's purposes. But might make a good investment property. There were a few areas in Montreal that had houses like this; he would look up the property value.

The door opened and Shane blinked. In Shane's head, a tailor would have grey hair, maybe be wearing a three-piece suit. Those half-moon glasses. In fact, a bit like Geppetto in Pinocchio.

"Er, Mr. Sargent?" he asked, just in case this was some mistake.

"Captain," said the man, scooping a sweep of peroxide blonde hair off his forehead. Extremely pale blue eyes lined with black eyeliner scrutinized him. "Come in. You are pleasingly prompt."

Okay. That was a good start.

Shane stepped through the door, took a sharp left and walked straight into a room the width of the entire brownstone and, oh yeah, this was more the thing. Dark wooden cabinets lined the walls, their drawers labelled in fading handwriting. Bolts of cloth were arranged in neat vertical rolls like a haberdashery. There was a large working desk in the middle, covered in scraps and tools and what looked like an old cashier machine. The room smelled faintly of wool, something medicinal, and coffee.

Shane turned and found that Sargent was looking Shane up and down. He almost flinched because it was so bold, then remembered this was literally part of his job.

“Mmm. Well, at least you know how to measure yourself correctly,” was the only comment he received. “Come on. The lighting in here is appalling.”

Surprised, Shane followed Sargent once again and they passed through a short corridor at the back of the shop lined with old photographs and emerged into a room so filled with light that Shane reeled back. “Wow.”

“Mmm. My grandfather went blind working in that room.”

The back of the apartment – which was what Shane supposed it was – had been entirely renovated. Knocked through and fitted with a glass extension and floor to ceiling Crittall doors that opened onto a patio, surrounded by a tall brick wall. Trees had been planted to give privacy to the customers who were expected to strip. Shane could see glimpses of tall buildings surrounding them but that was all.

The studio was all white walls and built-in cupboards, dotted with a few tall, well-tended plants. There was little furniture: a white kitchen-island thing with wide drawers, a raised platform, and two velvet bucket chairs around a glass coffee table. A blue curtain had been drawn across one corner. A dressing room, Shane guessed.

“So, this is a family business?” Shane asked, once he’d had his fill. He liked the idea of that.

“It was. Just me now.” Sargent rested his hands on his jean-clad hips, looking at Shane. “Do you always stand like that?”

“Ah, yes?” Suddenly intensely aware of every part of his body, Shane tried not to fidget. What was wrong with how he was standing? His posture was good.

“You’re very tense. You should get a massage.”

Shane didn’t *feel* particularly tense. He rolled his shoulders experimentally. “I get regular massages.”

“Sports massages. Not the same thing.”

“Are they not?”

“Hmm. I’ll make you an herbal tea.”

It did not sound as if Shane had a choice.

*

Shane was not able to enjoy the relaxing benefits of the herbal tea for long. Sargent had Shane strip down to his underwear and then measured him. *Very closely*. He was grateful Petrov had warned him about this, because he had then Googled exactly what might happen during a fitting and had come prepared to have his inside seam studied.

He stared at a bushy Ficus very hard and thought about being photographed at the gala, naked, which was enough to give him a cold shudder.

“Very good measurements,” Sargent announced, as he tapped in the final details to his iPad. “You would not believe how many people fail at simple instructions.”

Suffice to say, Shane glowed with this feedback.

Sargent opened a closet that ran the length of one wall, one of those ones with hidden doors that popped open when you pressed them. Behind it was a rack on wheels and Shane recognized some of the items he’d had sent ahead. His Tom Ford tux, a couple of white dress shirts, and a pair of pants and three T-shirts. The pants and T-shirts had been purchased new, at Sargent’s very, very specific instructions.

“You must find it difficult to get shirts to fit.” Sargent wheeled the rack over to where Shane was standing.

“Yeah. Sometimes. I usually just go up a size. But my body composition changes during the season, too.”

“And the season is...?”

“Um. September to May. Ish. I bulk during the summer so I’m usually at my biggest for the first four months. Then as soon as we get towards the playoffs, it’s kind of a battle to keep the muscle on.”

Sargent nodded. “So, you should have multiple pairs of everything.”

“Yeah, as I said, I usually just go up a size.”

“Then nothing fits you properly.”

“It’s not normally a problem. I live in athletic stuff. No one cares if that fits properly.”

This got him a pursed-mouth look, as if Sargent was disappointed in Shane. Shane tried not to look too obviously at Sargent’s outfit – which was a pair of faded, baggy jeans and a black T-shirt. The T-shirt fitted his skinny frame very precisely but it was clearly old and used as a pin-cushion, as demonstrated by the literal pins along the hem. He also had a handy little pin-cushion wrist strap too.

Shane was handed the Tom Ford pants. “Put these on and stand on the platform.”

While Sargent watched, Shane climbed into his pants, awkwardly, as if he had maybe never put pants on before in his life. And the last time he’d worn these was in Vegas, which was certainly a memory he wanted to park when in company. They’d obviously been dry cleaned since.

Sargent surveyed him when he was elevated. “Not too bad.”

“Yeah, I bought it probably this time last year. My mom—” Shane paused and couldn’t help the flush that crept up his cheeks.

“Your mom helped you.” Sargent appeared disinterested in Shane’s childish need to have his mom help him. He gestured with his finger, instructing Shane to rotate on the platform.

Shane turned. “Yeah. She is better at this sort of thing.”

“It’s a good suit. And black suits your coloring.” He stood back. “Let’s see you in the full outfit.”

Once fully dressed, with one of the white dress shirts and the jacket shrugged on, Shane was instructed to turn some more. Sargent occasionally stopped him – pulled at his sleeve, adjusted his collar, did something with the hem of his pants. He had Shane button up the jacket, then unbutton it. Then walk a few steps and return.

Then he stood back. “All right. How much weight do you think you’ll lose in the next three weeks?”

“Nominal amount.”

“Fine. This short notice, all I can do is taper you in. Here,” he pulled in some of the fabric of the jacket around Shane’s waist. “I will make some minor adjustments to the shoulders. The pants are too long, so they will be hemmed. Turn.” Shane turned. He felt fingers pinch the material over his ass. “The seat could use some help.”

“Great,” Shane breathed out, mortified.

“I think I can improve the shirt entirely. You need something in a jewel tone. A deep red, I think, for the occasion. Or an emerald green. You’re a bright winter.”

“Um. Okay.”

“Let me get some samples from the front.”

*

“Oh, honey,” Yuna sighed when she saw him, her eyes bright with pleasure. “You look so handsome.”

“Yeah?” He’d started to feel a bit unnerved about the red shirt. It was very different from what he normally wore. Sargent had assured him it fitted the theme and when he’d stood in the mirror for his final fitting yesterday he’d *thought* it had looked good. Sargent had said the red made his eyes and hair ‘pop’. “I don’t look, I don’t know, weird?”

“No. Is this the Tom Ford suit?” Yuna brushed something from his lapel. “It fits you so well.”

“Yeah, I had it tailored a little bit.” He’d also had his hair cut and styled this afternoon by a hairdresser Sargent had recommended in the city – which, for Shane, who had been going to same barber in Ottawa since he was three, was saying something. He was wearing a *lot* of product, which was fine if he didn’t think about it too much.

“David, take a picture of us.”

But his dad already had his phone out, smiling. “I’ve got about a hundred already.”

“Then let’s take some of you and Shane,” his mom said, picking up the skirt of her dress and hurrying to get her own phone. “Go stand by the tree. I love that they put a tree in your room.”

It was nice. In fact, the suite was great. He’d been upgraded when he arrived – he wasn’t normally particularly picky about hotel rooms, after spending so much time in them. Provided they were clean, and the sockets weren’t located in a nonsensical place, he was pretty happy anywhere.

But the hotel was really decked out for Christmas and this suite was suitably festive. And massive. It reminded him of the one Rozanov had in Vegas. Maybe he’d take a photo of it later and send it to him, though they weren’t really photo-sharing texters.

The gala was being held in New York because it wasn’t actually hockey-related but an event that Petrov had held every year since he’d taken over the reigns of Petrov 7. In fact, Shane had subsequently learned that his table was the *only* hockey table. A couple of his teammates had stumped up the cash for half a table and were sharing with a mix of financiers, celebrities and members of Petrov’s other businesses. Needless to say they were scared shitless. By all accounts they planned to dump their tables as soon as possible to find him – which he’d *sternly* told them not to.

Shane and his dad posed appropriately, giving each other the side-eye they always did when his mom started barking out instructions to improve the quality of the photo.

When she was finally done, she flicked through them making pleased noises. “I’m gong to send these to Will. That is going *straight* on your Instagram, Shane.”

He groaned. “Could you at least hold off until tomorrow? You know how they get.”

‘They’ being the die-hard fans who would work themselves up into a frenzy trying to work out where Shae was going. It wouldn’t take too much effort to discover where the event was being held tonight. Particularly if the social team geotagged him which, Shane reassured himself, they *wouldn’t* do because they were expressly instructed not to. Some of those die-hard fans were a little crazy. Like certifiably.

“Yes. You’re right. Besides, I’m sure there’ll be some professional photographs taken tonight.”

There would be. Petrov had warned him.

They got ready to go, his mom hurrying to the bathroom to touch-up her make-up and check her hair. When she came back, his dad elbowed him pointedly and Shane recalled his manners. “Hey, Mom? You look beautiful.”

She beamed at him, politely ignoring his dad’s less-than-subtle nudge. “Thank you, honey.”

Lily: *So you are on a date*

Jane: *What?*

Lily: *[Link]*

Jane: *Oh. Wow. That was literally thirty minutes ago. It got online fast.*

Jane: *That headline is very misleading.*

Jane: *Weird they cropped out my parents.*

Jane: *Obviously not a date.*

Jane: *Hello?*

*

If coaching style was a spectrum and Theriault was on the far right, and Shane's Pee Wee coach Teddy 'Bear' Dyers was on the far left, Wiebe would probably be somewhere in the middle.

Which was a walk in the park in some senses but it was also disconcerting for the team as a whole.

"Maybe we have PTSD," J.J. commented, after they'd fucked up a pretty basic drill and Wiebe had merely stared at them all silently and told them – calmly – to redo it.

Because, if anything, Wiebe's eerie calm was almost *more* frightening than Theriault on a rampage.

"I don't think he's cracked a single smile since he's been here," Drapeau said under his breath during a tape review.

"Shhh," hissed Hayden, when Wiebe's eyes swung to their corner suspiciously.

Obviously as captain Shane spent more time with Wiebe, both professionally and socially, so *he* knew Wiebe wasn't going to flip on them at any moment, but the rest of the team didn't. For the time being, it was keeping them in line so Shane had no intention of revealing that. After the initial grumbles about his age, and his less-than-star-like performance in MLH, the team had settled down somewhat and he didn't want to burst that bubble.

It helped that he was good. Maybe even excellent. He deferred to Shane a lot, which Shane appreciated, and seemed to listen to what Shane had to say. Which Theriault had *also* done but in a way that suggested that he could take Shane's opinion or leave it. And liked to remind Shane that it was his responsibility as coach to do the actual coaching and Shane's was to make sure that the room was stable and argue strategically with the refs – the latter of which he always implied wasn't that meaningful.

Wiebe was one of their main conversational topics when Petrov met with Shane later that month. Their 1-2-1 had once again been pushed a few days because of a ‘situation’ in Tokyo and Petrov had apologized for eating a late lunch while they talked. It was 5.30pm and three days before the Christmas break. Petrov was wearing a T-shirt and jeans as he’d got off a flight three hours before. He looked tired.

“How’s our new coach getting along?”

“Good, actually.” Petrov was a very neat eater. And had a dab hand with chopsticks. Shane admitted he found this an attractive feature of a person.

He also could admit now that he found Petrov, as a whole package, attractive. In a gay way. Not that he was going to do anything about that. Not that Petrov had indicated he wanted to. It was weird how even when he wasn’t here, how in his head Rozanov was.

Rozanov, who hadn’t messaged him *once* since the gala pictures two weeks ago.

“You sound surprised.”

“He’s young.”

Petrov delicately picked up a sliver of pickled ginger and delicately nibbled this. “He’s my age.”

“He’s young for a coach,” Shane amended, politely.

“Not young for a captain of industry, then.”

“Is that what you are?” Shane asked, genuinely interested. He’d heard the expression before but never in the context to understand it.

Petrov’s eyes crinkled.

“Oh, that was a joke. Got it.” Embarrassed to have been taken in by Petrov’s dry tone, Shane nodded to the food and changed the subject. “Where did you get the sushi from?”

“TOKii.”

He knew it. It was one of his favorite restaurants. “I didn’t know they delivered.”

“They don’t.”

Oh. “Is this a captain of industry thing?”

Petrov laughed in a tired way. Then laughed some more, less tired, and had to put his chopsticks down. “Shane. You know, you have been the highlight of my day.”

Shane blushed. “Must have been a pretty shitty day.”

“Oh, you have no idea.” He sighed and ate another piece of sashimi. “I’m sorry if the photos from the gala caused you any problems.”

For one truly heart-stopping moment, Shane wondered if the ‘problems’ he was referring to were related to Rozanov’s silence and how he knew about them. Sense took hold of him, thankfully, before he said anything stupid. “Problems?”

“My people noted that various sensationalist social media platforms were,” he waved his chopsticks around, “insinuating things.”

Shane’s heart did a double thump. “I hadn’t heard that. My mom mentioned there was some noise but it was mostly positive.” Naturally Shane had questioned the ‘mostly’ but his mom had breezily said it was irrelevant chatter. He’d asked if it was about the red shirt and she’d laughed and said actually that had ‘gone down a storm’, whatever that meant. But after that he had put it from his mind. “She said I should ignore it.”

“The right approach.” Petrov shook his head, a wry twist to his mouth. “An unfortunate reflection of my status and the click-bait fodder that is my publicly known sexuality.”

Shane’s hands clenched on his thighs. Petrov had never referenced it before. His sexuality. His *gayness*. Even though Shane knew – and Petrov assumed, correctly, that he knew – there had been no work-related reason for Petrov to bring it up.

But there it was. Out in the open.

He was supposed to say something. They had covered something like this in one of the training seminars. There had been a role play scenario, he was sure, which O’Connor and Hayden had acted out, beet red. But Shane was drawing a blank because he simply wasn’t certain he could do what was required here. Which was to convey Shane’s total coolness with the concept of someone being gay and also do so without implying that Shane’s own sexuality was anything other than a completely straight line that led directly to a woman.

“I don’t get on social media much,” was what he said. Which did neither of those things. And was fucking awkward, too.

*

At home, Shane re-downloaded Instagram, which he had deleted last week in a fit of pique after a certain Russian had posted a series of thirst traps which was usually a sign he was on some kind of slutty quest across North America.

It did not take him long to find what Petrov had been referring to. All he had to do was type ‘Mikhail Petrov’ into the search bar and up popped that photo of him and Petrov standing on the red carpet at the gala. Accompanying one of the best photos that had ever been taken of Shane outside of a sponsorship campaign, were various snide comments questioning if Petrov had found himself a new ‘friend’ amongst his recently purchased hockey team.

And that was one of the milder pages.

Some found other angles, zoom ins where it showed Petrov's hand was resting very lightly on Shane's back. So lightly that he didn't actually remember him touching Shane and usually that was something he clocked. There were other, blurrier shots taken inside the gala. Petrov coming over to talk to his table and focusing only on the one time he'd leaned over the back of Shane's chair and not the way he'd shaken everyone's hand, nor the twenty minutes he spent talking to Shane's mom. Or when he'd danced with Jackie and later Mrs. Bouchard.

Someone in the comments asked – in French – whether Petrov had bought the Metros *because* of Shane. Another person remarked on how good-looking Shane was and wondered how they had met. That he was clearly Petrov's type. Someone else asked – in English – whether Petrov was still in a relationship. A link was shared to a French website that suggested, no, Petrov was no longer in a relationship with that artist. Shane wasn't stupid enough to click on that. Someone shared a Wikipedia link to Shane's biography.

Face aflame, Shane wondered if Rozanov had seen these photos. These comments.

Quickly, Shane tapped 'E!News' in Google search and scrolled through the last couple of weeks. Nothing, thank God. He then navigated to La Presse's website, searching up his name. Nothing. If it wasn't on La Presse, then none of the guys would have heard anything about this.

Now hungering for information, and falling into that age old trap, Shane opened 'TMZ' which didn't tend to feature Canadian hockey players, so he was safe there, but they did like to splash partially dressed Rozanov's all over the place. He popped up maybe a dozen stories down, wearing some silky black shirt undone to his navel, a dark-haired woman draped all over him. He sneered. Whatever. Not the priority now.

Shane put his phone down and rested a hand on his leg, to stop it from bouncing.

Anxiety sweat prickled at his hairline. This was not great.

He called his mom and she picked up immediately. "Er. I did the thing I told you I wouldn't."

"But we were going to get you one for your birthday. We agreed!"

"Not that. And you really shouldn't, it's very expensive," Shane added, as an aside. He hated his parents spending money on him. "I meant, I looked up the stuff people were saying about me and Petrov."

"Oh, honey," she sighed, "why did you do that?"

"He apologized today for it. And I had no idea what 'it' was."

"Did he?"

"Yeah, it was awkward."

"Hmm, well, that was polite of him but there is no need. I spoke to Lauren in PR and she said the noise was minimal, mostly coming out of Europe, and the instructions they had from

upon high from Petrov's own team was that it was being monitored but no response would be required."

Obviously, there was plenty in his life that went on without Shane knowing any details – that was why he had a manager and an agent, after all – but this sounded serious and he said as much.

"It's not, Shane," Yuna said crisply. "This is no different than that thing with that ridiculous skincare brand last year."

Shane winced. "Thanks for reminding me."

"Because you'd forgotten. As this will be, since it's entirely fabricated and indeed homophobic nonsense. Just because he's a publicly out gay man doesn't mean he is seducing young men in his place of work. It's outrageous. If this gained any traction, he would have every right to sue for libel."

Shane said nothing for a long while and his mom let him sit there in silence. "Okay," he said eventually, once his brain had stopped buzzing over the word 'seducing'.

"Why don't you delete Instagram again? I think it'll be more peaceful for you. Though – did you see the comments you got on *your* post?" His mom's tone immediately became more upbeat.

Shane hadn't. He reluctantly scrolled back to the cursed app and went to his profile page where a carousel of photos of him and his mom, him and his dad, and later all the people at their table was the latest post. "Wow. Nearly three-hundred-thousand likes."

Sometimes Rozanov's posts got a million.

"Your highest engagement yet." She sounded proud. "Posting lifestyle content is clearly an angle we need to explore more."

His head dropped back on the couch. Not the *lifestyle* again. "I've got to go, Mom."

"All right. Thank you for calling me."

"Yeah, love you, bye."

He hung up and opened up his chat with Rozanov and stared at the last message he'd sent. A clearly desperate attempt to get his attention.

Jane: *Saw the hatrick against Tampa. Congrats.*

There had been no response. That had been three days ago. Three days and probably half a dozen girls ago.

Slowly, Shane typed out a new message.

Jane: *If I call will you answer me.*

He sent it before he could double-think it.

And waited.

*

Shane waited nearly twenty-four hours – seething the whole time, typing up a series of acerbic messages when Rozanov didn't reply and then slowly deleting them one by one – but then the asshole actually called *him*.

“Well?” Rozanov said. No greeting. Just a sharp demand.

It was wild to Shane how quickly the high of seeing ‘Lily’ on his screen could crash so quickly when actually speaking to Rozanov. “Well, what? God, you’re such an asshole. *Well* yourself.”

Shane threw himself on his bed. He was dressed for his third gym workout of the day. After not hearing from Rozanov, he'd had little else to distract himself on what would normally be a much cherished off day.

“Why do you want to call, Hollander?”

“Because you’re ignoring me. Not for the first time, either.”

He sniffed obnoxiously. “I’ve been busy.”

“Oh yeah? Whoring yourself across the east coast?”

Rozanov mock gasped. “Shane Hollander, wash your mouth with soap.”

It was *so* ridiculous that Shane unwillingly laughed. “How do you know that one?”

“I read things.”

Shane smiled as his heart went *pitter patter*. The high had returned. Hard.

He tried to be serious. “I wanted to talk to you about the pictures.”

“What pictures?”

Shane rolled his eyes. “The ones that people were posting about me and Petrov that you got so upset about.”

“Upset? No. Why would I be upset? You looked very pretty. Tell me, does he fuck you the way you like?”

And there we go again.

Shane wasn't going to rise to this, though it was *fucking tempting* to just scream down the phone about the absolute hypocrisy of this conversation. “Rozanov. I’m not fucking the owner of the Metros. More to the point, even if I *wanted* to, even if *he* wanted to, and I have

had no indication that he does, he would never. Putting aside the obvious power imbalance, it would go against everything he is trying to achieve. I know him. He would never do that. I think he would hate himself.”

Rozanov said nothing but managed to do it in a really grumpy way.

Shane pushed himself upright. “What is it about him that triggers you? Is it that he’s Russian, too? It’s not like I have a type.”

Of man. To be clear. That was what they were talking about. They were talking about Shane’s *type in men*. Which he didn’t have. Apart from, you know, athletic.

Rozanov made a small, dissatisfied noise. “You dressed up for him.”

“I didn’t. I dressed up—” He caught himself, the words *for you* almost there. He found another truth. “I dressed up because I’m sick of looking like a slob all the time or like my mom buys all my clothes.”

“Which she does.”

“She does. And that’s embarrassing.” He was an adult. And a *millionaire*. And his mom still bought him clothes. *I got your father a nice linen shirt, Shane, and he liked it so much I got you one too.*

“Hollander, if my mama was alive, I would let her buy me clothes, too.”

“If your—” Shane pulled his phone away from his ear so he could gape at his screen. “Your mom’s dead?”

“Ah. Yes.”

From these bare words, Shane could tell Rozanov regretted saying anything. But nothing would stop Shane now, not now he knew this incredibly personal, painful detail about Rozanov that certainly wasn’t public knowledge. “When did— not recently?” he croaked.

“I was young. A long time ago.”

Shane’s heart broke for him. “We’re not that old now, Ilya,” said Shane, Rozanov’s first name just... slipping out of Shane’s mouth.

This time Rozanov’s gasp was real. A small, shaky noise that traveled the couple of hundred miles between them.

Shane panic-swallowed. Like he tried to swallow back Rozanov’s name. Just stuff it back into his mouth. Into the locked box in his brain that kept things like *Ilya* and the noise Rozanov made when he came or the way his curls felt between his fingers.

He closed his eyes. It was just a name. It would be weird to talk about someone’s dead mom while using their surname. He was being sensitive. “Look, we’ve got... off track. I’m not

doing anything for Petrov. I know what— the reason why I called was— or wanted to call—”
Get a grip, Hollander. “Nothing’s going on. So stop being weird.”

“Okie,” said Rozanov in a small voice. “No more weird, Shane.”

Fuuuuuuuuck.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Hello. Full disclosure, this one is pretty schmoopy and doesn't progress the plot much (is there a plot, I ask myself? daily)

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

Christmas was fine, in that it was the usual parade of awkward Hollander social obligations. Watching his grandma get increasingly drunk on Martinis on Christmas Eve, then meeting up with his grandfather and step-grandmother for a tense Christmas Day lunch at their club the following day. On the drive home, his parents brainstormed where in Canada would be far enough away that they wouldn't have to repeat this farce again.

"I thought Mathilde was pretty chill this year," Shane piped up from his usual position in the back.

"Prozac," his parents chorused and then looked at each other as if they were both the cleverest people in the world.

Shane had only the vaguest idea what Prozac was. "Oh."

His phone lit up and, his interest in his step-grandmother being minimal, he returned to the totally not-weird non-stop texting conversation he had with Rozanov. A conversation that had spanned the entirety of the Christmas break. Barely an hour had gone by without them sending something.

Rozanov hadn't gone home for Christmas because it was both too far and also not really a Russian holiday. Apparently for Russians New Year was a bigger deal and Russian Orthodox Christmas was in January, which was when the Raiders would be playing New York.

Jane: *I've got to go to New York*

Jane: *More clothes fittings.*

Lily: *When?*

Jane: *I don't know. I haven't scheduled it.*

Lily: *Do you have a game around the 7th?*

Shane looked it up. His parents were debating the pros and cons of the Yukon and giggling. They did this every year.

Jane: *Games on the 4th and 5th. Then 9th and 10th.*

Lily: *So you could come to New York.*

Jane: *I guess.*

Jane: *I'd have to check with the guy to see if he's available.*

Lily: *We could go out*

Jane: *Absolutely not. Besides, won't you have curfew?*

Lily: *Okay. We could stay in.* 😈

Shane's stomach did a little summersault. Could he do this? Was he seriously contemplating meeting up with Rozanov *outside* of the games they played against each other?

True, they hadn't seen each other for a few weeks. The physical memory of Rozanov's mouth on his dick and his dick inside Shane was so unbelievably potent that Shane shifted uncomfortable in the back of his parents' car.

So, yes, he was seriously contemplating it.

In a way, maybe it would be less stressful for Shane. He wouldn't be staying in a hotel with his teammates and sneaking off to Rozanov's place. He had plausible deniability, visiting a tailor that the owner of their club had recommended. It *was* a clear slot in his schedule and as the season ramped up, it would only get harder for him to get away.

Hell, maybe they *could* go out. It was New York. He was sure they could find some out-of-the-way bar or—

What was he thinking? *No*. Maybe Shane could rationalize himself into this clearly very stupid idea but he wasn't going to take unnecessary risks. More unnecessary risks.

Besides, maybe Sargent wouldn't be available. It was very short notice.

Shane: *Hi Mr. Sargent. Just looking at my schedule and I have a window on the 6/7 January if you have availability.*

Shane: *Happy Christmas, by the way.*

Shane wasn't really expecting a response but one came mere minutes later.

Sargent, Richard [Tailor]: *Morning of the 7th. 11am.*

Sargent, Richard [Tailor]: *Bring something other than sneakers with you.*

*

Shane booked a suite at a boutique hotel he'd never stayed in before that had excellent reviews, ones that specifically rated its cleanliness, its nutritious food and also its excellent gym. He threw caution to the wind – and an unnecessary quantity of cash – for a room with a terrace in case Rozanov wanted a cigarette outside in the freezing cold. It crossed his mind that he was enabling Rozanov's bad habits but then *he* was a bad habit, so what the hell.

Besides, it was Russian New Year Christmas.

He'd also got him a present and he would have liked to say it was a spur of the moment thing but he actually spent every second since Christmas worrying about it before latching onto the perfect answer: a Metros Hollander bear from the gift shop. It was just the right size of not arriving empty handed but also being a dick. The gift bag was also branded. It made him smile every time he looked at it.

Rozanov's flight got in just before Shane's but Shane wasn't expecting to see him until after the game tomorrow, as per their usual routine. He figured he'd check out the gym, have some room service and watch a movie on pay-per-view.

Which was why he was surprised when there was a knock on his hotel room door before he'd barely unpacked.

Assuming it was a mistake, or perhaps housekeeping was bringing extra towels, Shane answered the door with a polite look, which dropped off immediately when he saw who it was. "What the hell?"

Rozanov bullied his way past Shane and yanked off his ball cap and sunglasses, tossing them onto the side table in the entrance area. He did a three-sixty turn. "Wow. Nice room, Hollander."

Belatedly, too frozen with surprise to have reacted, Shane closed the door. "What are you doing here?"

"You sent me room details. Was bored so I came. And I thought you would like to come, too." Smirking, Rozanov slowly backed Shane up against the door, his hands on Shane's hips, thumbs sliding up so they created a gap between Shane's sweatpants and T-shirt. His cheeks were flushed with cold and eyes winter-sky bright.

"Did you walk here?" Slightly breathless, Shane glanced down at the entirely sub-standard coat Rozanov was wearing. "That isn't a very warm—"

Ilya shut him up with the most effective method he knew: his tongue down Shane's throat. Shane kissed him back, any questions about Rozanov's presence or his ability to survive in sub-zero temperatures evaporated to the thrust of tongue and the dance of their mouths.

This idea was brilliant. How could he possibly have doubted it?

But when Rozanov's hands dipped under Shane's waistband on their inevitable trajectory, Shane jerked into action, grabbing hold of him. "Hold on." Heat crawled up his face.

Normally every interaction he had with Rozanov was planned days in advance. He had a whole routine. Researched, practiced, but *private*. “I haven’t, erm, showered.”

“Okay. I can wait.” Rozanov shrugged off his coat and tossed it onto the chair. “Actually, I can join you.”

“No,” said Shane, firmly. Not for *this* kind of shower.

He was expecting Rozanov to not get it, or argue, or just generally be difficult enough that Shane would have to go into detail. Instead, a weird thing happened to his face and he smiled in a way that Shane didn’t think he had ever smiled at Shane before. If he wasn’t Ilya Rozanov, Shane *might* have said it was sweet.

“Okay.” Rozanov kissed Shane’s mouth lightly and bussed their noses together. “You do what you need to do.”

God. The fact that Rozanov probably knew what he was going to do in the bathroom pretty much killed Shane. Nevertheless, cheeks burning, he dashed away and closed the door behind him.

It didn’t take that long. Shane had it down to a fine art and, not to put too fine a point on it, his diet was a real help in this area. He was regular as hell. By the time he emerged from the bathroom, dressed in his underwear, his fiery cheeks had more or less calmed down enough that he was able to make eye-contact with Rozanov.

Again, he expected some kind of lewd comment or joke. Instead, Rozanov was on the bed in his underwear, the same generic black boxer-briefs as Shane. Actually, maybe *exactly* the same as they were also Calvin Klein. And he smiled at Shane. “All good?”

“Yeah.”

Rozanov held out a hand. “Come here.”

Shane went.

Later, they faced each other under the duvet, taking turns in yawning. There had been no question of whether Ilya would stay the night. He hadn’t asked. And Shane had just handed him the hotel toothbrush after they’d showered.

“How do you handle curfew?”

“Marly is covering for me.”

Shane grunted, wondering how that worked. Never mind the fines, Theriault would come down on them like a ton of bricks if they so much as whispered past curfew. There were no excuses. If someone was caught, the whole team would be punished. Bag skates for days. He didn’t know if anyone from his team had tested curfew yet with Wiebe. “How’s his knee?”

“Much better.”

“So still fucked then?”

“Shut up.”

Shane snickered. He flung an arm, totally casually, over Rozanov’s hips. Rozanov did the same to Shane, only – less casually – yanked him close until they were belly to belly.

“Goodnight, Shane,” he said, grinning like a dork.

“Goodnight, Ilya.”

*

The second time Shane woke with Ilya Rozanov in his bed, he didn’t panic. He’d done this before. He was a master of the sexy sleepover. It didn’t matter that they were wrapped around each other. Or that he could feel Rozanov’s dick pressed against his ass. In fact, there was nowhere else Shane would rather be.

Boldly confident, he reached behind and squeezed Rozanov’s rounded ass cheek in greeting.

Rozanov huffed behind him, apparently already awake. “Morning,” he rumbled, breath tickling Shane’s ear.

His hand travelled down Shane’s front, palmed the bulge in his underwear in a questioning way and Shane thrust forward into that hand and then back against Rozanov’s dick. *Yes*, he was saying without words, *please fuck me again*.

Rozanov mouthed the back of Shane’s neck as he pulled Shane’s underwear down one-handed, aided by Shane’s impatient wriggling. Kicking them free, Shane made to roll onto his front but Rozanov grunted and held his hip. “No, like this.”

“Huh?”

In answer, he pushed a thigh between Shane’s, parting his legs. His finger teased between Shane’s ass cheeks, finding the entrance that Shane had so thoroughly prepped last night. He circled it and Shane clenched with anticipation. “Mmm,” Rozanov said, thoughtfully.

It was all a bit too passive for Shane, who was an action-orientated guy. He reached for the half-empty bottle of lube – a bottle that had been *brand new* yesterday – and one of the condoms on the nightstand. He thrust these awkwardly behind him, Rozanov snickering, and moments later the finger returned, this time slicked up.

Rozanov rubbed the slickness around Shane’s hole, being a deliberate fucking tease but equally Shane liked being teased, it got him out of his head, and he pressed his face into the single pillow they had apparently shared last night and gave himself up to the sensation.

It was only when he realized he was practically humping the duvet that he slapped Rozanov’s thigh. “Get on with it.”

“So bossy,” Rozanov muttered, but gave him two and then three fingers in short order. With expert precision, he found Shane’s prostate and Shane twitched, his leaking dick jumping eagerly, pressure building.

He was suddenly *much* too close. He wanted Rozanov to be *inside* him when he came. “Oh fuck. I’m ready, I’m ready.” He slapped Rozanov again.

Obedient, Rozanov adjusted them, pulling Shane’s thigh over his own. He heard the condom wrapper tear and then the head of Ilya’s dick probed Shane’s hole and he began to fuck his way inside gently, dick moving in small, jerking increments, accompanied by the sucking-wet sound of the lube.

It was fucking dynamite, really, but it wasn’t enough. Shane pressed back, trying to seat Ilya more thoroughly.

“Impatient,” Rozanov laughed breathlessly in Shane’s hair. He thrust forward though and – ough – yeah. That was what he needed.

Every time they fucked, they seemed to unlock something new – at least for Shane, who the hell knew with Rozanov, probably he’d done end-to-end of the Karma Sutra – and Shane tried to catalogue the differences of this angle. It wasn’t as deep as when he was on his front or hands and knees and Rozanov couldn’t go as hard – but the angle was good for intensively stimulating his prostate and he could stroke Shane’s dick simultaneously, setting a delicious thrusting and pulling, thrusting and pulling rhythm.

“Good?” Rozanov mouthed Shane’s ear.

Shane made an incoherent noise as the pressure in his pelvis started to climb to excruciatingly pleasurable heights.

“Shaaaane,” Rozanov bit down on his earlobe. “Tell me.”

“S’good, s’good! Fucking— *it’s always good, okay?*”

Rozanov’s hand slid down to cup Shane’s balls and then on an upstroke gave a jerky little twist to Shane’s dick that seemed to literally *pull* Shane’s orgasm from him. Gasping as his come spurted across the bed, he felt the muscles of his hole clench around Ilya, felt the punched-out gasp that accompanied it as Ilya reached his own climax. “Fuck, Shane,” he whispered as he thrust irrhythmically into him, “always so good.”

*

“Do you want your present now?”

Rozanov paused in his aggressive brushing of teeth. Eyes wide, he disappeared into the bathroom and spat before hurrying back, wiping toothpaste from his mouth with the back of his hand. “You got me a present?”

“Well. A small one. It’s Russian Christmas New Year, right?”

Like a child, Ilya wiggled his fingers at Shane. “Gimme.”

Shane jumped out of bed and half-tripped over Rozanov’s jeans, which were still on the floor. He tossed these to him, giving him side-eye because if he had *just* hung them up like Shane did, that wouldn’t have happened.

He had put the little gift bag in the closet and though he kind of knew that this wasn’t important, that it was a joke, he nevertheless felt a little... shy. Second guessing himself. Maybe he should have got something better? Or even nothing at all.

Oh well. There was nothing for it now.

Shane thrust the bag out to Rozanov. “It’s not anything really,” he said.

Rozanov narrowed his eyes. “Is that a Metros gift bag?” He dug his hand in and yanked out the bear. His face went through a series of expressions before he broke into laughter. Ilya laughed *properly*, all the sharp edges smoothing into boyishness. “You are such an asshole, Hollander.”

Shane bit his lip. It *was* a great present. He had correctly navigated this social situation. He was so fucking proud of himself.

“What am I going to do with this little Shane bear?” Ilya said softly, stroking the bear’s cheek. His smile had faded a bit, changing to something a little gentler.

“I don’t know. Probably hide it somewhere, I guess. I think they’re pretty good quality, though.” Shane crept a bit closer, wanting to be nearer to him in this moment. He touched the bear’s foot. “Soft, yeah?”

Ilya nodded. He rubbed the side of his nose with his thumb. “We have them. Should get you one. You could keep it in your bed.”

Shane snorted. “As if.”

“Sleep with it every night. Take it on road trips,” Ilya teased, sauntering towards him so that Shane backed up against the TV console. Given the tone, he wasn’t expecting the minty kiss he was given. Nor the softness of it. “You’ll keep my Shane bear safe for me? Until tonight?”

A little breathless for unknown reasons, all Shane was able to do was nod and then lean forward to seek another kiss.

*

Sargent wasn’t wearing eyeliner this time but there was something different about him, and Shane pondered this as he undressed and put on each article of clothing handed to him and stood where he was told to stand, how he was told to stand. He put on the boots to wear with the pants and Sargent said ‘good’ and then he took off the boots and put on his sneakers and Sargent said ‘never wear these together’.

“So, what do you think?”

The T-shirts – simple, white cotton that Shane would genuinely never give more than a single thought about – fit him *like a glove*. Nothing tugged, nothing rubbed. When he moved his arms, nothing strained. He lifted his hands above his head and twisted from side to side, watching the interplay of his muscles beneath the cotton. “Wow.”

“I have a template for this now. If you buy other colors, it’s an easy job. Let me get you a color palette, actually,” Sargent said, heading towards the central island and pulling open drawers.

He found what he was looking for in the third drawer – a sheet of card printed with colored squares. At the top were the words ‘Bright Winter’. “These colors will all suit you.”

“Wow,” Shane said again. “These are... bright.”

“Many of my clients would kill to be a Bright Winter. Eye-catching.”

Doubtfully, Shane touched his finger to dusky kind of purple, like a plum. Could he ever wear a suit this color? “Yeah that’s... not very me.”

Sargent’s mouth twitched but he said nothing, he just brought his hands together with finality. “You can take these with you today.” He gestured to the neat pile of T-shirts and pants. “I will adjust the two shirts. Next time you should bring a pair of jeans.”

With this, he looked down at the pair Shane had put back on in such a way that suggested that, maybe, these jeans were a crime against fashion.

“I was also wondering if you could, um, make me a sports jacket. You know, like a smart jacket but not too smart?”

“I know what a sports jacket is, Shane. And you would wear it with, what?”

“Jeans?”

Sargent tilted his head to the side and looked down at Shane’s disappointing jeans again.

“Okay not these jeans.” What the hell was wrong with them? They were *perfectly normal*. They were Levis. Levis were a classic. They were a totally safe choice that he had bought for himself, by himself, and had been pretty pleased about that until now. “Got it. Maybe the pants you just tailored?”

This got him an improved look, but it was not quite approval. “Let’s go look at some material. Are we talking winter-weight? Spring? A nice linen for summer?”

What Shane thought was a simple request became very much not so simple. They eventually settled on a light-weight cotton in navy with a teal lining that was on the color palette and matching navy pants. And then a pale grey linen jacket, with a light blue lining, and matching pants.

“I am thinking a Nehru collar for the linen jacket. Something a little different.”

“Great,” said Shane, no idea what a Nehru collar was and planning to Google it later and see if he liked it. He found it easier to say ‘no’ to things if he didn’t have to do it person.

“When can you come back?”

This Shane had an answer for, as he had a couple of games against the Admirals at the end of January and in March.

“That works for me.” Sargent tapped something into his iPad, looking down at the screen. “I’ll email you your invoice.”

“Great, thank you.”

“You know, I am not a stylist. I know what colors and patterns and materials work well. I know how to fit clothes to a body. But curating a personal style is not my area of expertise.” Sargent paused delicately, his long eyelashes lowering with what even Shane could tell was faux demureness. “Even if I do have... opinions.”

Shane smiled. He quite like Sargent. He was to the point and good at his job. “So I noticed.”

“If you want someone to help you do that, I do know someone. And I think you would work well together.”

“Um.” This was all a bit much for Shane. Even getting someone to tailor his clothes so they fit his body was a giant leap forward in sartorial terms. He didn’t want to be dressing in neon pink because he was a *bright winter* or whatever. He was even a bit concerned about the Nehru collar.

“A stylist won’t push a style on you, Mr. Hollander,” Sargent said sternly. “Their job is to work with you and help you find *your* personal style. Even if that personal style is baggy jeans and T-shirts. As well as making you more cohesive, a stylist will give you the tools to help you navigate any choices you make on your own.”

It did sound helpful but the idea of employing someone else made Shane feel a little tired.

“I’ll give you her Instagram handle and you can look her up. She’s actually based out of Boston at the moment but she can work remotely.”

“Boston?” Shane asked, doing some rapid, favorable equations in his head.

“Yes, her partner is doing a PhD. Neuroscience of all things. Also, not his first PhD.” He rolled his eyes. “Some people really are just eternal students.”

“I barely finished high school.” And he had *hated* every minute of it. Stuffing his head full of useless knowledge that he had to do well at (because, his mom) but simultaneously cramming workouts and hockey practice and games around his schedule. He had been permanently tired.

“Me too.”

It was then that Shane worked out what was different. Sargent was wearing those fake eyelashes and *immediately* Shane wanted to rub his own eyes at the phantom sensation. He withheld this totally insane action until he was walking up the steps to street level and then he scrubbed his hands against his face until his eyes watered.

*

Shane watched Ilya's game from his suite, wearing the new T-shirt and a pair of newer track pants that he packed specifically because he thought Ilya would see him in them and they were probably a shade too tight for him.

It was not a great game. Marlow, Ilya's left wing, was moving slowly, favoring his right knee. He'd been out for a couple of weeks and probably shouldn't have been allowed back which was actually always how the Boston team worked. Shane had quipped in their last tape review of the Raiders that they should make sure to go for Marlow's weak side the next time they met as he for sure won't have healed properly.

He was clearly right.

Then midway through the second period, Boston's second line center Connors took a nasty check that had Shane wincing. He was carried off the ice.

Despite all this, Ilya scored three times, which eventually took them to a win of 3-2. If the Raiders hadn't been on top form, that was nothing compared to the Admirals. Hunter in particular was all over the place, not taking passes, really not connecting with the puck at all.

If Ilya was anything like Shane, he would not be pleased with that performance.

And, lo, there he was, shirtless as per, his curls flat with sweat, shaking his head at questions from the media and pulling an unimpressed, somehow intrinsically Slavic facial expression. The lighting really did emphasize the sharpness of his features, like a Greek statue brought to life. "We scraped through. We can do better than this." He shrugged. "But a win is a win."

Then he looked to the camera, looked *straight* at Shane, and winked.

"Fuck," Shane said, biting down on the edge of his thumb, his hand drifting to rest warmly over his half-hard dick.

*

Their post-game fucking – even if it wasn't Shane's game – was vigorous, Shane on all fours at the edge of the bed, his ass in the air as Ilya stood behind him. Rozanov knew what he was doing; his entire focus was on making Shane come untouched which they knew from experience could be achieved best at this specific angle, in this specific position.

Tears running down his face at the intensity, grasping at the duvet, incoherent noises streaming from his lips, Shane could do literally nothing but take what Rozanov was giving. When he came, he elevated to a higher plane just like the first time. He would never, ever get used to it.

They snoozed for a few minutes after – Shane because he was basically unconscious, Ilya because he was probably tired from a brutal hockey game – but then Ilya grunted and reached for his phone to check the time. On his screen there were multiple missed calls.

“I should call home.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Do you want me to—” Shane waved his hand at the door weakly. His legs were currently spaghetti-esque. “I could go for a walk?”

“No, *malys*h, I’ll go outside.” So saying, Rozanov pulled his pants on and shrugged his coat on over his bare chest. “It is very late in Moscow. This will not take long,” he said drily.

Shane stretched and enjoyed the way Rozanov’s eyes travelled down his body as he did so. “I hope not. You’ll get frostbite.”

“Pfft. I am Russian, Shane.”

He opened the doors, letting in a blast of tundra air and then laughed at Shane’s desperate scramble to pull the duvet up his body. “Close the fucking doors, Rozanov!”

He did, but not without giving Shane the middle finger. Shane cuddled back into the bed, smiling.

Rozanov was on the phone for nearly an hour, pacing back and forth. The double glazing was very impressive; Shane could barely hear him and he was obviously not speaking English.

He was also not happy.

It had taken him a while to work this out because initially Ilya had stood, stock-still, his back to Shane as he stared over the balcony with his phone pressed to his ear. But then he had started walking and gesturing with tight, controlled movements, as if he had forgotten he might have an audience. Like this, Shane could see his profile more clearly. Shane knew what an angry Rozanov looked like. He’d seen it on the ice when a ref made a bad call or if someone checked him poorly. *This* was Rozanov angry.

Shane had tried to be polite and *not* look. But his eyes had kept drifting over, like Rozanov was an addictive substance Shane needed to drink in. He was watching a side of Rozanov he didn’t usually get to see, an insight into Rozanov’s personal life. To how he interacted with his family, whoever they were.

Eventually he hung up but instead of coming inside, he rifled around in his pockets and Shane’s prescience was proved right when he pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. Shane might not know if Rozanov had siblings but he knew him well enough to get a room with a smoking terrace.

When Rozanov returned, sliding through the glass doors quickly so as to not let the heat out, his expression was smoothed over and Shane knew the rules here. He would have to pretend that had been totally fine. That he’d had a perfectly pleasant call with his family and they had all wished each other Happy Christmas in Russian and sent each other their love.

“I need a drink,” said Rozanov, heading straight for the mini-bar. “The vodka here is probably shitty— actually, no, this isn’t bad.” Rozanov paused in surprise as he waded through the options. He waved a bottle over his head. “You want?”

Shane hesitated. He really didn’t drink during the season.

“You don’t have to, Hollander, I will not force you,” Rozanov said irritably, because apparently Shane’s silence was translatable. “Here. They have your ginger ale.” He tossed him a cold can.

“Thanks.”

“One day, you should let me make you a Moscow Mule. When we have ice and limes. You will like. Is ginger beer, which is similar to your ginger ale, though spicier, and vodka. You won’t be able to taste the vodka.”

Shane was pretty damn sure he would. “Yeah, maybe. One day.” He watched with interest as Rozanov poured three little bottles of vodka into a glass. “You don’t add ice?” He remembered that from Vegas.

“No. Dilutes it. Very uncivilized.” He returned and climbed back into bed next to Shane, smelling of cigarette smoke.

“Do you want to watch a movie?”

“No.” One handed, Ilya arranged Shane so he was lying against his shoulder, unmistakably cuddling. He draped his arm about him and sighed. “This is good.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you very, very much for your comments. I love them 🥰

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

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

“Hey, so we maybe need to catch-up,” Hayden said after practice.

Shane dragged himself out of a mental repetition of the variation of a continuous attack drill he’d been working on with both his wings in preparation for their game against Tampa.

“Sure. Any reason in particular?”

“I had my 1-2-1 with Petrov yesterday and I think I need to talk about it with someone.”

He gave Hayden his full attention now. “That sounds... serious.”

Hayden made a face. “I dunno. Maybe just need to talk it over with you?”

“We can do that.” Shane smiled in what he hoped was a reassuring way and not – as he’d been told before – in a way that suggested he was pretty sure he was about to be disappointed.

Hayden affected a hang-dog expression. “Don’t look at me like that, man.”

Yeah, he might need to practice that one.

They headed to Murph’s, keeping it quiet in case the rest of the team saw this as an invitation to get a rare drink with their Captain.

Murph’s was, to Shane’s surprise, festooned with dangling glittery red hearts. “What the fuck,” he asked, as they slid into their usual booth at the back, Shane shuffling his way into the corner so that he wasn’t really visible. The staff at Murph’s were pretty good at keeping fans off his back but sometimes they slipped through. Not that there was anything wrong with that – Shane loved his fans – but sometimes a guy just wanted a beer with a friend. Or a ginger ale.

“Damn, you are so single. It’s nearly Valentine’s.”

“Oh yeah? Wow that came around quick.” He ignored the single comment. He was *busy* okay? The season was ramping up. They’d had All Stars – which Shane insisted on taking seriously, particularly since they’d had him up against Rozanov at every opportunity. And *he’d* had himself up against Rozanov at every opportunity – in more ways than one. Heh. “What are you doing with Jackie?”

“Dinner and a babysitter we’re paying through the neck for. Hey, Marcie,” Hayden greeted one of their usual waitresses, a pretty brunette with a nose piercing and a love of brightly colored lipsticks. Today’s was a really vibrant pink. Which would suit Shane because he was a *Bright Winter*.

Only not because he would never wear lipstick. Weird thought. He rubbed his thumb against his lips, recalling the unpleasant waxy texture. Jessica, his high school girlfriend, had also worn lipstick. And lip gloss. All of which Shane had hated.

“Afternoon, gents. What can I get you?” She smiled broadly. “Your usual, Shane?”

It was really a pleasure to be known. Shane smiled back easily. He liked Marcie. “Please.”

“And I’ll get a Blue. Thanks, Marcie.”

“No problem. I’ll be right back.”

They returned to the crucial matter of dissecting Hayden’s lame Valentine’s plans. “What did you get Jackie?”

Hayden picked up the Valentine’s menu, grimaced at it, and put it back down. “It’s good, actually. I got her a gold necklace with the kids’ initials.”

Translation: his mom had suggested a gold necklace with the kids’ initials. Still. This was actually pretty thoughtful. And he hadn’t left it to the last minute like last year. And it wasn’t a bouquet of really big daises like the year before that, which had apparently also been Bad.

“Nice one, man. She’ll love that.”

“And a spa day for her and her sister. But this time,” Hayden said, pre-empting Shane’s mental dismissal, “I’ve agreed with my mom that whenever Jackie wants to do it, she’ll come and stay and take care of the kids.”

Shane followed that logic through. “But doesn’t that mean that Jackie will have to look after both your mom and her sister? Since they’ll both have to stay?”

Hayden studied Shane with a sort of slowly morphing irritation. First the irritation that Shane was questioning his plan. Then the irritation that he was probably *right* to. And lastly the irritation about whether or not he needed rethink this plan, which required brain capacity he did not have.

“Why don’t you just pick a week in June and I can help you babysit instead.”

“I can look after my own kids.”

“Can you though?”

“Fuck off, Shane.” Hayden laughed and ran his hands through his hair. He groaned. “You’re right. I’ll sort it out. I just want to do something nice for her. She does so much.”

“I know, dude. I know.”

Marcie arrived with their drinks, dropping coasters down and then placing their drinks neatly. “You want any chips or anything? Not you, of course, Shane,” she said, winking at him.

“I think we’re all good here,” Shane said, speaking on behalf of Hayden who had a habit of mainlining about a kilo of peanuts here – they would keep topping up his bowl – and they were *so* bad for you.

“Okay,” Hayden said, after Marcie had left and he’d taken a swig of his beer. “So it was a pretty normal meet. We talked about Jackie and the kids. He asked about Coach and the team. We talked about the game on Monday and about the roadie and then he asked about you.”

“Like, captain stuff?”

Hayden shook his head. “No. He asked if I’d seen any of the press after the gala.”

“Right.” Great. “Oh, wait, have you?”

“Yeah, man, Jackie follows all that shit. Plus, there were pictures of us there all dressed up and she likes to share them with our parents.”

“Of course. Sure. You didn’t mention.”

“Well, some of it was a bit weird, wasn’t it?” Hayden – nervously – took another swig of his beer. Shane mirrored him and gulped his ginger ale. “He wanted to know if the team had picked up on it.”

“Have they?”

Hayden shook his head again, this time more urgently. “No, I haven’t heard anything. Not that there was anything to hear. It wasn’t that big a deal. Only—I ah. Kind of said that it couldn’t happen.”

“I don’t follow. What couldn’t?”

“Like. He was saying it was frustrating. That that kind of behavior from the media and stuff was detrimental to people being, like themselves.”

WARNING, Shane’s brain went. WARNING.

“—and then I said I’m sure you didn’t care because you weren’t gay and even if you were, which I know you’re not, man,” Hayden said earnestly, “it couldn’t happen.”

Shane held himself very still. “What couldn’t happen, Hayden?”

“Being gay.”

“I couldn’t be gay?”

“No, just people generally.”

Shane was lost. Totally lost. “Hayden—”

Hayden looked up to the ceiling with frustration. “I’m not explaining this well. I mean, I know that’s, like statistically unlikely right? That there are *no* gay people in hockey.” He leaned forward eagerly, as if to get Shane to confirm that, yes, it was statistically unlikely. So Shane nodded, even though he really, really didn’t want to. He wanted to peel the skin from his body, create a Shane clone that would sit on front of Hayden for this conversation and *vanish* from the bar. “Yeah. So I said more that – if someone was gay, they couldn’t come out.”

“Couldn’t. That’s the word you used.”

“Yeah.”

“Not... wouldn’t?”

“Does it make a difference?”

“Um. I mean, sort of. Maybe some people,” not Shane-people, “*would* come out. If they were —” Not Shane. Not a generational hockey player. Not mixed-race. Not first line center for the Montreal Metros. Not casually fucking Ilya Rozanov.

“You think someone would if they had the balls?” Hayden asked with surprise, naturally not appreciating that he was stabbing Shane in the stomach here. Or in the balls.

“I mean. I guess. Anyway. What happened when you said that.”

“He asked what I thought the repercussions would be.”

“Right.”

“And I said the guy would probably be benched.”

Shane winced.

“Shit, I knew that was wrong.” Cringing, Hayden took another fortifying drink. “I’m such a fucking idiot.”

“You’re not—” Shane sighed and rubbed his face with his hands and then just left them there. He *was* an idiot. He could picture it so easily, picture Hayden’s golden-retriever face, his earnest desire to correct Petrov on hockey etiquette. “I don’t think they could bench you. Or whomever. Legally speaking.”

“No, but *emotional* benching.”

He peeked through his fingers. “Did you say that?”

“Kinda. I said it would cause problems in the room.”

“Oh boy.”

Hayden groaned and pushed his beer aside so he could lean his head against the table. “I’ve really fucked up, haven’t I?” he told the no-doubt sticky wood.

“Did *you* come off as homophobic here or was it more that the MLH is?”

“I don’t know. Maybe both? He seemed pissed.”

Fuck. Shane was going to have to fix this.

*

That night, Shane sent a very polite and professional email to Marlene asking for Petrov’s soonest availability. He signed it *Shane Hollander (Captain)*, just in case Marlene needed reminding.

Regarding? she wrote back, no niceties, not even a ‘sent from my iPhone so apologies for the brevity’ signature.

Regarding Hayden Pike, he replied. Two could play at that game.

Will he know what that means, she asked, no question mark.

Yes, said Shane, even more pleased with himself. Suck it, Marlene.

Twelve hours later, Marlene emailed him a phone number. *Mr. Petrov said you can call him when you want. Do NOT share that number with anyone else. It is his PERSONAL cell.* She then wrote the whole email in French for him. Just in case he hadn’t understood.

What a baffling woman.

Obviously, Shane was *not* going to call Mikhail Petrov, billionaire, owner of the Montreal Metros whenever Shane wanted. That was insane. Instead, he composed a short text message, which he spent over an hour on.

Shane: *Hi, this is Shane Hollander. Please let me know when you are available for a call. Thanks.*

Petrov replied immediately. *Hi Shane Hollander. Give me twenty minutes.*

Shane stared. Did that mean he would call Shane? Or should Shane call *him* in twenty minutes?

Probably Petrov would call Shane.

He checked the timestamp. It was 9.02am now. So he had until 9.22am.

Shane replied, *Great. Speak at 9.22am (EST).*

Petrov sent back a laughing face.

*

Petrov didn't call him until 9.56am which was annoying for a number of reasons, the main one being that Shane had come back from a run and had delayed showering in case Petrov called. So now he had been stewing in his own sweat for nearly an hour, writing and rewriting what he was going to say.

Shane was uncomfortably nervous. He wanted to clear up any issues with Hayden, of course, but he also wished to be as far away from the context as possible. If he could get through this conversation without the word 'gay' being used, he would count it as a win.

Shane's phone lit up with the incoming call and his heart jumped. *Mikhail Petrov (Owner, Metros) calling.*

He answered, putting the phone on speakerphone so he could move about if he needed to. Bracing himself with his hands on his hips, he stood up straight. "Hi, Mr. Petrov, thanks for taking my call."

"Hi Shane." Petrov sounded amused. In the background, Shane could hear the clutter of what he suspected was crockery. "How can I help?"

"Ah. Yeah. Hayden Pike came to talk to me yesterday. He was concerned he'd given you a bad impression in your last catch-up."

"He was?"

Shane's eyes glanced at his notes. "Yes. He worried he came across as homophobic. He's not. He's just not the most eloquent guy, that's all."

"That's certainly true. You can reassure Hayden that I didn't think he came across as a homophobe. I did think he was fairly blasé about the toxicity of his chosen career and the casual way he threw about the anticipated discriminatory punishments a member of the MLH might face should he chose to be open about his sexuality."

"Yeah," said Shane, slowly.

"So you can imagine my concern."

"I can imagine it, yes," Shane repeated, because *concern* wasn't on his notes and he needed to choose his words carefully. He imagined this was press and Petrov was that irritating guy from Sportsnet. "But, in Hayden's defense, that *is* what would happen."

"It would not be what would happen on my team, Shane."

Shane winced, grateful that Petrov couldn't see him do so. "I'd like to think so, too."

"Shane, I have removed the GM, I have purged human resources, I cleansed the coaching staff and replaced them with people who are more aligned to Petrov 7s values."

"Yes, sir."

The moment seemed to call for a 'sir'.

“Are you saying that even with new policies, and an overhauled support system in place, no one in my team would feel comfortable expressing their sexuality, should that be something they would choose to do?”

Shane pictured Rozanov’s mirth-filled face. *He wants to make hockey gay.*

“Shane? That’s a yes or no question.”

Sighing, Shane took a seat on one of his bar stools. “But it can’t be a yes or no answer.”

“Perhaps you could elaborate,” Petrov said coolly.

Elaborate?

Fine, Shane decided, feeling put-upon and irritated by the oversimplification of the culture he had been living and breathing for more than half his life. He could *elaborate*.

“Right. Well. Fine. You’ve done all these things. And they’re good and progressive things. I agree with everything you are doing. But— shit. It’s not a quick fix. It’s not going to change decades of— of the MLH touting this white, uber-masculine ideal. The qualifications for professional hockey do not include being open-minded and that goes from fucking Crowell down to the kit guys. You – we – have influence over the Metros but we don’t live or work in a bubble. You don’t have influence everywhere else and it’s the *everywhere else* that’s the problem now. Not just other teams who have shitty players and shitty management, who won’t trade for you if you’ve got a reputation for not playing the game the right way, but the fans. I *love* my fans but I also have a whole team who manages my social media because I get so much abuse despite being the best fucking player in the league. Meanwhile, my linemate and white, married friend Hayden gets memes and virtual pats on the back when we lose. I cannot conceive what it would be like if I—” *Don’t say it, Shane, don’t say it.* “What I’m trying to say, we aren’t an island. Gay, black, Asian, Latino, mixed-race, whatever it doesn’t matter. It’s not what the MLH promotes. It’s not what guys like Hayden have been raised under, even if they’re only passively absorbing behaviors like icing guys out in the locker because they don’t fit the mold. Half of them go along with it because it’s just what people *do*. It’s going to take more than diversity training and 1-2-1s to change that. It’s going to take—I don’t know. Starting the whole team from scratch. Uniting other teams in the league. A fucking figurehead or something who talks about it in more than a performative way and isn’t going to be shut down. It’s going to take... years.”

And then Shane, exhausted, ran out of words.

And Petrov said nothing.

The line was so silent that even the clinking of crockery and glasses had gone away.

Shane anxiously tapped the screen, just in case Petrov had hung up, but there was the counter, still ticking away.

“Um. Hello?” Shane asked, wondering if maybe he was fired.

“I’m here. I just wish I’d recorded you.”

He was fired. He was so fired. “Oh God, I’m really sorry.”

“No, no. I think that was the first honest thing you’ve ever said to me. Bravo. We will talk when I’m back. We have a lot to discuss.”

*

Shane didn’t tell his mom.

For as long as he had been playing professional hockey, Shane had downloaded every meeting he’d ever had with management to her. He’d replayed – heavily edited – conversations with coaches. With teammates. She often read the room better than he did and could see things from a different perspective, which was useful.

He had got into the habit of also calling her after most of his 1-2-1s with Petrov, unpacking what they’d talked about, wanting her evaluation – and approval – of everything he had said.

He did not do that this time.

In the first place, Yuna wouldn’t have understood why Shane wanted to clear up the situation with Hayden. She was fond of Hayden, though she had never really understood why Shane had decided he was his best friend. He got the feeling she didn’t think Hayden was very bright – which sure as shit this situation would have proved. She acknowledged he was a good liney. She cared about Hayden’s career but more in the sense that his career currently supported Shane’s career.

Whether Petrov liked him or not was irrelevant to Shane’s career so while she would have respected Shane’s desire to right a wrong for his friend, she ultimately wouldn’t have approved of Shane intervening at the possible detriment of Shane’s own favor.

But that wasn’t why he hadn’t told her. This was about more than Hayden. This was about the fundamentals of the sport that his mother and to a degree Shane ignored in favor of the *good* things about hockey. That Shane was fucking good at it. That it mostly gave him joy. That it would pay him well and when – shudder – he retired, he would retire a young man with millions in the bank and a reputation that would live on.

But that *also* wasn’t why he hadn’t told her.

Shane hadn’t told her because – at the heart of it – Shane didn’t want Petrov to think Hayden was a homophobic asshole.

And that was important to Shane because he, Shane Hollander, was probably, definitely gay.

*

“Shane, I’m not sure if you’ve met Alex.”

Shane shook Alex's hand, eyes immediately glancing at the bright pink hair. They had matched their earrings to the same shade. "Yes. You came and gave us that talk on the use of pronouns in the workplace."

A talk that had been genuinely informative about an area of etiquette that Shane had found confusing but also the most excruciating experience of Shane's life, surrounded as he had been by his teammates who had been extremely vocal about their opinions regarding the talk.

"And you were very attentive." Alex raised their eyebrows, as if to suggest that this was not the case with the rest of Shane's teammates, some of whom had audibly and rudely sighed and Wiebe had been forced to raise his voice for the first time.

"Some work to be done with the team there," Shane acknowledged sheepishly though, frankly, the sighing had been the best of the scenarios he had imagined. He had been afraid someone might walk out. Or, worse, contest Alex on the usage of pronouns and mentioning that fucking liberal agenda again.

Alex smiled wryly and set their laptop down, fiddling around with the connections. "I think we're here because there's work to be done everywhere."

Petrov snorted. "Take a seat, Shane."

They had gathered in one of the smaller conference rooms that were dotted along the hallway down from the owner's suite. Shane had signed some paperwork in this room, he was pretty sure. Though it had been decorated with more Metros stuff at the time and now was stripped back to rather more neutral tones.

And a really nice table, actually, with an intricate parquet design. He stroked the wood thoughtfully. Judging from the color and pattern, it was mango, which he'd been reading about. He had been paying rather more attention to furniture, now that he was in the process of building his own place.

He looked up and found both Alex and Petrov watching him stroke the table. They wore eerily similar expressions, heads tilted to the side in curiosity.

Shane sat back and cleared his throat. "Great table."

The now familiar crinkle around his eyes indicated that Petrov had, once again, found Shane deeply funny. "I'm sure Marlene can find where we sourced it."

"Oh, no, let's not bother Marlene," Shane said hurriedly, imagining being on the receiving end of more snippy emails.

"Shane," Petrov's eyelids fluttered at him, "are you afraid of my assistant?"

He scoffed, absolutely not going to be ashamed. "Any sane person would be."

Alex laughed, a short, sharp bark. "He's got you there, Mishka." They opened their laptop as Shane pondered how you got 'Mishka' from 'Mikhail'. "Okay. Let's get started. I have a few

slides.”

“Color me surprised,” said Petrov drily, which got him a glare. “What? You love a slide deck.”

They bickered with obvious fondness as Alex switched the screen to presentation mode and Shane wondered if maybe this wasn’t going to be as awkward as he had thought it was going to be.

That was right until the presentation loaded and Alex said, super casually, “So here is our plan for world domination, Shane.”

And projected on the screen was some intense grid with years horizontally and vertically there was a list of different departments – including HR, Communications, Management, the Team, Coaching Staff, Supporters. The text was super tiny but within each box was an initiative.

He squinted. He wished he’d brought his glasses.

“Well, not the world,” Petrov corrected. “This is *our* organizational transformation roadmap, for the Metros.”

Alex clicked on. A series of boxes on the furthest left column lit up in green. “We are currently here.”

Now that the boxes were green, Shane could read them better. “Introduce new DEI policy. Cascade policy. Introduce mandatory training. Restructure management and coaching staff—hey, does that mean you were already planning to replace Theriault?”

“Yes. He proved pretty early on that he wouldn’t align to our values. And would consistently undermine us to the team. Correct?” Alex asked Shane sharply, raising their eyebrows, as if daring Shane to disagree.

He couldn’t. “Yeah.”

Petrov tapped his pen against the table. “You never mentioned.”

“You never asked me.” Shane waved a hand at the look of complaint that crossed Petrov’s face. “Look, no, you don’t get it. That’s not what you do to your coach. Hockey is a hierarchy. It goes rookies, vets, assistant captain, captain, then coach. You don’t bitch about your coach to management unless you really mean it and you’re prepared to be punished if it goes wrong. And in the beginning we were just trying to work out if this—” He gestured to the screen “—was one of those performative initiatives the MLH roles out whenever there’s bad press or the real thing. It’s obviously the real thing. Everyone can see that now.”

“How do you know everyone sees it’s the real thing?” Alex wanted to know.

“There are chats. Chat groups,” Shane said hesitantly, really now feeling like he was breaking a fairly substantial bro code. “We have a big group one, which I police. Then there are various splinter groups. The team without me and just the As. One with just me, J.J. and

Hayden. The rookies have one – that one usually lasts a couple of years so I know last season's rooks still have an active group. That's Peetie and Franks and Jessie, though he's gone back down to the AHL now." Not a loss, in the grand scheme of things, though Peetie and Franks had been upset. "And then there is another group that Comeau set up just after I got made captain which is more... selective."

Alex and Petrov exchanged a look and then Petrov leaned forward like Shane was spilling a juicy secret. "Comeau thought he was going to get the C, didn't he?"

Shane grimaced. It wasn't a thought he particularly liked to dwell on. "Yeah, he was Anderson's A. But the year Anderson retired, Rozanov was made Captain, the youngest ever, and we're all about the rivalry here so." Shane shrugged. At the time it had left a nasty taste in his mouth, coming second to Rozanov once again, and all for optics. But Shane had made his peace with it. He was a damn good captain. They would pry that C from his cold, dead hands.

"So this group is where the trouble is," Alex surmised.

"Yeah. I have a couple of guys in there who give me the occasional insight. I won't tell you who. But I understand the tone is shifting. The dissenters have started to make noise about toeing the party line. Comeau doesn't like it but he knows if he makes waves, it will not be good for his career. Not when there isn't a coach to suck up to, not when he knows management is willing to make big changes."

Alex shrugged and looked over at Petrov. "I still think we get rid of Comeau."

"Shane?"

Shane shook his head. "He's an excellent defenseman. He and Drapeau are almost unstoppable."

"I'm sure we could find another," Alex insisted.

"Are we seriously talking about restructuring the team now?" he protested. These were not decisions that the captain made. And certainly didn't discuss it without his coach present.

Petrov seemed to read Shane easily. "Do you want Wiebe here? I can assure you, he's on board."

"Wiebe knows about this? Fuck," Shane muttered, sitting back in his chair.

"Shall we click on to the second chart?" Alex asked brightly. They didn't wait for permission. The next chart was even worse in terms of density and this time Petrov stood up so he could stand closer to the screen. "This is my first draft of the Transformational Roadmap for the whole of the MLH. I haven't come up with a catchy name yet."

"Oh, yes, we need an acronym," Petrov squinted at the screen. "How about TROL?"

Alex's whole face lit up. "TROL? Oh, that could be fun." They socked Petrov on the arm. "*That's* why they pay you the big bucks."

Shane was not going to be able to tell his mom about any of this.

*

It was gone nine by the time they wrapped up and Shane's head was buzzing with new information and the anxiety that he had just stepped on a landmine which was on top of another landmine, which was on top of *another* one. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was the entirely wrong choice to be involved in this operation.

For it was an operation. It was a *multi-year* operation that would probably continue until well after he retired from hockey.

His stomach rumbled, loud enough that Petrov heard it. "Should have fed you. Sorry. We really got caught up." He checked his watch. "Want to grab dinner?"

Alex had slammed their laptop closed and left already, murmuring about being late to meet friends, so it was just Shane and Petrov standing outside the conference room.

Shane frowned, thinking about the photographs.

Petrov seemed to guess this was the direction of his thoughts. "Shane, I really don't actually have paparazzi chasing me around most of the time." He sighed. "But, you're right, let's not risk it."

Now Shane felt bad. Petrov looked genuinely disappointed. "No, no, it's fine." It *was* fine. There was nothing going on between them. Petrov was basically his boss, for God's sake. Plus, he knew that if he went home now, the buzzing in his head wouldn't stop.

Shane was rewarded with those crinkling eyes. "We'll go to TOKii."

"Bribery."

"You know it."

Smiling, weirdly relaxed, Shane followed Petrov to his office, and then remembered the specter that was Marlene. She wasn't at her desk. He peered into the little kitchenette, just in case she was hiding in there. "Please," Petrov said, clicking things on his laptop, "she leaves at 6pm on the dot every day."

That was a relief. "Aren't executive assistants supposed to... assist you all the time?"

"I have others."

"Others?"

"Two others, actually. One for GMT, one for EST. Marlene is really only here for the Metros administration which is not exactly time consuming, though she of course feels otherwise."

Shane ambled over to look out of the window onto the ice as Petrov sank down into his office chair and began to reply to emails. The facility was shut down, so there was little but ambient

light. He touched the glass. He still vaguely longed to be out there. It was simpler than the real world. “What about the AGM?”

“What about him?”

“Does he know all about this?”

“Martin is doing what Martin does best.”

“Which is?”

“Golf,” Petrov slammed the lid of his laptop closed and shoved it into a sleek little laptop bag. “He plays a lot of golf.”

“Why haven’t you got rid of him?”

“No, I mean that, he plays golf with the Commissioner on a semi-regular basis. He’s basically my mole. But we agreed to some plausible deniability. He’d like to retire early and wants an easy life.”

“But in the meantime...”

“He gives me a soundbite or two. And is a dab hand with a recording device.”

“Wow.” Shane had met Martin a handful of times. He would never have guessed it.

He pushed off the glass and strolled over to look at the whiskeys on the shelves of the bar. Most of them were unopened. “My car’s here. I could drive us?”

This clearly stumped Petrov, who stopped throwing things into his bag. “I would need to speak to Rene.”

“Oh, sure. He your driver?” That would make sense. Billionaires probably didn’t drive themselves places. Just like they had a minimum of three executive assistants.

“No, no, my security.”

“You have security?”

“Yes, people like to try to kidnap me on occasion.” He reached for his desk phone, tapping a speed-dial and lifting the handset.

“Oh! Me too.” Weird thing to have in common with a person, but there you go.

Petrov looked at Shane askance as someone picked up at the other end of the line. He shook his head a little. “Hi. Rene, I’m heading out with Shane Hollander. We’re going to grab a bite at TOKii so he was planning to drive us.”

Rene said something at the other end and Petrov nodded and hung up. “He’ll meet us there. Tell me about these kidnap threats. We should compare notes on creativity.”

Shane was patting himself on the back for the decision to accept this invitation to dinner. For one, the restaurant itself was a good choice. It was pretty upscale and at this time of night only a few patrons were eating. Petrov and Shane had been escorted to one of the more private tables in the restaurant, away from any scrutinizing eyes but not exactly hidden like they were actively hiding something. It didn't feel subversive. For another, the conversation that edged around their earlier discussion was helping Shane with the buzzing in his head, almost like he was being regulated by Petrov's openness.

Also, Petrov hadn't done that annoying thing that nearly everyone did when there was any Asian food on a menu and assumed Shane knew anything about it. If anything, he seemed to be far more *au fait* with Japanese cuisine than Shane was and had basically ordered for them. They seemed to have very similar tastes and dietary requirements, which Shane found a relaxing change from eating with his teammates. He would never have come here with the guys.

A fleeting thought – that he might like to come here with Rozanov – whistled through Shane's brain and was quickly dismissed as irrelevant.

Shane selected a piece of kinmedai. "Did you think about buying another team?"

"Not really. I wanted a French-speaking team so it was a choice between the Metros or the Centaurs and it was pretty clear that the Metros were on an upwards track whereas the Centaurs—"

"Are mediocre." Which from Shane's POV was pretty heartbreaking. They had been his team, as a kid. His and his dad's. They'd been cruising at kind of middle-of-the-pack for a long time but there had been a couple of exciting years when he was a teenager when the Cens had hovered around the wild-card cutoff and he and his dad had been screaming fans in the audience at home and even some away games. They had never quite made the mark. A shame.

"Yes, not much of a choice. Plus, the Metros are an Original Six franchise, which counts for something. If we could make change here, that would make a bigger wave than if it was a less historically impressive team. And there was you, of course."

"Me? Oh, fuck, not you, too."

Petrov snorted. "What? You don't enjoy being the Asian-Canadian poster-child for hockey? I notice you feature on our website on nearly every page."

"Yup. Me and J.J. and Sharif and Nisha—"

The eye crinkle, which had been a regular feature of this evening, returned. "—who doesn't even work here anymore. I also noticed none of the actual LGBTQI+ staff are included."

Shane nearly dropped his chopsticks. "We have LGBTQI+ staff?"

Petrov's eyes widened. "Yes. To start with, we have an openly gay Ops manager."

The Ops team was not big so it didn't take Shane long to narrow down this to one utterly unlikely possibility based on knowing for a fact Marie-Therese was married to someone in finance, Lance was engaged to an ex-puck bunny (at least, Shane hoped she was an 'ex'). Which left... "*Bruce?*"

"You didn't know?"

"Bruce is gay?" Bruce was massive. Shane was a big guy, but Bruce was a foot taller and about a foot wider. His hands were the size of dinner plates. He had a *beard*.

"There's a picture of him and his husband on his desk."

"He's *married*? I thought that was, like, his brother or something."

"Shane. It's their wedding photo."

Shane closed his eyes, beyond mortified. He was pretty sure he'd once said 'nice photo' to Bruce for lack of anything else polite to say. "He doesn't wear a wedding ring," he said weakly.

He heard Petrov huff out a breath and when he (bravely) opened his eyes again it was to find him muffling his laughter in his napkin. He appeared near tears.

Gently, Shane laid his chopsticks down, facing this humiliation head-on. "Look. You should know, I'm basically oblivious to all social cues."

This seemed to make Petrov laugh harder. He tried to smother himself and then muttered, peering over the edges of the napkin, "Oh, I *know*, Shane."

"Unless someone tells me *point blank*, I'm not going to get it. You should keep that in mind with your plans for world domination. I am not reliable. I need explicit instructions."

Petrov mopped his eyes and took a shaky breath. But a thought clearly crossed his mind, and his sense of humor was reignited, and he had to bury his face in his napkin once more, shoulders shaking. "His *brother*," he wheezed. "Shane. His *brother*."

Okay. Shane was a good sport. He could see the funny side. "Take your time," he said generously, picking up another piece of sashimi.

Chapter End Notes

Today, as I lamented the upcoming chapter where I have had to write about actual hockey, I thought to myself 'Jeez, can't believe I'm writing about a sport I've never seen' and then I remembered... I HAVE. I went to Montreal in 2016 for work. They took us to

a game. I watched, I shit you not, a Montreal vs. Vancouver game. I have PHOTO EVIDENCE. This has blown my mind. (The only real memory I have from this was that it was INCREDIBLY VIOLENT hahahahaha).

PS. WIP is now at 91k words. Still not quite finished 🤪

PPS. Oh! Also. I had NO IDEA that putting Shane/Original Male Character would be such a talking point for you guys. Hahaha. I will give no spoilers on this subject 😬

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

This chapter was hard. I had to write some actual hockey 😭

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

The last time they saw each other before playoffs, they agreed that if both their teams made it, they would have to stop seeing each other.

Admittedly, Shane brought this up at a particularly charged moment, so Rozanov's agreement might not have been made when he was of sound mind.

"Fuck, yes, whatever you want, Hollander," he said as Shane slowly lowered himself down, taking him inch by inch. "Fuck. Fuck. Yes, like that."

It was a good workout, riding dick. Shane had never done it before, obviously. But he could feel his core was really engaged and he was in complete control of where exactly Rozanov's cock was brushing his prostate. If only other workouts felt like this, like it was lighting him up inside.

Plus, Rozanov was *really* into it. He kept looking down, where they were joined, his eyes and mouth blown wide, like he was witnessing an amazing spectacle. Shane could feel each individual finger digging into his hips as Rozanov helped them move together. He would have suspicious bruises tomorrow. He couldn't care about it now.

"I just think—" Shane groaned. Wow. This was so good. Rozanov felt *massive* at this angle, stretching Shane in the best of all possible ways. "Oh fuck, I just think it would be distracting."

"Distracting," Rozanov panted, fumbling for the lube and slicking up his hand. He gave Shane's dick a couple of quick strokes which had Shane rocking himself down *hard*. "*Shane*. Fuuuuuck."

Shane adjusted himself slightly, leaning forward a little more and Rozanov seemed to take this as a sign that Shane wanted to be kissed so his head jerked up and crashed their mouths together. The co-ordination required to kiss and fuck in this position tested Shane's limits and they panted into each other's mouths, half laughing, half moaning. "S'fucking good, yes?" Rozanov asked.

"So good."

The only issue was that Shane probably wanted it harder. It was good like this, definitely. He could come. But he knew it would be better if he was on his back or front. He liked it when

he was being smothered. Didn't want to think about why.

"You are thinking," Rozanov said, watching his face.

"Can you fuck me now?"

Rozanov's hips jerked up instinctively, out of the rhythm they had built. He gripped Shane's ass with one hand and moved the other up to his back and *rolled them* without pulling out.

"Fuck, Ilya," Shane whispered, impressed at this co-ordination, as Rozanov pushed his legs up over his shoulders and went to town.

Oh yeah. That was— *that* was what he wanted.

"Make yourself come, Shane," Rozanov instructed, the veins in his forehead popping with intensity.

His dick was leaking and still slicked up from the couple of strokes Rozanov had given him earlier. Shane reached between them and he was *much* closer than he thought because one stroke had his climax rushing through him, crying out as come spurted between his slippery fingers.

"Fuck, Shane, fuck," Rozanov grunted above him, hammering home, his dick piston-ing in and out. Rozanov looked crazed with lust. Shane had done that. Shane could do that to Ilya Rozanov.

Rozanov's mouth parted as he came with a gust of air, his hips stuttering as he finished inside Shane. He held himself up for a moment, arms shaking and then with a laugh lowered down on top of him.

"What did you make me agree to?" he asked vaguely, mouthing Shane's neck with his usual post-sex affection.

Shane automatically started to play with the sweaty curls he could reach. His legs were trembling. "No sex during playoffs. If we both make it."

Rozanov grunted. "Yeah, this would probably kill me. We are not going to make it though."

Shane gasped. "What? Don't say that." Even if you thought it, you shouldn't say it. That was the rule. He slapped Ilya's ass, none too gently.

Ilya lifted his head with a strange quirk to his mouth. "You can do that again if you want."

Shane laughed nervously, the muscles in his stomach fluttering with a strange sort of excitement. "You like that?"

"I like pretty much everything you do."

Oh. Wow. "Um. Okay." This fairly short-circuited Shane's brain. "Same," he said, which was both polite and true.

Rozanov's grin was knowing. "As I was saying. With Connors out, and Marly's knee, we're fucking weak in the center and if I'm not on the ice no one is scoring. And don't get me started on our defense."

Well. That was true. Shane was glad he hadn't been the one to say it though. Boston had lost 4-2 tonight, Shane skating rings around said defense. And Rozanov had scored both goals, unassisted. "What the hell is going on?"

"I don't know." Rozanov gently separated them and tied off the condom. He clambered off the bed – a little shaky, which was gratifying – and in the bathroom Shane heard the metallic sound of a trash can opening and closing. The bathroom faucet ran.

"Complacency, maybe?" It sometimes happened. More of a psychological thing than anything else. An *oh we won last year* attitude which, combined with the rose-tinted glasses of *it wasn't so bad* led to an assumption that it was repeatable.

It wasn't. Or teams would be winning back-to-back cups all the time.

"Maybe." He sighed heavily in the bathroom. "The team is old, Shane. They were old when I joined. And they're older now." Rozanov returned, two washcloths in his hand. One he used to wipe off Shane's stomach, the other for his thighs and ass while Shane lay there like Rozanov was his personal servant. "We got some new blood in the trade but it's not enough."

This was annoying. Shane felt for him. "So, what's the plan for next season?"

"Isn't this crossing the line?" Rozanov asked sardonically, wriggling his finger in Shane's belly-button.

"Stop that," Shane giggled, helplessly, pushing his hand away. He was right though. "Oh yeah. I forgot about... that." Team secrets and all. Did this count as collusion?

Laughing softly, Rozanov tossed the washcloths towards the bathroom where they landed with an unappealing wet splat. Ignoring Shane's moue of distaste, he climbed back into bed and fussed with his pillows until he was propped up.

Shane lay still, somewhat unnerved by what had just happened. Rozanov wasn't normally this honest about his team. Truth be told, neither was Shane. When they talked about hockey it was typically in terms of their own successes. Boasting, gloating. If Shane was having problems, he didn't go to Rozanov to discuss them.

Even though, he was probably the best person *to* discuss them with.

But yeah. Collusion.

"Sorry," Shane said. He really *did* feel bad for him. Particularly since Shane was feeling pretty damn good about their chances this year. Shane's new liney, Lachlan, might as well have been a clone of Hayden, and combined the three of them were death on the ice. He'd heard on *Man In the Crease* referring to them as the 'Three Horseman' which had given him a real kick.

Rozanov grunted. He waved a hand around. “Is fine. Next year.” His knuckles brushed Shane’s arm and he leaned down to kiss the curve of Shane’s shoulder. “Are you hungry? Do you like tuna melts?”

*

The next TROL meeting was just Shane, Alex and Wiebe, as Petrov was in New York dealing with another crisis. This time they were staring at an excel spreadsheet projected on the big screen.

Both Wiebe and Shane were uncomfortable.

“This is no different than tape,” Alex told them, not for the first time. Their tone was tight, as if they didn’t quite believe what they were saying, either.

“It’s a little different,” Shane muttered, unbelievably depressed by the scene before him.

“We’re actually not looking for weaknesses here. We’re looking for allies. It’s positive.”

“Not felt quite so positive so far,” said Wiebe crisply.

Alex tried for a laugh. “That’s only because there’s literally no one good in the entire MLH.”

Shane pointed to the singular green box on the spreadsheet, right next to the ‘Admirals’ label. “Thank fuck for Scott Hunter, hey?”

“And that’s it.”

“Ryan Price,” Wiebe announced suddenly, struck by a desperate kind of inspiration. “I’ve played him. Always thought he was decent.”

“He’s on the Bears, right?” Alex murmured, leaning closer to their laptop to find the name on the list. “There he is. Excellent.”

Shane chewed his bottom lip. Rozanov’s name was *right there*. Boston Raiders – Ilya Rozanov – Captain. Practically taunting him, the letters emboldened on the screen.

Could he say it? Or was it too risky? That sea of red was *so* depressing.

“Rozanov,” he announced, so fast he practically stumbled over Rozanov’s name.

Both Alex and Wiebe stared at him.

“Your arch nemesis?” Alex asked, visibly puzzled. “You think he’s an ally?”

“I do.”

“The notorious womanizer.”

“I think his sex life is entirely consensual. And I’m not sure what that’s got to do with his opinions on diversity in the MLH,” Shane said defensively, though God knew he wasn’t

thrilled about the womanizing either, not least because if Rozanov was regularly fucking women he was surely *also* fucking other men, just more secretly.

Which was *fine*. They weren't exclusive. Shane could fuck other people, too. Like that guy in Mexico that one time. He just didn't prioritize it like Rozanov seemed to.

Alex raised their hands, accepting this criticism with aplomb. "*Mea culpa*. You're absolutely right. If you vouch for him, then I will fill this little box green, no problem."

Wiebe was still staring at Shane. "I have to admit to some surprise, Shane. I know the rivalry is part PR but you know him well enough to be able to judge this?"

"Yup," said Shane, very deliberately pronouncing the 'p' so it sounded final. He would take no more questions on this.

They bounced around a few more names for another twenty minutes and then Alex sighed and zoomed out. All three of them then sighed together. The spreadsheet was a map of reds and oranges, with only a handful of greens. And this was just their division.

"I guess... it can only get better?" Alex suggested at this bleak picture.

Afterwards, Wiebe and Shane walked downstairs together. "I'll reach out to Garmin about next week's game. Suggest drinks after."

"I'll ask J.J. to do the same with Leroy." It would have been super weird for Shane to reach out – whereas J.J. knew him from Juniors. They were apparently part of a chat group for black MLH players. If there was an East Asian one, Shane wasn't on it. It would be a small group anyway. Just him and Liu in Washington and Liu *hated* Shane. Maybe if the category was expanded to Asia as a whole. That would, what, take them up to eight?

Fuck. Maybe he should do it.

"Who are you going to read in?" Wiebe smirked. "Always wanted to say that."

"Only J.J., I think."

"Not Pike?"

"Um. Maybe not immediately. Like, he'll be on board, I just have concerns about how subtle he can be. Not that I'm going to be great at this," Shane muttered, fucking dreading next week. He rubbed his head, where a tension headache had formed about an hour ago.

A thought occurred to him. "We're not going to do this during the playoffs, right?"

"Hell no."

"Okay." That was a relief. There were only five more games. Five awkward post-game drinks where he tried to suss out whether or not the opposing team was filled with raging homophobes or racist assholes. "Would be easier to hire a private investigator."

“Sure. And when the story breaks on the front page of every national newspaper that Mikhail Petrov hired a private investigator to dig up dirt on the opposition, I’ll quote you on that.”

*

Shane’s whole career, he’d pretty much decided his role in diversity was a passive one. By existing, Shane was making a change. He was the Asian-Canadian poster-child for hockey. Never mind that he couldn’t speak more than kindergarten-level Japanese, kids who didn’t look like Hayden, like Comeau and Drapeau and Peetie, would grow up thinking *I could do that too*. Maybe even kids who didn’t have a white dad and a white surname, which he knew had opened more doors for him than if he’d been entirely Japanese.

That was enough. He didn’t need to stick his neck out any further and yet here he was, sticking his neck out. Way, waaaaay out. Way out of his comfort zone.

The first post-game drinks with Leroy was only made bearable by J.J.’s presence. Leroy had brought his As with him and he had clearly been puzzled by the invitation but affable enough. His As, not so much. Greer was clearly pissed about the loss and Sorrel didn’t speak a word all evening, just texted on his phone.

Which left most of the talking to J.J. and Shane who was, let’s be honest, not that great at it.

By the time they left, Shane had another headache and even J.J. was clearly questioning the viability of this plan.

“What are you going to tell Gaultier?”

“That it’s fucking hard to bring up gay shit in hockey?”

J.J. huffed out an unamused laugh. “No shit.” He grunted. “Maybe we should bring Peetie with us.”

“What and ask the table if anyone has a gay uncle?”

“Hey, Hollander, *relax*,” J.J. said, gripping Shane’s shoulder and digging his fingers in like he was giving him a massage. “*Crisse*, you’re tense. This was a practice run. We just need to think of ways to improve.”

“Right.” Shane dragged in a deep breath. J.J. was right. “Okay. I think... I think we need more people. This was too concentrated.”

“Agreed.”

“Maybe we bring the rookies. Kids are more open, aren’t they?”

It hadn’t actually been that long ago since Shane was a rookie, not in reality. But right now he was feeling one-hundred years old.

“And I think we just... prime them.” J.J.’s brown eyes were narrowed with thought. “We tell them that our team is better. That diversity makes us stronger.”

“Would help if all the rookies weren’t white this year.”

“Fucking wouldn’t it,” J.J. groaned.

They had agreed to meet Wiebe back at the hotel, even though it was nearly eleven and Shane wanted to be in bed, like, two hours ago. He had four unread messages from Rozanov that he hadn’t even had a chance to look at, a tantalizingly delicious prospect. Even if they were predictable critiques about Shane’s performance that evening, he was still looking forward to responding properly.

They trudged into the hotel bar, both thinking that Wiebe would also have struck out, only to be met with a buoyant face.

Wiebe waved at them. “Boys. What can I get you?” he asked, beaming.

J.J. ordered a beer. Shane a ginger ale, which he then changed to a sparkling water. So close to bed, he didn’t want to add more sugar to the mix.

“I take it your evening wasn’t a bust?”

Proudly Wiebe pulled a napkin from his jacket pocket. “I have *a list*.”

“A list of names? How?” He and J.J. crowed over the napkin Wiebe spread triumphantly over the bar.

“Garmin’s twin sister is a lesbian. She’s been following Petrov’s ‘mission’,” he used his fingers to give the word emphasis, “and it was literally the first thing he asked me about. And —” Wiebe laughed. “—he used to work with Theriault. *Hated* him. Gave me a great opening.”

“Jesus,” Shane said, pouring over the admittedly short list of names, but surprised none the less, “Marcus Lawrence? I would never have guessed.”

“Apparently came into Garmin’s office a couple of weeks ago and said he had concerns about the homophobic language in the room.”

“*Tabarnak*,” said J.J.

“Exactly.”

*

They got better about it. The next game, they brought Hayden and the rookies – all of whom were utterly baffled but game. It wasn’t actually *so weird* for teams to socialize together. It happened at All Stars, at the Winter Classic. The issue was more that it wasn’t particularly normal for Montreal who were known as being somewhat standoffish.

Maybe this was Shane’s doing. Maybe it was the brand.

They had only played Ottawa, however, and had wiped the ice with them. So it wasn't as if it was a big deal.

Shane and J.J. walked away with the general feeling that Ottawa was mostly harmless. Zane Boodram was a decent guy – another member of J.J.'s chat group – and he hadn't seem too weirded out by the direction of their conversation. Boodram had brought his goalie with him, Wyatt Hayes. Who was weird, in the way that most goalies were weird, but really affable. When Shane had brought up their new owner, both Bood and Hayes had already been aware and completely unphased when Shane had – using a sentence he had practiced – asked what they thought about diversity in the organization.

Boodram, naturally, had some thoughts – dry retellings of microaggressions he had faced – but Wyatt surprised Shane by talking about how neurodiversity was entirely ignored in the organization. Shane didn't know what that was but Hayden *astonished* him by being a font of knowledge on the subject.

In the car back to the hotel, he asked about it.

“Come on, Shane, you've met Stella.”

Stella was Hayden's sister. “Stella is...”

Hayden nodded encouragingly into Shane's confused silence. “On the spectrum. We've definitely talked about this.”

Shane rapidly flicked through his mental repertoire of conversations he'd had with Hayden about his sister. Stella was a researcher for some biochemical company. She was quiet. Antisocial. Didn't like loud noises. None of this screamed problematic to Shane, who felt similarly. And he *had* met her. They'd had a perfectly normal conversation.

“Don't think neurodiversity is on the seminar list,” J.J. said thoughtfully.

“I'll ask Alex.”

*

They took Peetie and one of the new rookies out the next time and this seemed to be a signal for Micky Dawson to invite all the kids on his team which made the evening pretty chaotic and not remotely useful. Everyone, except Shane, got really drunk which as captain was one of his particular bugbears as it turned the whole situation into one where he felt like everyone's fucking dad. The loser dad who forced them to drink water and corralled them all into cabs and stood a couple of polite yards away as they hurled into an alley.

At breakfast the following morning, they debriefed with Wiebe, who gave Shane a somewhat disappointed look, but had equally not got far with the opposition team's coach. He seemed pissed in general. Maybe he was hungover, too.

On the flight home, Jonsson slid into the empty seat beside Shane – a surprising enough gesture that Shane pulled his headphones from his ears. People didn't normally bother him on

the plane. Then again, he *had* poured Jonsson into bed last night and made sure he had water and Tylenol, and a waste can in close proximity. “If this is about last night—”

Jonsson’s pale face flushed, splotchy down his neck. “Ah, no, Cap. Sorry again about that.”

“Maybe don’t accept tequila from the Scouts again, huh?”

The kid grimaced. “Yeah. Yeah, no more tequila. Maybe ever again. In my life.”

Shane suspected this was a hollow promise.

“Um. So. There’s something... something I wanted to tell you about last night.”

“Oh?”

“One of the guys. He was asking me about— he’s heard that we’re, like—” Jonsson blew out a breath and looked up. He grew, if anything, splotchier. “We’re getting this reputation, you know. For being, like, gay.”

Shane’s vision kind of tunneled. “What?”

“Like. Kind of gay.”

“We being... the Metros.”

“Yeah. Or like not us, the team. Maybe just... the vibe?”

“Are you asking me this or telling me this.”

“Um. Telling you. I guess?” Jonsson squeaked, not sounding remotely confident. Shane really didn’t know why. It was a simple question.

Shane took a deep breath, which he found himself doing a lot around Jonsson. Surely he hadn’t been this nervy as a rookie? “Okay,” he said, when it wasn’t ‘okay’ at all. “Is this what you wanted to tell me?”

“I guess. Yeah. I mean. Also, he kind of came out to me.”

“Oh. Wow.”

“Yeah. It was in the bathrooms. He’d had a lot of tequila too.”

“Don’t tell me who it was,” Shane said hurriedly.

Jonsson shook his head, probably too violently for the state of his hangover, because he grimaced and held his fingers against his lips briefly. “No, no, I wouldn’t do that. It was just, I thought you should know.”

Looking back, Shane remembered feeling like it was a relief to make the playoffs. Not just because this was the crowning achievement of the year, his literal life's work, but because now Shane could just concentrate on what he was good at – which was winning hockey games – which felt ridiculous after the fact because at no point did Shane know that they were winning.

As a kid, as an adult, Shane poured over the analysis of each playoff season. The media always spoke about playoff moments as though they existed in neat little boxes. A process. A journey to inevitable success or failure. But that wasn't how it was when you were actually playing. Playoffs were essentially one long conversation between teams, teams fueled by exhaustion at the end of a long season, and stubbornness and skill, yes, but, despite what Shane would wish, there was definitely luck in there. Or magic.

They'd drawn New York in the first round and Hunter did *not* make it easy for them to progress to the second round, but they did it, cinching the four games it took to go on to face Tampa. Compared to the Admirals, ironically Tampa was a piece of cake – they swept it in four and enjoyed a nice little break before the Conference Final against Washington. They won 4-2 – and for the first time Shane lost his voice entirely, from stress – and that left them to play Colorado for the Stanley Cup.

Wiebe had warned them – unnecessarily – that it would be tough, and he had been right.

Game One arrived and opened the conversation for the finals.

Shane scored early, the first three minutes of the first period, after a tidy, well practiced back and forth with Hayden, but after that Colorado was relentless. Every goal was answered. Every shift was harder than the last. Hayden took a puck to the mouth before the second period was over, disappearing down the tunnel and returning with fresh stitches. Mitty kept them alive with save after save, and somehow, they escaped with a win.

And it did feel like an escape. This early on, it couldn't feel that good, not when it was apparent from that first game that Colorado wasn't going to go down easy. Shane saw the wide-eyed stares of the rookies on the bench, rookies who had walked into playoffs with nerves but ultimately that naïve hope. And now reality was setting in.

To continue the metaphor, Colorado answered that opening conversational salvo with Game Two.

Nothing seemed to go their way in Game Two. They missed passes by inches, shots that should have gone in hit posts, rebounds landed on the wrong sticks. Shane scored once, off an assist from Lachy, but it wasn't enough. They lost 4-1, and the flight to Colorado was miserably quiet, Shane rewatching the game over and over again until J.J. leaned over and took his tablet away from him and exchanged it for one of his protein bars and the offer to play cards.

Game Three... fuck, game three.

Nobody, not even Shane who had always considered hockey to be the most beautiful of sports, nobody cared what the game looked like anymore. It wasn't about playing beautifully.

It was about grinding out each shift and making the other team work just as hard. Shane managed a pair of decent assists, J.J. scored the winner late in the third period, and they clawed back the lead.

By then of course, their injuries had started to really pile up.

Comeau's wrist was being heavily taped up every night, a different array of colors each time. Franks could barely lift one arm after a collision in Game Two. Mitty had now blocked so many shots that he walked around with ice-packs strapped to him at all times like a mascot.

Shane wasn't much better. One awkward check had left his ribs aching every time he took a faceoff. If he had been so inclined to laugh – which he, of course, wasn't because he was a walking sense of humor failure right now – it would've hurt. It hurt to *breathe* too deeply. It hurt to sleep. To stand. But by Game Four, he barely noticed the pain anymore because it was just part of who he was now.

Game Four was Mitty's game and practically guaranteed him the Vezina.

Colorado threw everything at him, and somehow he stopped almost all of it, one goal after another, a machine, a fucking goalie machine. Shane scored the overtime winner after pouncing on a loose puck but everyone knew who had really won them that game. They practically smothered him on the ice and then again in the locker room. And the medical team gave him a fresh ice pack as a special treat.

Now up 3-1 in the series, they had a chance to finish it at home.

Instead, Game Five fucking Colorado refused to go quietly. *Fuck*. They scored late to force overtime before ending it with a shot through traffic, traffic made up of Shane's own fucking team screening their own goalie like they were goddamn rookies. The arena emptied in silence while Shane sat in the locker room staring at the floor, too exhausted to be angry.

Wiebe didn't panic. He didn't give a speech. He didn't scream at them like his predecessor would have done – which, perversely, Shane wished for now. He felt like he needed to be punished in some way and he could see on many of the team's faces that they felt the same.

Instead, Wiebe told them to pack their bags, eat a million calories, get some rest, and get ready to do it again.

By Game Six, both teams looked broken because they *were* broken.

Every one of them carried some kind of injury that had no chance to heal and every chance of getting worse. They were all slower, heavier, and it was now a question of who could keep pushing for five more minutes on the ice, who could outlast.

And it was in this context that Shane had one of the best nights of his season for no reason he could see.

Hence, the *magic*.

Shane scored twice, set up two more, and it felt like he was on the ice for almost every important moment, including when Peetie scored his first playoff goal. They piled on him as tears ran down his face. But it was Hayden who cinched it for them, scoring in the last seconds before the buzzer. Shane swore he could hear Jackie scream.

When the final horn sounded, the scoreboard read 6-3.

Nobody rushed the ice. They simply stood still, too shattered to do more than stare at each other, even as the fans roared. By his side, Hayden let out a strange giggle and then reached out to grab him by the shoulder. “Shane,” he said, his voice hoarse. “We won.”

“We fucking won,” Shane whispered, still not believing it.

Only afterwards, with the crowd still roaring somewhere beyond the locker-room walls, drowning in champagne, did Shane finally allow himself to appreciate what they’d done.

People would remember his numbers. His goals. His assists.

They’d remember those moments, those *boxes*. The highlight-reels and the interviews where everyone insisted Shane had carried the team and he laboriously and repeatedly drew their attention to where his guys had shone, how Wiebe’s cool head had kept them sane, how their strategy had held firm.

He’d remember Hayden bleeding through fresh stitches.

He’d remember Drapeau finishing checks with one good shoulder.

He’d remember J.J. dragging himself over the boards, Peetie’s playoff goal, Franks’ awful playoff beard.

His team.

His fucking team.

*

“I’m not getting rid of them. They’re just going to have to learn to be better people,” Shane told Wiebe, drunk on champagne and life and the *Stanley Fucking Cup*.

“Right,” said Wiebe, slapping Shane on the back. “Have a good summer, Hollander.”

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw everyone's attention to the note I left myself in Word while writing this chapter because it was amusing:

OH MY GOD SOMEONE EXPLAIN THE PLAYOFFS TO ME.

(To be clear, this is not an invitation for someone to explain it to me.)

For the record, I have sort of made up the team now. I know in the books Drapeau is the goalie but in the show Miitka is. So I've kept both and made Drapeau defense. I've mostly done this so I don't have to keep making up names.

Thank you for all the lovely comments. It's got a bit overwhelming in the best of all possible ways. I have loved checking my emails to see what you're all saying and guessing and wondering about ❤️

WIP is now at 97k words. I may have to add another chapter.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

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

Shane's mom had spent the last few months ensuring that Shane did *not* have a good summer. His sponsorships had been steadily ramping up since he made captain and the only real time he could commit to shooting during the year was in the off-season. So, Shane spent most of his summer either on a plane, or a hotel room, or standing in front of a camera.

Or on his phone to Rozanov.

Lily: *how 'international' is this campaign?*

Jane: *Just Northern America, I think.*

Lily: *So there will be billboards of you naked in Boston*

Jane: *not naked!!*

Jane: *I don't exactly know the media buy, dude.*

Lily: *Dude?*

His phone lit up and even though all his screen said was 'Lily calling', he could *tell* Rozanov was miffed. He grinned. Shane was getting better at this game of baiting Rozanov. And it was *so* rewarding, too.

"Just need to take this," he said, waving his phone in the air and ducking away from the catering table where someone had thoughtfully provided food he could actually eat for a change. He cupped his fingers around a little bowl of quinoa salad, grabbed a fork and pressed his cell phone between his ear and shoulder as he hurried off to find a quiet corner. "Hey," he said.

"Dude," Rozanov spat, faux irate. Faux irate that gave him an excuse to call.

Shane ducked into a stairwell and sat. It was a little breezy. He was wearing a fluffy terry-cloth robe and very little else. "Sorry, something wrong with that?"

"I am not your *dude*."

"Oh? What are you then?" Shane asked promptly, knowingly skating them ever closer to a conversation neither of them wanted to have, one to which neither of them had a good answer.

Rozanov deftly avoided it. "I am Ilya Rozanov, winner of the 2014 Stanley Cup."

"Pfft, old news. I am Shane Hollander, winner of the 2015 Stanley Cup."

“I won it first. And will win it next season.”

“Irrelevant,” Shane declared, joyfully. “You didn’t even make the playoffs this year. What makes you think next season will be any different?” He paused for effect and grinned. “Dude.”

Rozanov hung up.

God, this was a fun game.

*

Rozanov called again later but this time it was a Facetime call, which Shane answered from his hotel bed, smiling with anticipation.

“You are reading,” Rozanov said with every appearance of genuine happiness.

Shane reached up to take his glasses off only for Rozanov to make a predictable protesting noise. “Leave them.”

“You are so horny for my glasses.”

“Yes. Make you look like sexy librarian.”

“That is such a reach.” Shane left them on because, hell, if sexy library did it for Ilya, then who was Shane to complain? Apparently, asshole hockey player did it for Shane, which was surely weirder.

After the initial rush of pleasure at seeing him, Shane could be more critical now. It had been a couple of days since they’d last video called, thanks to Shane’s shoot schedule. The bags under Rozanov’s eyes were more pronounced. He looked pale and kind of sweaty. Still hot, obviously, but a bit off-color. “How was it today?”

“I do not want to talk about it, Hollander.”

“Let’s make a deal—”

Ilya groaned. He moved, passing through rooms with velvet curtains and fascinating-looking woodwork. He had a glass in his other hand, vodka, of course, which he deposited on a random table as he passed. “No, no deals, Shane. Just take your clothes off.”

“I will take my clothes off if you tell me one *real* thing that happened today. And it has to be a good one. Not, like, your lunch didn’t suck.”

“I didn’t have lunch today,” Ilya said petulantly, throwing himself onto a bed Shane was now very familiar with, as it was often the backdrop to their phone sex.

Yes, he had phone sex now.

It was Shane’s turn to groan. “Why didn’t you have lunch?”

“Hungover.”

Of course. “Did you have a good time last night with Svetlana, then?” See how easily Shane was able to say the name of the girl Rozanov had fucked on and off throughout his teens and twenties. See how *blasé* he was about this. Svetlana also lived in Boston, where she held down a high-paying glamorous job which made her both proximate to Rozanov for most of the year and obviously a catch.

Shane had never met her, never even seen a picture of her, but he hated Svetlana.

“Yes. Was nice.” Ilya shuffled up the bed until he was propped up on his pillows. He rubbed at the side of his nose, blue eyes drifting slightly to the right of the camera. “We went to a club we used to go to when we were kids. Saw some people from school. Drank too much. Smoked too much. She went home with an ex-boyfriend and we are going to meet up with him and his friends again tonight. So that will be fun.”

“And you? Did you meet anyone... fun?”

Rozanov’s eyes returned to hold Shane’s. “Hmm, no, very few sexy librarians in Moscow clubs.”

They both chewed on this response for a little longer. This was another game they were playing. One where Shane asked in a round-a-bout way whether Rozanov was fucking anyone else and Ilya consistently replied that there hadn’t been anyone to tempt him.

It was a game that Shane didn’t quite know the rules for, nor what was his next step. After all, Rozanov could be lying. Maybe it was bad form to reference other hook-ups to your hook-up.

Or equally, he could be telling the truth – that he hadn’t seen anyone he wanted but this was just a matter of time. There was still three more weeks left before he came home.

Shane wanted Ilya home *yesterday*.

“Did that count?” Rozanov asked eagerly.

“Huh?”

“Did that count as a real thing?”

It didn’t, really. What Shane had been looking for was more real than that. Something about his dad. Or his brother. He knew things were bad there because very, very occasionally Ilya let something slip. It was usually an accident, something said in a moment of hungover weakness when he was still sleep-addled and rough-voiced, and then quickly covered up with something provocative. At a guess, Shane thought there was something wrong with Ilya’s dad – that he was sick in some way – and his older brother wasn’t very helpful.

Sitting forward, Shane pulled off his T-shirt. “It counts. Get naked, Rozanov.”

One week later, Shane got it his wish, only he wished he hadn't.

Moscow was seven hours ahead, which had been working out reasonably well given Ilya was a night owl and Shane an early bird. They got into a rhythm of Shane calling when he first woke up, usually to tell him about his – Ilya's words – deeply boring dreams and then Ilya would call just before or after he ate dinner and went out.

And Ilya *always* went out. Every night.

Shane had – on a purely academic level – known this, in that his knowledge of Rozanov had always felt *very* academic, like he had studied everything about him third-party sources, like he was studying for a test.

Rozanov's summertime nocturnal activities were well documented by both Moscow media, as Ilya Rozanov was apparently a huge fucking deal in Russia, and in turn in Northern American hockey circles where he was also a huge fucking deal. Photos appeared whether Shane was looking for them or not, the media spinning it into one of two ways – playboy Rozanov strikes again (weirdly positive, hot guy doing hot things with hot people you should be envious of) vs. Rozanov goes too far this time (weirdly negative, hot guy not to be trusted, lock up your daughters).

Shane's academic understanding of Rozanov's thirst for a social life had been met with a violent reality over this summer, when he got to witness it kind of first-hand. Typically, Shane's morning call – usually around 7am – would reach Rozanov when he himself was only just getting up. At midday. About half the time, he was hungover. On hungover days, he would rarely get out of bed and if he did it was only to get McDonalds or to force himself to go for a run. If he wasn't hungover, he would spend his day doing some brutal work-out routine in an attempt to balance out the damage he had done to his training the day before.

Then in the evening call, Ilya would prompt for phone sex and then outline his plans for the evening. Sometimes Svetlana would be in his apartment, so Ilya would take the call in his bedroom – occasionally receiving abuse from his friend for ignoring her – and he typically already had a drink in his hand or was eating while he was getting ready.

Shane had been kind of horrified by this routine – and also in part fascinated by this insight into Rozanov's life – but Rozanov had claimed that this was 'normal' and all of the young, unmarried guys were spending their summers doing this. Not working, like Shane was. If anyone was weird, it was Shane.

Which, sure, perhaps he had a point.

If he'd thought Rozanov was having a good time, it might have been one thing (one, utterly inexplicable-to-Shane thing), but increasingly he suspected Rozanov was hating every minute of being in Russia.

That morning call was usually tonally the most obvious. Rozanov would be moody and uncommunicative, which had initially been extremely weird as he regularly chased Shane for that call, sending him messages in the night like *call when you wake up* and *are you awake yet* and *you are sleeping late, Hollander*. But after a few minutes of sulky responses to

Shane's opening prompts, he'd start smiling and talking back and being a bit more like himself. Which was better, obviously, until those last few seconds when they said their goodbyes and all the light in Ilya's eyes went out.

The evening call was a polar opposite experience. Ilya was usually hyperactive. Words tumbling over one another. Eyes full-moon bright. The first few times Shane had wondered, disapprovingly, if Ilya had been on something and had repeatedly asked only to be laughed at and told to mind his business. As he experienced this behavior more often he began to suspect something worse: that Ilya was putting on a front. That this was a flimsy, decorative façade he put on to look like he was enjoying himself.

So, yeah, Shane thought Ilya hated being in Russia. But he didn't know *why*. In desperation to get him to *talk* about it, he'd introduced the 'real thing' rule where they had to share something about their day that was something they'd only tell each other. Rozanov hated this rule and ignored it most of the time.

Then, one week after Shane's Calvin Klein shoot, his phone rang at 9pm. He was in bed with one of his rare fiction novels, a mindless Dan Brown that his dad had lent him. When he saw Lily on his phone, his heart jumped to his throat.

"Hey?" he asked, answering immediately. "Is everything okay?"

"I have something real," Rozanov said, words tumbling over themselves, his accent thicker. Slurred.

Shane braced instinctively, one hand pressing into his mattress, forcing himself upright. "Okay. You can tell me."

Ilya sniffed. "Today, *yesterday* now, was the anniversary of my mama's death. And they forgot."

His eyes closed, heartbroken. "Oh, Ilya, I'm so, so sorry."

"Maybe for my father is fine. He forgets everything these days. But Alexei—he was *fifteen*. He was a piece of shit to her. He lied and he spoke back and he made her life hard— *harder*. How could he forget?"

Shane could hear in his voice that Ilya was crying and Shane had never been one of those people who found themselves empathy-crying but hearing Ilya sniffle several thousand miles away had tears springing up in his eyes. "I don't know. I don't know how he could forget something like that."

"Because he is an *asshole*."

"Yes, he sounds like an asshole."

"Did I tell you he has got a girl pregnant?" Ilya spat hotly.

"You did not." *Another* real thing. "What an asshole."

“He is going to marry her. He is— he is making it a big thing. He is big man. Knocked up a teenager. Going to make her the police commissioners’ wife. Fucking asshole.” Ilya sucked in a wet, hiccupping breath. “And Papa – when he is all there – is so *proud*. So proud he is going to be a grandfather and I— I am not going to be *here*,” he said, and it was very nearly a sob.

The physical inability for Shane to reach through his cell phone to hug Ilya was so tangible that his fingers tingled. Could he go there? Did he need a visa for Russia? Was that something that could be arranged at short notice? “It’s okay, Ilya. It’s okay,” he said uselessly.

“It’s *not* okay, Shane, he is sick. And I am not going to be here and he is so *angry* with me, and Alexei— I am nothing more than a blank fucking check. More, more, more. That’s all he ever wants from me. Money to shoot up his fucking nose.” He was actively sobbing now, his disjointed, whooping breaths stuttering down the phone.

“Okay, okay, it’s not okay. It’s not okay. None of this is okay. They are all assholes who don’t deserve you. Take a deep breath, Ilya.”

Ilya did so. Then another one. It was painful to hear. “I’m a little drunk,” he said.

“That’s fine. It sounds like something you need to be a little drunk for.” Maybe a little drunk every night, from the sounds of things.

“I wanted to hear your voice.”

A tear rolled down Shane’s cheek. “I’m glad. You can call me any time, Ilya. Any time at all.” Shane swallowed. He was not the best at navigating emotions and particularly not big, real ones like this.

But he wanted, desperately, to do a good job. To be here for Ilya. “Did you— did you do anything yesterday for your mom? Does she have a grave or something?”

“I went to her church to light candle. She was— she would have liked that.”

“Hey, that sounds just right.”

Ilya took another deep breath and when he let it out, it was shaky. “I hate it here,” he whispered.

Shane got zero pleasure from being right. “I know you do.”

*

They didn’t talk about it. Not the phone call. Not about his brother or his dad or his mom. Shane wondered, afterwards, if perhaps Ilya had been drunk, too drunk to remember.

More likely, he was embarrassed. They didn’t have *that* kind of relationship. They were just guys who hooked-up.

Even in his head, where Shane kept all his secrets, Shane knew he didn’t mean it.

*

September rolled around and with it training camp. On the first day, Shane was up at 5am, too excited to sleep until his usual alarm. Shane *loved* this time of year. He loved the potential. A new season stretched out in front of him, pure, untainted by injury, illness or any weighty losses. A handful of low-cost exhibition games to warm everyone up. And then the eighty-two games that would take them to the playoffs and the possibility of a second Cup.

“Welcome back, fuckers!” Comeau yelled triumphantly as he entered a locker room that hadn’t yet taken on the familiar smell of rubber and wet gear and disinfectant and men’s sweat, having had the whole summer to sink into bland mustiness.

There was a lot of hugs and backslapping. They were Cup winners now. Broken a sixteen-year drought and now beloved by Montreal. Shane’s face was plastered everywhere across the city and people kept paying for his meals or coffees. It was a little embarrassing but in a nice way.

J.J. arrived next and kissed everyone enthusiastically – quite a few of the guys on the mouth, too, which just made them all laugh and shove at him. Shane yanked his head to the side at the last minute and got a slobbery kiss on his cheek that utterly confirmed for him that he had no sexual feelings towards J.J. whatsoever, not that he’d ever wondered.

Back in the Theriault days, the days that felt like one-hundred years ago, Shane would have spent most of his time during training camp on the ice, introducing himself and feeling out the prospects as they ran through Theriault’s drills. And while a big part of his days was spent doing that, Wiebe repeatedly called him over to stand with him and the other coaches, chatting through observations, inviting Shane to give his own feedback.

He fucking loved it.

“You ever think about after, Hollander?” Wiebe asked, as he took a picture of his white-board where they had mapped out the first attempt at a new roster and then wiped it clean. Part of Wiebe’s routine was to redo this map every day. See if anything changed.

“After?”

“After hockey. Ten, fifteen years, God willing, from now.”

Shane stilled. Deer in headlights. His brain shut down.

Wiebe glanced over and barked out a laugh. “Oh, yeah, I remember that. There’s no ‘after’, is there?”

“I mean. I don’t like to think about it.”

He did, of course. That was why he had *investments* and sponsorships. For *after*. For a comfortable retirement, whatever form that retirement took. But he didn’t think about it in real terms. The hockey and no hockey of it all.

“You should. Coaching, maybe. Then management. I’m sure Petrov would want to talk to you about succession planning.”

“I’m—I’m *twenty-four*.”

“Don’t remind me, fetus,” Wiebe muttered, rolling his eyes. “But Shane Hollander, GM of the Montreal Metros might be pretty sweet, though.”

Speechless, Shane opened and closed his mouth, more guppy than hockey-player in that moment. Wiebe laughed at him again and when he walked around his desk he nearly tripped over a massive box, more free protein bars. “Fuck. Do you want some of these?”

“No,” Shane said faintly, “they’re packed with sugar.”

Wiebe gave the box a betrayed look. “Shit, don’t let Ali see them, then. He’ll have my head.”

Ali was their new team nutritionist. He had reviewed Shane’s macro-biotic diet, nodded, but suggested he add the occasional treat day to his schedule. “Life is about balance. I don’t want you to become one of those athletes who denies themselves things. It’s unhealthy for the mind. Have a burger occasionally. Or a Snickers.”

Shane *loved* Snickers. “Erm. Rhys, our previous nutritionist, felt that keeping on diet was healthier. Made it easier to stay consistent. Which I, ah, sort of agree with?” Shane found it hard to question authorities. Behind Ali were a series of framed qualifications that told Shane he knew more about nutrition than Shane did, even though he’d been on some form of high-performance diet since he was fourteen and felt like he knew what was best for his body. He functioned well. His diet had got them a Stanely Cup.

Ali tilted his head to the side, looking down his long nose at Shane. His wide, mobile mouth moved into a wry, knowing smile. “Bet it makes you sad sometimes though.”

Shane laughed, a little nervously. He rubbed his hands on his thighs. “No, no, it keeps me in great shape.”

“I’m going to add one Snickers bar a week to this diet.” He began to type into his laptop, updating Shane’s meal plan, the meal plan that would be shared with his personal chef. A Snickers bar would now turn up once a week, probably put in his fridge next to the neatly portioned glass containers that contained his meals. “You can choose when to have it.”

Shane licked his lips – practically tasting the chocolate – and privately decided he would half this Snickers bar. Have half of one a week. The other half could go in the freezer. “Um. Okay.”

*

Shane messaged Petrov now. Not often. But if he pushed their 1-2-1s, Shane would sometimes send any thoughts over, and Petrov had pushed a lot of their 1-2-1s recently.

Shane: *Do you want to change up Peetie for one of the new rookies?*

Shane: *Or do you think it's time to ease off on the meetings.*

Shane: *You're pretty busy.*

His phone lit up with an incoming call immediately. His heart leaped into his mouth. It was *so weird* that Petrov called him. It was so unfathomable that this... this important adult was involved in Shane's life.

"Hi—" Shane fumbled with what to say next

"If you call me 'sir' I will hang up."

"It was probably just going to be Mister."

"Jesus, Shane." Petrov sighed and in the background a car horn honked. "*La vache!*" Which Shane assumed was not meant for him. "Anyway, indirectly to your question, I have good news. We have found a new GM."

"Oh great," Shane said, uneasily. "Who is it?"

"Christine Castonguay."

First thought: a *woman*? Second thought, thankfully the thought Shane actually verbalized, "That's— she was the AGM for Calgary? For, like, two years." It had been a big deal.

"Yup. She took a step back. Breast cancer."

"Oh. Oh, I don't think that was made public." In fact, what had been made public was that she hadn't been 'ready' for the job. Also a big deal. His mom had been pretty ticked.

"No. She didn't want it to be. However, she's got the all clear and is ready to take on this role. We're confident she'll hit it out of the ballpark."

"Maybe we could use a hockey metaphor instead, huh."

"Why be a cliché, Shane?" Another car horn. "For fuck's sake!" Then there was a stream of very fast French, muffled as if Petrov had pushed his phone against his clothes. "Honestly," he said, returning to clarity, "the driving in this city has only got worse which is inconceivable."

"So you want to move our meetings to the new GM?"

"I've explained the set-up. I'll leave Christine to decide how she wants to play it. Maybe she'll want to meet with you herself, but I find it useful to meet with you regularly. You keep me humble, Shane." Petrov laughed silently.

Shane couldn't help but feel a strange sense of relief. He wasn't about to verbalize that, though. "Okay. Looking forward to working with Ms. Castonguay. When does she start?"

“We’re making the announcement next week. She’ll be with us, full-time, from November. I’ll be back by then, so I can spend the week with her.”

“Great. Hey, can I tell my mom? She’s gonna be stoked.”

“Provided she doesn’t go to the press, sure. But don’t tell anyone I told you that,” he added.

“Pinkie promise.”

“You’re too cute, Shane,” Petrov sighed.

*

Shane stood before the newly posted schedule of games, eyes eagerly taking in the Boston shortform under the month and date. His cell phone was ready in his hand, message half-typed out before he even finished a thought.

Jane: *2 weeks?*

Lily: *Fuck yes.*

The frisson of pleasure at the immediacy of Ilya’s reply was very definitely sexual.

Lily: *Can I come the night before?* 🐱

Jane: *Yes.*

That response was automatic. It was instinct. The one that followed was more practical. Shane leaned against his locker, half burying his face in his clean clothes.

Jane: *But we can’t... you know*

Lily: *If you can’t say it, you shouldn’t be doing it*

Shane blushed. God. Ilya was such an asshole. He *did not* know why he found this so attractive. Angrily, he jabbed out a response.

Jane: *You can’t fuck me. Not before a game.*

Lily: *Okay. Will save that for after.*

Fine. Better. But Shane couldn’t help himself. He pushed more.

Jane: *Also, we need to go to bed early*

Lily: *If you don’t want me to come, it’s okay*

Jane: *No. I want to see you.*

Lily: *I want to see you, too.*

Lily: *We can go to sleep whatever time you want.*

Shane breathed out a sigh of relief.

“So I guess Lily’s still in the picture,” said a dry voice behind him.

Shane nearly leaped out of his skin. “Shit, Hayden!” He had thought everyone had gone.

Hayden laughed and reached into his locker. “Forgot this.” He grabbed a plastic bag, filled to the brim with those shitty protein bars Wiebe had been trying to palm off on everyone.

“You shouldn’t eat those. They’re filled with sugar.”

“And yet *delicious*.” Hayden wagged his eyebrows, because he was fucking ridiculous. He nodded to the cell phone Shane now had pressed to his bare chest. “So? When are we going to finally meet her?”

“You’re not. It’s not serious.”

“You’ve been hooking up with this girl for years, Shane.”

“It’s not. Serious.”

“Come oooooon. Not even a photo?” He put his hands together. “Give me something, buddy. Anything.”

Shane began to hurriedly get dressed, shoving his cell phone into his cubby. He did try not to be on his phone too much these days for this very reason, as the team had latched on to the name ‘Lily’ regularly appearing on Shane’s phone, but he’d sincerely thought everyone had left. He’d stayed for some extra laps after training, just to clear his mind. “Fuck off, Hayden. It’s not like that.”

“It’s just me, Shane.” Now Hayden was serious. He was Best Friend Hayden. “I’m not judging, or anything. I played the field before Jackie.”

Shane glanced at him dubiously and yanked on his hoodie. “Oh yeah? Funny. I don’t remember that. From what I remember, you latched onto Jackie the night out after our first win against Detroit—”

“Okay, but in *high school*—”

“Fucking high school? You didn’t— weren’t you home schooled?”

“Only for the last two years!”

“So, what, you were ‘playing the field’ when you were fourteen?”

“What I’m trying to say,” Hayden forced out, now so exasperated he was talking through gritted teeth, “is that if you want it to be something more, because playing the field is not you, buddy, you should tell her—”

“I do *not*. Thank you. Enough.” Shane shoved his feet into his shoes and grabbed his bag, furious with himself for allowing this to happen, inviting this commentary into his personal, secret private life. “I see her, like, four times a year and that’s all I want. Okay?”

It was not, remotely, all Shane wanted.

“*Okay*. Jesus. I’ll leave it alone.”

It was not, remotely, okay.

Chapter End Notes

We've hit 100k words in the WIP, team. But I do have an outline of how to end it. So maybe it'll be 17 chapters.

THANK YOU FOR ALL YOUR COMMENTS 🥰🥰🥰🥰🥰

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Hey, whoops, sorry I think I'm a little late posting. Time really flew this week.

“How are you?” Shane asked, interspersing the words with hungry, wet, sucking kisses against Ilya’s mouth.

“Fine. You?” Ilya replied, lapping into Shane’s mouth, tugging Shane’s T-shirt up, his hands running over muscles, squeezing, pinching.

“Fine.” Shane did the same to Ilya, refamiliarizing himself with a body he had missed like some essential nutrient, and they broke apart, briefly, to properly wrest each other’s clothes from each other, and then flung themselves urgently back together to resume sucking face.

Ilya walked Shane backwards until he was pressed against the wall which was nice and sturdy and Shane had a real thing for being shoved against walls and kissed so he moaned, and Ilya moaned, and they got their hands in each other’s pants.

“Thank you for not wearing underwear, Hollander,” Ilya said, pulling back to look down between them, where he had his hand wrapped around Shane’s already leaking dick. His mouth was wet and red. Shane basically wanted to die of lust. “Very efficient.”

“You’re welcome.” He was panting. “I need to suck your dick.”

“Oh, fuck, yes. Oh fuck,” Ilya groaned, as Shane dropped down to his knees. His fingers went to Shane’s hair as he yanked Rozanov’s pants and underwear down quickly, releasing an erection that—

“Did you get *bigger* over the summer?”

Ilya’s hands shoved him practically face first into his dick. “Fucking suck me, Shane, before I die.”

Shane grabbed hold of Ilya’s ass with two hands – hands that kneaded Rozanov’s impressive glutes, glutes he had thought about to an unreasonable degree – and then took Ilya’s rock-hard dick between his lips. A fleeting, hysterical thought crossed his mind, that it was *definitely* gay to be so turned on by sucking someone else off, and then he demonstrated the skill he’d been practicing on his dildo this summer and swallowed his whole dick down.

This got an appropriate response from Ilya above. “Holy fucking shit, Hollander. *Fuck.*” This was followed by a stream of explosive Russian that got more and more unintelligible as Shane’s head bobbed backwards and forwards, as he swallowed around Ilya’s dick.

He had to pause to remember to breathe through his nose, inhaling the familiar intimate musk of Ilya's warmed-up skin, and he looked up to find Ilya had one arm propped against the wall and was leaning with his head looking down. "Okay?" he panted, hand gentle in Shane's hair.

"I'm good," Shane said, smiling and wiping his cheeks. It always made him cry a bit; it was kind of intense. More intense with a real dick. Way more. "You can come down my throat, if you'd like."

"Ummm, okie," said Rozanov, looking pained. He squeezed his eyes closed and his fingers delicately stroked Shane's hair, so lightly, so gently, down and then around Shane's ear to cup his jawline. "That will be soon, Shanya."

Shane turned back to the task at hand. He cupped Rozanov's balls as he took him back into his throat, the fat head of his dick dragging at Shane's soft palette and then, *pop*, all the way in until Shane's nose was brushing the curls of pubic hair. This time Shane experimented with a little hum.

Rozanov's hips jerked. "Fuck! Coming!"

Shane could feel it, the way his balls were tight, the jerk in his dick, but it was different than when he came in his mouth. He swallowed automatically and kept on swallowing as Rozanov kept on coming. When he finally slumped forwards, Shane gently pulled back, nosing Ilya's softened cock before giving it a final little kiss. "Did you save that up or what?"

"Yes. Kind of." Ilya slid down and landed on his knees in front of Shane. His whole face was droopy, like all his facial muscles had relaxed. "Hollander. I think I saw God."

Shane was so pleased with himself. And also a little woozy, both horny and over-sensitized and trying to catch his breath. "I'm glad. I practiced."

Rozanov's eyes narrowed. "With who?" he demanded, but his fingers were gentle as he reached out to stroke the wetness on Shane's cheek.

"With my fucking dildo, asshole." He shoved at Ilya's shoulder and was rewarded with a relieved expression. "Come on."

Ilya listed forward and buried his face in Shane's neck. He huffed. "You smell so good. Better than I remember."

Tears sprung into Shane's eyes, different ones, ones related to the Big Feelings he had stored up in his chest. He had been thinking much the same thing. The summer had been *so* long. "Phone sex is not the same."

Ilya plucked at Shane's waistband, wriggling his sweatpants down and over his ass. He tutted at the sight of Shane's flushed and leaking dick. "So neglected, I am sorry, *dorogoy*."

Shane brushed at Ilya's curls and then dug his fingers into them. He had missed them, and the body they were attached to, *so much*. "What does that mean?"

"Um. Sweetheart. Better than *dude*," Ilya said, glancing up to give Shane a dark look.

“You’re calling my dick sweetheart?”

“Yes. Has only ever been good to me.” And so saying, smiling sweetly, Ilya bent down to kiss it.

*

“So I’m supposed to ask you and Marly to drinks tomorrow, after the game.”

Rozanov looked up from his careful removal of the broccoli from the pre-prepared meal Shane was sacrificing for this evening. The broccoli was being neatly piled up on Shane’s plate. At Shane’s insistence, they had microwaved a portion of frozen peas in order to up Rozanov’s vegetable intake, which had made Rozanov laugh weirdly and he been unable to explain why, just cozied up behind Shane in front of the microwave as they watched the bowl spin.

“Ah, what?” Ilya looked alarmed.

“Yeah, we’re—” Shane sighed. He had wondered, many times, how to broach this topic with Rozanov. “So, we’re kind of investigating— no, that sounds way too serious. We’re like putting out feelers to see if we can find some allies in other teams who will support diversity initiatives within the league.”

“What the fuck, Shane.”

Yeah, that was pretty much how he thought it was going to go.

“It’s not as bad as it sounds.”

“Sounds pretty fucking bad.” Rozanov then liberally doused his chicken with hot sauce.

“You didn’t even taste it,” Shane protested, his thought process entirely diverted by this culinary crime. “It’s marinated in Thai spices. There’s chili already in it.”

“I can tell from the smell of it that it’s not spicy enough.”

“But that’s a *Mexican* hot sauce.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Rozanov stabbed a piece of chicken and stuffed it into his mouth. “Is good.”

They were sitting at the corner of Shane’s kitchen island, facing each other. Ilya had one foot resting on the footrest of Shane’s stool and Shane had one of his feet resting on Ilya’s, between his legs. They were close enough that periodically Ilya would put his hand on Shane’s knee. He did this now, squeezing Shane’s knee to tell him that he had his attention. “Tell me from the beginning.”

Shane sighed. He told him from the ‘beginning’, in that he started with Hayden and Petrov and this led to Rozanov rolling his eyes so violently he thought they might pop off from their optic nerve. “*This* is your so-called best friend?”

“He has other qualities.”

“Well, they’re not hockey.”

“Hey! He is a *great* hockey player.”

Rozanov scooped up some peas with the wild rice. “He is your stooge on the ice, you mean.”

“How the hell do you know ‘stooge’?”

This was ignored. “If he did not have you, he wouldn’t know what he was doing.”

“Ilya, that is just not true.” And Shane believed that. Hayden had gone 15th overall in his draft and had solid hockey IQ, an IQ that allowed him to anticipate Shane’s every move. He was second only to Shane in points in the team, for God’s sake. God, Rozanov could *never* meet his mother. “And also this is beside the point.”

Ilya rubbed Shane’s leg. “Okie. So your idiot friend was idiot in front of your boss. Then what?”

Shane explained calling Petrov up – Ilya made a face – and then described how he’d had a moment of insanity and given Petrov a realistic view of the world. “So now I’m part of some fucking task force. There’s a roadmap. We’re trying to make diversity less of a bad word and more commonplace in the teams. Starting with ours but also spreading it to other teams through word of mouth. There’s also some plan for like a kids hockey camp or something.”

“You’re going to get a reputation.”

He exhaled. Rozanov had hit the nail on the head. “Yeah. I know.”

“Maybe the reputation you really want to avoid.” Ilya raised his eyebrows significantly.

“You mean. That I’m—” Shane used his fork to create a circle in the air, not able to say the word, but *trying*.

Ilya sucked on a tooth. He picked up his beer and took a small sip. “Soft, maybe.”

“Or, gay, maybe,” Shane murmured, finally getting it out.

Gay.

GAY.

G-A-Y, went Shane’s brain.

And then Shane’s brain went quiet.

Respectful of this moment, Ilya inclined his head seriously and very carefully put his beer down. “Maybe that.”

Shane's cheeks prickled. There had been something else he had been wanting to broach with Rozanov. Something that had also felt like a face-to-face conversation. "People would be right though, wouldn't they? About the gay part."

For a moment Ilya's expression didn't change and Shane wondered if he hadn't understood. Then, finally, the corner of his mouth lifted, and he gave Shane a small, curious smile. "Would they?"

Shane lowered his eyes. It was too much to look at him, not when Ilya was being *kind* in this moment of extreme vulnerability. "Yeah. I think so. I mean. I'm pretty damn sure."

Ilya's hand ran up Shane's thigh, a heavy pressure, then jumped to his shoulder where it slid around the back of Shane's neck, all warm and firm. He gently tugged Shane forward until their mouths met in a lingering, closed-mouth and slightly spicy kiss. When he pulled back, he used his other hand to lift Shane's chin and force him meet his gaze. "Is okay? You're okay?"

Faced with Ilya Rozanov at his very kindest, his blue eyes pools of rare sincerity, Shane fumbled a bit for the words. "I'm fine. I've had a lot of time to think about it." The *noise* in his head had been incessant. And now it was gone, leaving behind plenty of emotions but not much in the way of confusion. Or denial. "I'm not, like, thrilled."

Ilya's thumb rubbed. "Definitely no more girls?"

Shane shook his head as an unmistakable twinge of regret assailed him. He dipped his eyes again. "No more girls."

Unlike Ilya, he thought. Bitterly.

Ilya kissed him again, distracting him from the unfairness of Ilya's fluid sexuality compared to his own. He squeezed the back of Shane's neck and slowly sat back. Now he looked practically smug. "Okay. Sad for them. Happy for me."

Shane managed a weak laugh. As coming outs went, this had gone reasonably well. Admittedly, it had been to the guy he was semi-regularly fucking, who – Shane was reasonably sure – had some affection for him, so it couldn't have been an absolute surprise, but it hadn't been awful. And it was done.

Shane sat up straight and cut into his chicken. There it was. He was gay. He had – kind of – said it out loud. And he was still breathing.

"Are you going to tell anyone else?"

"I don't have any plans to, just yet. At least, not until I know the room is a bit more friendly."

"I meant your parents, maybe."

"Oh, God, no," Shane ejected. That wasn't remotely on his radar.

Rozanov was surprised. "They would not be good?"

“It’s not that. It’s—” There were lots of reasons. Reasons he didn’t want to get into tonight. Reasons he maybe didn’t want to look too closely at. “I just don’t want to. Not yet.”

“Okay. Is your thing to tell.” He shrugged. “Metros may be the best place for you to be now,” Ilya said thoughtfully. “You know you will be protected.”

“Yeah. Weird, isn’t it?” There would have been absolutely no question of this a year ago. Being gay might have been a secret Shane would have taken to his grave. Or at the very least until he retired.

“I’m maybe a little bit jealous.” Ilya shrugged. “Boston is not like that. Not bad. But not like that.”

“You think your team would be dicks?”

“Many of them, yes. LeClaire— maybe he wouldn’t give a shit. I am talented, he cares more about that. But the team— hmm.”

“So, Marly—?”

He winced a little, baring his teeth. “I do not know. I will have to, we would say in Russian, feel out the ground.”

Shane smiled. “In English we would say test the waters. Like dipping your toe in.”

“Oh.” Ilya’s eyes brightened as it always did when they found common linguistic ground. “Is similar.”

“We can feel out the ground tomorrow evening. You and Marly and anyone else you want to invite.”

Ilya nodded slowly. “Let me think about it, please. Maybe Marly is not the person to invite. Connors maybe. He is— he is sweet, sometimes.” Ilya sighed the sigh of a man who was sometimes thwarted in expressing himself. “I don’t mean *sweet*. I mean, good with emotions. *Sensitive*. *Da*. He is good with the rookies. Kind. But not a pushover.”

“Okay. Sounds like a decent guy.” Shane only knew him as Ilya’s right wing and, like many of the Boston team, would *not* shut up – just kept a constant, low-level chirping, nothing particularly clever, just relentless observations. Fucking irritating. “You decide, that’s fine. Um. Wiebe is also going to have drinks with LeClair.”

“Fuck, really?”

“Yeah.” He’d already set it up and both he and Alex had been on at Shane to arrange the meet with Rozanov. Shane had, awkwardly, said that he had his number from the bit they’d done at the awards. No one had batted an eyelid at this but Shane had genuinely felt he might have stuck a sign on his forehead that said *we have regular phone sex*.

Ilya snorted. “You will let me know how that goes.”

Rozanov got them all drunk.

Shane couldn't pin-point the exact moment it had got out of control. Maybe it all started from the first drink he'd accepted because he was a little nervous. This was a high stakes evening – the Metros, the Raiders, specifically him and *Ilya* and J.J. and Connors – and he could feel himself getting more and more uptight and the more uptight he got the more silent he got and that was *not the point*.

“Moscow Mule,” Rozanov said, presenting this drink to Shane like it was a prize.

Of course, only Shane knew the context of this. J.J. thought Rozanov had deliberately got Shane – and *only* Shane, everyone else got beers – a Russian-named drink to be a shit-stirrer.

“Hey,” Shane said, overcompensating with far too much false enthusiasm as J.J.'s face darkened with protest, “I’ve always wanted to try this. It’s ginger beer and vodka. Great. Thanks, Rozanov.”

“Yes, Hollander’s ginger fetish is well known,” Ilya explained, and now he *was* being a shit-stirrer because it wasn’t a fucking fetish, Jesus Christ.

“Fuck off,” he muttered, taking a sip of his drink.

Which was *delicious*.

So delicious in fact that he finished it in like six gulps as they were all making super awkward chit chat about the Guardians Nomads game, rather than talk about their own which had gone into overtime and resulted in a Metros win that they all knew they had scraped together. And then he was given another drink. And another after that. Thankfully, he wasn’t the only one drinking. Probably he wasn’t the only one nervous. The Metros meeting the Raiders – it was something for the record books.

It was Rozanov who brought up Petrov. “Heard your new owner is gay,” he announced and somehow, because it was Ilya, because he could be charming when he chose to be, it worked.

“Shit, really?” said Connors, looking at his captain askance and then Shane for confirmation. “Like. Out?”

“Yeah,” Shane said, honestly wondering if the burying of this part of the Metros new owner was an MLH thing or a Petrov 7 thing or just a hockey-players-head-in-the-sand thing. It had taken Shane no time at all to find out the details. Admittedly he had a vested interest. “He is. It’s very clear that he wants the organization to be more open-minded.”

“What, like? Like—” Connors faltered, clearly couldn’t think what open-minded could possibly mean in the context of the MLH.

“Less of a white-boys club,” was J.J.’s dry assertion, casting his eye around the table but actually, yes, this table was currently half and half. Shane had thought about inviting Hayden

but had decided against it, mostly because Rozanov really liked to pick on Hayden on the ice and Hayden *always* fell for it, his imposter syndrome getting the best of him.

“And more inclusive, just generally,” Shane said, using his straw to stir around the ice cubes and pieces of lime in his drink. “Less talking shit about ethnicities and definitely no... homophobic stuff. We’re getting training. Regularly. About a whole host of things.”

“Last week we had a seminar on trans... people,” J.J. added, choosing his words very carefully. Elaine, from HR, who was very well liked, had been there, along with some representative from a local charity. She told them her teenage son was trans. The team had mostly been shocked into silence, even Comeau, whose crush on her was well known. They hadn’t even known she had a kid.

Afterwards, when Shane had thanked her for talking to them, her eyes had been wet with emotion. At a guess, she had never felt safe talking about her son before.

Rozanov’s eyes flicked to Shane and away. He had maybe not mentioned that one. He wasn’t ultimately sure of the scope of Rozanov’s grasp on diversity. He wasn’t even sure he understood his own.

Fuck. He just wanted to *play hockey*.

“Wow, okay,” said Connors, gamely nodding along as if this already weird evening hadn’t taken an even weirder turn. He kept glancing at Rozanov for direction. “Moving with the times.”

“Yes, the times,” repeated Shane, wisely.

Rozanov sipped his beer. “Maybe Boston could do more than just Pride tape.”

“Struggle to even get the guys to do that. And we’ve got a lot of Russians,” Connor added, slanting a concerned look Rozanov’s way. “Risky for you guys.”

“True,” Rozanov acknowledged with a begrudging twist to his mouth.

Shane realized for the first time that he had no idea if Rozanov even used Pride tape. Or if the fact that he was Russian and Russia was hostile to homosexuality meant that he couldn’t.

“But there’s more to it than just the performative stuff,” Shane said, primed for this very scenario, ready to say his lines. He knew for a fact that Petrov *hated* how the MLH treated Pride. He thought the MLH should either go all in or not at all. At the moment, it was a kind of wishy-washy approach with individual organizations deciding whether they wanted to acknowledge Pride and even that acknowledgement tended to be nothing more than tape or the occasional jersey. And even *then* it wasn’t mandatory for the players on the teams. ‘Free speech’ and all that. “I guess, it’s about expanding your horizons. A lot of us are pretty ignorant about this sort of thing. I know I am.”

And part of that was deliberate. At least on his behalf. Shane had ignored everything that wasn’t hockey. Everything that was a distraction. That he was half-Japanese was irrelevant to

hockey. That he was gay was irrelevant to hockey.

“More drinks?” J.J. suggested as the awkward conversation lulled. “Think it’s our round.”

Possibly it was then that the night got out of hand – so he couldn’t entirely blame Rozanov. J.J. bought shots – he was a big fan of shots – and he smirked at Shane as if he knew that Shane couldn’t say no, now, not in front of Rozanov. He was right of course. Shane’s competitive streak was aroused and he was forced to demonstrate that, yes, he was capable of doing shots. Doing multiple shots. So many shots.

And— it was kind of fun? J.J. was one of his two favorite Metros and Rozanov was... well, Shane’s favorite Raider. And Connors was nice. So they shit-talked each other and did shots and Shane played footsie with Rozanov under the table and one time they coordinated going to the restroom and it was empty so they made out a little against the door which was insanely risky and insanely hot and when they came back to the table Shane felt like he had been branded by Ilya Rozanov’s mouth. He kept touching his lips because they felt warm, kept licking them to chase the taste of Rozanov. His phone vibrated on the table and he picked it up, automatically, just in case it was Rozanov, only he was *with* Rozanov, so that was— oh, look, it was Rozanov.

Lily: *Stop touching your mouth*

Lily: *Very distracting*

Lily: *Unless you want me to put something else in it?*

Holy fuck. Well. That was hot. Maybe they could go back to the bathroom.

Shane was mid-way through typing that categorically career ending suggestion when, thank God, Connors finally slapped his captain on the back and put an end to it. “Early start tomorrow, Captain,” he announced, slurring just a bit. “We should head.”

“Ah. Oh. Yeah.” Rozanov blinked darkened, lust-filled eyes at Shane.

“That’s right. We should head on home, too,” Shane found himself saying and he hadn’t really put the two things together, that meeting up with Rozanov after a game might impinge on his usual plan to *meet up with Rozanov after a game*.

They hadn’t discussed it, in fact.

“I, ah,” Rozanov snapped his attention away from Shane, “actually have plans.”

“Woo-hoo, with your Montreal girl?” Delighted to be able to share a piece of gossip, Connors laughed and turned back to the Metros. “He has a girl here. We’ve never met her. But after every Montreal game he scurries off to get his dick wet and we know tomorrow he’ll be fucking *delightful*.”

“*Crisse*, what kind of girl would betray us like this?” J.J. complained, hand over his heart and affecting the body language of a wounded soldier, leaning dramatically against Shane, head on his shoulder. “Doesn’t she know you are the enemy?”

Rozanov's eyes tracked J.J.'s physical contact with Shane, frowned, and then turned this glare on his teammate, standing up to pull on his jacket. "Fuck off, Connie."

There was an admiring glint in J.J.'s eye. "Do you really have a girl in every city?"

"No, this one is *special*. She's his *favorite*," Connors cooed and then he made to pinch Rozanov on the cheek which resulted in a tussle that had the bartender shouting at them to behave.

Shane stood up – wobbled a bit – and pulled on his own jacket. He was the Montreal girl, wasn't he? Fuck. He couldn't decide if he was embarrassed or slightly turned on. He licked his lips again. "Your favorite, huh."

"She has a very good mouth," Rozanov said with a lingering look at Shane's mouth before he escorted Connors from the bar with his head in a headlock.

Turned on, Shane decided. Definitely turned on. "Well. Have a good evening."

J.J. snorted and draped his arm around Shane's shoulders, always the affectionate drunk. "You know, he isn't such an asshole, is he?"

"Oh, no, he's definitely that," Shane said.

Five minutes later, in an Uber Black, Shane's phone lit up.

Lily: *Ten minutes. Get yourself ready for me.*

Chapter 10

Shane had been studying his team dynamics from more angles than he usually did. Before he'd started on this goddamn journey of self-actualization, he just focused on who was good at hockey, who needed a little more correcting, and who simply wasn't worth his time, which was a shitty truth but it was a truth. There were twenty-three men in the Metros roster and he only had so much time.

Besides, Theriault had agreed with him.

But now Shane was looking at his team through a wholly new perspective which – ironically – was pretty similar to the old one just with new layers: who was a good person, who needed a little more correcting, and who simply wasn't worth his time. Despite his hopes, that latter category did exist. He just didn't know what to do about it yet.

There were maybe two people on the team that Shane could place in the 'good' bucket and that was, inexplicably, Peetie and himself. And he wasn't always totally sure about himself – acknowledging he was gay didn't make him some kind of diversity and inclusion savant. It just meant he had a bit of self-awareness now.

The ones who needed a little more correcting were a much larger bucket and that bucket was qualified by a willingness to be corrected or to open their minds. Things had settled a bit since the upset of Anderson's retirement and Shane getting the C. There were certainly many guys in the team who respected him now, some who even *liked* him – Hayden and J.J. and the remaining rookies of the last four seasons. Sure, maybe he winced internally when J.J. used cocksucker as a derogatory term. Maybe he lightly chastised the rookies for sexist language. But they were otherwise willing to respect his opinion and would listen when he said 'hey, maybe don't wonder out loud if Deniz from catering gives good head, maybe that's an inside-only thought'.

But those two buckets combined did not a whole roster make. In fact, it was barely a third.

Once Shane would have said that the heart of that problem, the main challenge when it came to 'alignment' to Shane's vision for the team and Petrov's values, was Comeau. Comeau was everything that Shane was not. Shane was well aware that his social abilities, or lack thereof, made him less appealing as a leader to some of the more outgoing, charismatic members of the team. Guys like Comeau, guys who threw money down at the bar and took the rookies out clubbing and acted as their wingmen on nights out and talked shit about *liberal-agendas* and *woke culture* and generally behaved as if they were God's gift to mankind.

And normally Comeau was loud. Loud with his opinions and his jokes and his *let's fucking do this, fellas*. It was the cliched kind of loud. He repeated things he'd heard without much thought about their impact. He was a white guy in a white sport and he had never been affected by any of the diversity issues that people like J.J. and Shane faced on a day-to-day basis and for most of his career that had been fine. No one had challenged his thinking.

But. That talk about trans people and Elaine and Elaine's kid had really shaken him up. He'd been noticeably *quiet* after that seminar.

After, Shane had checked in with his moles about the team chat he wasn't included in and been sent a single screengrab.

Drapeau: *That was some bullshit huh*

Drapeau: *Can't believe Elaine's kid is some she-male gay*

Comeau: *He's not gay.*

Comeau: *He's a nice kid.*

Comeau: *He's just a kid.*

Drapeau: *lol ok Gil they got you too?*

Drapeau: *pussy*

Apparently there had been no more conversation after that and later Shane had observed a noticeable chill between the two. It was J.J. who told him that Comeau and Elaine *had* gone on a few dates the previous year, but she'd broken up with him when things had started to get serious. The fact that Comeau had kept this pretty damn quiet was unheard of. Typically, his women were paraded around like it was a fucking dog show.

So Shane gently, almost reverently, placed Comeau into the middle bucket. The *could be corrected* bucket. And pondered what to do instead about Drapeau, who *was* still a problem, before remembering that, actually, there were people he could talk to about this now.

Shane had regular one-to-ones with Wiebe and they were increasingly comfortable. Nothing like the ones he used to have with Theriault where he'd sort of stood to attention the whole time, like a soldier on parade. That's not to say Shane hadn't liked that. Being in a hockey team was kind of like being in the army and Shane and Theriault had been working together for a few years so they both knew each other and Shane *knew* how to manage him. There had been some pleasure in that, weird as it was to say.

But Wiebe had now got a leather couch put in his office and this big beanbag and sometimes they had informal leadership team meetings in there, all squeezed in like they were back in Juniors and half the size. He had a fridge filled with protein drinks and snacks. And fruit – which Shane really appreciated because fruit was always allowed.

Shane sat on the couch, eating an apple, and stared out the window. "What's your experience with team dynamics?"

Wiebe was leaning back on his chair, studying the whiteboard where they had mapped out next week's game plan. He had one of those squeeze stress balls in his hand, a freebie from some supplier who wanted to sell them something. "Maybe you'll have to narrow that down for me."

"You played on different teams. Detroit and the Scouts, right?" Wiebe had been moved around a reasonable amount for only being in the MLH for eleven seasons. In between the stint with Detroit he'd been sent down to the AHL – not uncommon, exactly, for a mid-range player. "Then Chicago."

"What an unsurprisingly good recall you have of my career, Shane," Wiebe said drily.

Shane shrugged because of course he would have done his research, which he supposed was Wiebe's point. "Were the rooms very different?"

"Ooooooh, yeah." Wiebe tossed the ball into the air and caught it a couple of times. "Chalk and cheese. Let's see. Detroit. Captain was Storky. Stan Sorkin. Rock. Absolute rock. Couldn't phase him. Humble. Wicked sense of humor. Took absolutely no shit from anyone. Room was fun, for the most part. Relaxed unless, you know, you were giving him shit." He sighed kind of nostalgically. "The Scouts. Fuck. Oskar Krajnc. Absolute machine. Controlled. Smart as hell. But," Wiebe laughed and looked at Shane, laugh lines in full display, "literally dead behind the eyes. Zero emotion. Terrifying. I mean, for me, at the time. Coming from Detroit, that room was *silent*. Took me a while to understand him. He wanted you to work hard and own your mistakes and get better. Not sure I ever delivered."

"Really different."

"Totally. And... Chicago was also different. Chicago was— not great. Clarke is an asshole."

Shane inclined his head. "I've heard that."

Wiebe pulled his feet off his deck and sat up, resting his elbows on the table so he could massage his temples. "He's actually the reason I retired when I did."

"Fuck, really?"

"Fuck, really. The most toxic locker room I have ever belonged to. Intense bullying, from the captain, from the As, from management. Even the fans were pretty toxic. There was incredible pressure on the team. The stress was unbelievable. If you didn't put in two hundred percent you were basically ostracized. I hated it. Emily hated who I was when I was there. Barely saw the kids and even when I did I was so burned out I was a shitty dad."

"Fuck. I'm sorry."

"It's part of the reason I was so taken in by Petrov's offer. The idea that we could actually *do* something was, is, still pretty inspiring."

"But you said the other two teams were kind of positive."

“Yes,” Wiebe said slowly, “in a comparative sense. No team is perfect. None of those teams would have accepted a gay or bi player. In fact, it would have been worse in Storky’s team. It would have ruined the fun.” The way Wiebe said ‘fun’ was a little bitter.

Shane was maybe oversensitive to this kind of chat now so was really, really aware of what his face was doing and couldn’t work out how to make his face look appropriately sympathetic and not, you know, terrified.

“Krajnc would have been *is not hockey, do not give a shit*.” And Wiebe laughed again, this time more tiredly. He rubbed a hand over his face.

Aware that he had brought up quite a lot of disappointing memories for Wiebe, Shane approached his real reason for the subject, “Um. Follow-up question.”

“Sure.”

“Did they have different approaches for when the team wasn’t gelling? If there were maybe one or two key troublemakers who were affecting the chemistry or something.”

Wiebe raised his eyebrows. “They talked to their coaches, Shane.”

Shane rolled his eyes, which was the sort of shit that would have got him punished by Theriault. “What do you think I’m doing now?”

The squishy stress ball flew at Shane’s face. He caught it. Of course. “Who are we talking about?”

“Can we talk in hypotheticals?”

“I’m sure I could guess.”

“Hypotheticals. Come on.”

“Okay. Hypotheticals.” He tapped his fingers on his desk. “So Chicago crushed anyone who tried to step out of place, so let’s not use them as an example. But in Detroit... I suppose we did a lot of team building exercises. Not just drinks after games where alcohol might be a hindrance to behavior but charity work and family things.”

“We don’t do much of that. That’s probably on me.” Not having a family – not in the wife-and-kids sense – Shane hadn’t really ever prioritized it.

“You focus on other equally valuable things, Shane. And the charity thing isn’t actually your responsibility.” Wiebe reached for his in-tray and began shuffling things around. “Come to think of it, I got a memo a week or so— okay, so maybe two months ago.” He winced as he pulled out a sheet of paper. “About this very thing. Our new head of HR has been reviewing where we should put our efforts.”

He handed the sheet over to Shane who had to admit had some qualms about the kinds of charity work Petrov might consider relevant but was pleasantly surprised to see it was all

quite manageable and community based. Children's hospitals and food banks and school reading programs. Nothing out of the norm.

"You look surprised."

"Yeah, thought it might be— I don't know. That trans charity or something. Not that it would be *bad*..." Shane, grimly, made himself stop talking. He thought of Elaine's wet eyes. And the vaguely hunted look on his team's faces.

Wiebe picked up another squishy stress ball. This time it was bright pink. "I think they know our limits."

"Maybe next year," Shane said, meaning it.

"Maybe." Wiebe slid the memo back into the in-tray pile. "I'll have a think. About other things we can do."

"Thanks, Coach."

*

Petrov: I'll be in New York when we're playing the Admirals next week, though I doubt I'll have time to watch. Can we do our 1-2-1 then? Otherwise we'll have to push it to next month.

Shane: *Sure.*

Petrov: *When do you get in?*

Petrov: *Never mind, my travel is all over the place, I'll co-ordinate with Marlene.* 🤖

Shortly after that, a meeting invite was sent to Shane for 9.30pm, after the game. The address was the hotel they were staying in.

Marlene's email was brief,

Mr. Petrov has an important virtual meeting shortly after he lands which he will take from his suite. Given the time, it would be best if you join him there. Will you be hungry.

Shane rolled his eyes. "It'll be immediately after a game, Marlene, what do you think?"

An email arrived while he was bitching about her to himself.

I'll get something ordered. Don't keep him up late.

"What the fuck, Marlene, I'm not the one scheduling a 9.30pm meeting," he muttered, hitting the 'accept' button on the invite nevertheless.

*

Kurt opened the door and smiled blandly. "Good evening, Mr. Hollander."

“Hey, Kurt, how are you?”

“Very good, thank you.” He stood back and allowed Shane into the little entranceway of the suite. He gestured to Shane’s left. “Mr. Petrov is expecting you.”

“Cool.” Hands in his pockets, Shane strolled through the penthouse suite of the JW Marriot, admiring the decoration. They’d been renovating the hotel in phases for the last couple of years but clearly the rooms the team were put in were last on the list. From what he could see, the decorative choices were definitely more modern, lots of clean lines, greys and navy and whites. Presumably the other rooms wouldn’t have all this marble, though.

His cottage was going to have a more rustic vibe, in keeping with the remote surroundings, but he and his interior designer had worked on a palette that felt a little more contemporary.

Petrov was on the phone and waved at him from where he was standing by the vast sweep of windows. He mimed for Shane to help himself to the bar and Shane turned to see that Kurt had not followed him, the front door clicking closed as he left.

They were alone.

Shane helped himself to a bottle of water from the bar, half an ear on the conversation. Petrov was speaking Russian, which was the first time he’d ever heard him speak it. He wasn’t familiar enough with the language to be able to tell if he was native, like Ilya, or spoke it more like Shane did French. To Shane, it was a sexy language but that might be because Shane associated it *with* sex, with Ilya murmuring indecipherable things while he was inside Shane.

Best to think of something else.

On the coffee table, there were a couple of bottles of champagne and some empty glasses. Looked like a bit of a celebration had happened. Shane picked up the bottle, which was still half full and wet with condensation. His dad was a bit of a connoisseur of champagne, so Shane recognized this was expensive. He replaced it in the ice bucket.

Petrov said goodbye and hung up, tossing his phone onto the desk by the window. He rubbed his hands over his face and seemed to transform from a tired man into an energetic one in an instant. “Shane! How are you? Good summer?”

“It’s November,” Shane pointed out.

“Yes. Yes, you’re right.” He was almost jittery. “We closed a big deal. I can’t tell you anything about it but it’s— big.”

“Congratulations.”

“Hopefully it’ll mean I can stay put for a few weeks, too. See some games. I hear we’re having a good season.”

He grinned. “We are.”

“Do you want a macaron? Glass of champagne? I think Marlene’s ordered us some food.”

Shane shook his head as his stomach rumbled. He’d eaten a protein bar earlier, just to tide him over. “I can wait for dinner. Besides, it’s not my treat day.” He had a whole Snickers bar ready for tomorrow, which he planned to eat in small nibbles while watching something mindless on TV, maybe even Facetiming Ilya, who got some weird pleasure out of watching Shane eat chocolate.

“Treat day?” Petrov poured himself a glass of champagne and picked up a green macaron. He dropped down onto the couch and gestured for Shane to join him. His shirt was untucked. His feet were bare.

“Ali has worked a treat day into my diet.” The bare feet were distracting. Petrov had very neat feet. Ilya had very neat feet. Shane knew he got regular pedicures. Maybe Petrov did too. Wow, he needed to stop looking at Petrov’s feet. “So I can have something not in the plan.”

“Like what?”

“Mostly Snickers bars.”

This made Petrov’s eyes crinkle. “I’m partial to a Kinder Bueno bar myself.”

“Oh yeah? I think I just really like the peanuts. I used to love peanut butter on toast before I cut that out.” Sad times.

Petrov nodded as if Shane’s inane food chat was the most interesting thing in the world. “I sometimes put it in my protein shakes.”

“Have you ever tried peanut butter powder?”

“Oh – yeah. Pales in comparison.”

The food arrived, Kurt pushing it into the suite on a trolley draped in a tablecloth. Petrov hurried to clear the dining area of papers and his laptop so he could set everything up. Marlene appeared to have ordered enough food for an army.

Petrov took a seat at the head of the table. “Thank you, Kurt.”

Kurt inclined his head to him and then to Shane. “Have a good evening, Mr. Petrov. Mr. Hollander.”

Kurt left again and, bemused, Shane shook his head, trailing Petrov to the table and taking a seat on Petrov’s left. “Is he, like, your butler?”

“More like a personal assistant. But he’s employed by me, not Petrov 7.”

“So he gets your food for you. Does he make your peanut butter protein shakes?”

This got him a partial eye-crinkle. “Amongst other things.”

They paused to investigate the various dishes that Marlene had arranged. A whole roasted chicken. Some wild rice. Some kind of green sauce that they both sniffed and were none the wiser for doing so. Roasted vegetables. Roasted potatoes. Boiled potatoes. A salad with dressing on the side. A bowl of *petits pois à la française*. And an apple pie.

Petrov went for the apple pie first.

Shane watched this behavior with a dawning understanding. “You’re kind of drunk.” He was witnessing Mikhail Petrov *drunk*.

Petrov’s nose wrinkled. “On three glasses of champagne? Who do you take me for? I think it’s mostly jetlag.”

“Oh. You *do* look pretty tired.”

“Thanks, Shane,” Petrov said with just the right amount of offended and amused to put Shane at ease. “I’d say the same to you except you’re twenty-three and fueled by a win. We did win, right?”

“Twenty-four,” Shane corrected. “We did.” And they won *well*. Hunter had been switched on for once but it had been nothing compared to the Metros, who were playing like they could all read each other’s minds.

It had been fucking amazing.

“Excellent. What do you think are our chances—”

Shane hissed, helplessly. “Too early,” he said, unable to keep the annoyance from his voice. He put some chicken and rice on his plate, some of the salad, and a little bit of the green sauce and kept up his glare. “Don’t say things like that.”

“Ooops,” Petrov said, eating a large mouthful of pie, really unrepentant. His eyes rolled back. “*Mon Dieu*, this is so good.”

Shane wasn’t going to be able to have pie. But that was okay because tomorrow he would have his Snickers. “Good for you,” he muttered.

“You know,” he said, stuffing another mouthful into his mouth, “I think I have notes for this meeting somewhere.”

“I think you should just finish your pie,” was Shane’s snippy answer.

*

They did, eventually, get around to talking. Shane had met the new GM the previous week and Petrov wanted to hear about it.

“It was good. She seems really switched on. She knew a lot about last season, the team. She was... nice. Smart. I think she’s going to be good for the Metros.”

“Is there a ‘but’?”

“No, not really. She was just, like, a normal GM.” What Shane was trying to get at, but didn’t know how to articulate, was that he couldn’t imagine ever doing what he was doing right now with Christine, which was sitting in Petrov’s hotel room on a couch, their feet up on the coffee table, watching the highlights of the game.

“That’s good, though.”

“Yeah. It is.” And it was. It was... professional.

Which wasn’t to say that Shane didn’t think his relationship with Petrov *wasn’t* professional. Because it was. It was just— different. More comfortable. “Maybe it’s because she’s older.”

“Than you?”

“Than you.”

Petrov offered him the box of macarons for the umpteenth time. “What’s that got to do with it?”

“Nothing.” Shane wasn’t making sense and he knew the real reason it was ‘different’. Christine wasn’t a handsome gay guy who made Shane feel comfortable with himself. He could not say that out loud, though. So instead Shane nodded to the screen. “Look at Lachy. That was a beautiful goal. Really smooth.”

They talked about the game a little. And about the two last weeks. Shane tried hard to sound detached and critical when he was really still buzzing. They were having an amazing opening to the season, they really were.

Petrov got himself a water, drank half of it standing at the bar, and then wandered back to the table to eat a roast potato. “Alex has been keeping me updated with Project TROL.”

“Yeah. We’re still plugging away at that.”

“Apparently it’s bearing fruit.”

“If you mean that we’re now known as the gayest hockey team in the league, sure.”

Petrov snorted. “Shane.”

Shane turned to look at Petrov over the back of the couch, hand spread open in entreaty. “That’s literally what they’re saying.”

“You know it’s not what they mean, though.”

Shane rolled his eyes and returned to the TV. “No, I know.”

‘Gay’ was somehow becoming the shorthand in the MLH for ‘nice’ or something. “And it’s not bad. I mean, Drapeau *hates* it.” Shane couldn’t hold back his grin, which Petrov

responded to with a laugh.

“He’s a free agent as of July. Wiebe says he’s probably going to sign with someone else.”

“Yeah, which solves a room problem but weakens our defense.”

“Then we’ll find someone better.” Petrov returned to the couch and to the macarons, which he offered to Shane yet again, only for him to decline, yet again. He dropped back down on the couch. He was closer than before, his thigh nearly touching Shane’s. “Only one treat day, huh?”

“One more than I used to have.”

“Maybe I should ask Ali to do me a meal plan.”

“Based on tonight, you might need it.”

“This is *my* treat day, Shane.” He shoved an entire macaron in his mouth and Shane didn’t know why it happened, not really. A quality of the safety he felt. The macarons and the intimacy of Petrov’s bare feet, the slightly silly behavior. It just came out. Or, rather, Shane did.

“I’m gay, by the way.”

It was ill-timed. The macaron clearly went down the wrong way. Petrov turned bright red as he choked and Shane had to hit him on the back repeatedly.

“Jesus. Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Shane got up and grabbed another one of the little bottles of water from the bar, bringing it back to Petrov.

“That is not— wow. It’s the first time someone’s ever come out to me and I literally choked. I cannot believe it.” He coughed some more and tore the cap off the water, taking a couple of big gulps.

“It’s okay. You’re only the second person I’ve come out to, so I don’t really have any standards yet.”

“Shane. My God.” Petrov blinked away his watery eyes and wiped at his nose. “I’m— truly honored.”

Shane thought this was funny. At least compared to how Ilya had reacted, which had been more kind and sort of relieved and jokey. He’d have to ask him if he’d felt *honored*. Shane imagined he would get a lot of shit back for that. *No, Hollander, I was not honored that the guy who sucks my dick came out to me.*

“Do you want a tissue? I’ll get you a tissue.” There was a box of them on the desk. Shane presented them to Petrov, who stared at this offering as if Shane was possibly insulting him. Shane shook the box. “What? You probably need to blow your nose.”

“Blow my—” Aghast, Petrov took the box of tissues and tossed them on the coffee table. “I will be right back.”

He left, kind of a hurried sashay in his step, and disappeared down the little hallway, presumably to a bedroom. A door closed and a moment later Shane *did* hear the sound of him blowing his nose.

When he returned, he’d obviously also washed his face, brushed his hair. And was now wearing a sweater instead of the untucked shirt. “Sorry about that.”

“All good.”

Petrov cleared his throat and began to tidy up, clearing the coffee table of the champagne and the glasses. “I should probably get an early night, Shane. Comparatively speaking.”

“Oh, yes, of course.” Shane had surely really overstayed his welcome; he hoped Marlene didn’t find out. He jumped up. “Hey, let me know if you’re going to make it to any of our games? I’m sure the guys would be pleased to know you’re there. The Molsons never came.”

“Will do, will do,” Petrov said with a vague, strange sort of smile.

*

Shane stayed in New York an extra day to have another fitting with Sargent and to meet up with Scott Hunter.

He’d decided to do this one alone.

He knew Scott, probably better than he knew the other captains, bar Rozanov. And obviously not in the same way. They’d played together at All Stars. Hunter had a reputation for being a decent human being on and off the ice which Shane had been relieved to find was true in real life as it was in the media.

Shane was planning on being rather more forthright with Scott than he had been with the other captains. Less gossip. More actual business. Hence meeting him alone.

He wore a new pair of jeans that Sargent had tailored for him and a cashmere sweater that his mom had bought using the color chart. It was that plum color and was also probably a shade tighter than he would normally wear, showing the definition of his upper arms.

Which was fine. He was an athlete.

He completed this outfit with a pair of white leather Reeboks, which had made Sargent roll his eyes and Shane felt compelled to defend himself. “Look, I’m a brand ambassador and I am never seen in them. At least they’re not, like, the running shoe kind.”

So, feeling confident, Shane set out to meet Hunter at a small bar he had recommended that he said would be ‘private’.

“Hey, Rook,” Hunter said, smiling and standing up from the booth he had sequestered himself in.

And Shane— well. Most of the times he’d seen Hunter, it had been on the ice, fully kitted out and helmet on and none of them look their best with sweat pouring down their faces. Outside of their usual work environment, wearing jeans and a soft-looking sweater, and smiling in that lopsided way, Shane suddenly realized that perhaps the posters of Scott Hunter on his teenaged bedroom walls hadn’t been because of his hockey prowess.

Shane laughed, out loud. “Sorry,” he said, shaking his head at Hunter’s perplexed look and taking his hand to shake. “Just had a, like. A random thought.” He surveyed the table, saw Hunter’s beer was low. “Can I get you another?”

“No, Hollander, let me. Sit. What can I get you?”

“Ginger ale if they have it. Sparkling water if they don’t.”

Hunter smirked. “Sure.”

Shane sat and, smiling to himself, got out his phone, because if he thought of something funny he always wanted to tell Rozanov first.

Jane: Meeting Hunter. Just realized I probably had his posters on my wall for other reasons than his stick handling.

Jane: If you make a stick handling joke here you are a cliché, fyi

Rozanov didn’t reply immediately, which was reasonable because he was playing Tampa, so Shane tucked his phone away.

Hunter returned with their drinks. He had switched to Coke. “So. What’s up? Why the cloak and dagger?”

Shane took a sip of his ginger ale, letting the sharp sweet taste settle on his tongue. “You heard our team got bought last year, right?”

“Yup. Big news. Read your new owners cleaned house. Lot of supposition for why, though.” Hunter’s eyebrows raised in a question.

“Yeah, basically, Petrov 7 have these, like, core values and they’re really serious about them. They didn’t think that management were a good fit, so they’ve been slowly replacing people, including Theriault few months back.”

“Wiebe is a good guy.”

“You know him?”

Hunter nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah. Solid player. He had a shit time in Chicago, though. Not surprised he retired early.”

Shane winced. “He told me a bit about it. He said it was part of the reason he took the job. Petrov, our new owner, is really hell bent on changing the Metros – making us more diverse, more inclusive.”

Hunter’s eyebrows had climbed up his forehead. “When you say diverse and inclusive, what do you mean?”

“Um. Well, it’s mostly a lot of internal work on the organization. Restructuring and stuff. But there’s also some genuine training to make us more accepting of each other, of people generally. Like,” Shane managed to laugh, to try to make this sound *light*, because in every other workplace this would be normal but this was the fucking MLH and it was very much *not* normal, “there’s a way we all talk to each other, about each other, that is just— you get used to it, don’t you? The shit talking. The chirps that cut a little too close to the bone, the ones that the refs ignore. The borderline racist and actual racist shit I’ve heard in my life is... you just. Ignore it. But it’s not actually okay? You know?”

The corner of Hunter’s mouth went up and he sheepishly nodded, “I suspect you get it worse than me, but, yeah, I know what you mean.”

“The whole team is now in this monthly training. It started out pretty basic. What is diversity. What is LGBTQI+. And maybe if any of us had finished high school or paid any attention to the world around us, we might have learnt about it and it wouldn’t be so fucking eye opening. Like, we had a whole thing on the actual stats behind diversity in the MLH, which I think massively shocked so many of my team, because they have never even looked around the room and thought about the fact in the entire roster, only three of us aren’t white.”

Hunter had enough self-awareness to wince. “Yeah. It would be the same with my guys.”

Shane nodded. He knew a few of the Admirals on a more personal level. Carter Vaughn, he thought, was a pretty decent guy. But then there were guys like Zullo, a defenseman who had often had a word or two to say about Shane on the ice.

“And beyond the team, this year we’ve started a new outreach program, scholarships for kids who might never have the opportunity to learn hockey. Kids from low-income backgrounds across Canada.” Everyone knew you had to be pretty comfortable financially to be able to put a kid through hockey training and not come out the other side bankrupt which, broadly speaking, meant middle class and white. “And that’s for both boys and girls, incidentally. And we’re working with a few regional and provincial associations to see if we can expand the financial award schemes.”

He paused to take a sip of his drink.

“Shit, Hollander,” was Hunter’s erudite summary.

“Yeah.”

“So... why are you talking to me?” he asked and it was a mite suspicious.

“I’ve not, like, singled you out, man,” Shane explained. “We’re talking to all the captains of the different teams. Basically testing the waters. The Metros can only do so much so we were thinking that if we started to make some noise from the ground up... we might be able to make more change elsewhere. Or at least get an idea if anyone is thinking the same.”

“And? Are they?”

“There’s a few guys out there who are open to it. A couple of captains have gone to their coaches to ask for more training, to engage on things like Pride and the general pre-historic attitude. And... I’ve heard we’re getting a reputation for being different. Have you heard that?”

“If you have, it’s not reached us yet. What does your team think about it?”

“They’re coming around. We’ve got a couple of stalwarts but I’m working on that.”

Hunter took a long sip of his drink and in the silence Shane felt the need to prompt him, looking for some sign of support which he realized he had not yet been getting. “What do you think? Do you think the Admirals would be open to making change?”

“I’m not sure, Rook.” Hunter looked down at the table and perhaps it was just the lighting but Shane thought he was looking a bit red. “It’s a difficult situation.”

“You don’t think management would be interested?”

“Not sure.” He took another drink, his eyes avoiding Shane’s. “We do some stuff, you know. Pride and that. And you know I don’t generally hold to poor behavior on the ice anyway. I keep a pretty clean room where I can. Like you said... there are a couple of guys who are maybe a little more hard work.”

“Sure, sure,” said Shane, wondering if he’d massively misread Hunter all this time. He sipped his own drink, genuinely a little achy with disappointment.

Hunter cleared his throat. “Can you— I’m interested in the training you guys are getting? Do you have a list, maybe? It’s something I could share with HR.”

That was more like it. “Oh yeah. Yeah, I could do that.”

“Thanks.”

*

Petrov pushed their next 1-2-1. And their next. And Shane didn’t think much of it until someone shared an article in the group chat to a French tabloid newspaper story. The story featured photos of Petrov in Paris, eating dinner in some intimate little restaurant with – apparently – the same guy he was outed with. The photos were blurry and indistinct, but Shane could easily recognize Petrov.

According to the story ‘the couple remained close personal friends’ which Shane was guessing was tabloid-speak for ‘probably fucking’.

His phone buzzed with another message.

Drapeau: *Are we getting a new mommy?*

Drapeau: 🙄

Oversensitive to Drapeau's barely concealed homophobia, Shane saw red. With two quick flicks of his finger, he exited Drapeau from the group chat. What the fuck. He couldn't wait for the guy to fucking leave.

Leaning forward, Shane upped the resistance on his bike as his phone buzzed with a message in his chat group with Hayden and J.J.. He swiped to open it, reading as he pedaled.

JJ: *Did you just boot Drapeau out of the group chat, capitaine?* 🤔

Still furious, Shane pressed the voice to text button. "Yes, sick of his shit. Send."

Hayden: *lol*

Hayden: *can you do that?*

Probably not. And really the comment hadn't even been that offensive, not in the grand scheme of things. Rolling his eyes, Shane hit 'stop' on the bike and returned to the group chat. He re-invited Drapeau who immediately started shit.

Drapeau: *what the fuck Hollander?*

Shane: *felt like you needed a timeout*

Drapeau: *you're such a piece of work*

Drapeau: *figures your sucking his cock too*

Immediately the rest of the team piled in, calling Drapeau out. A really surprising number of the team, actually, *including* Comeau and a few of the rookies who normally wouldn't say boo to a ghost.

Drapeau: *fuck you all*

[Drapeau has left the chat]

Shane stared at the screen for a little bit, uneasy, then screen-grabbed the chat and sent it to Wiebe. *Do you think this is a problem?*

Wiebe: *I don't know. I could send to HR.*

Shane: *That bad?*

Wiebe: *No just for a second opinion.*

Shane: *OK.*

He heard nothing from Wiebe for a few hours, not until he was preparing his lunch which today consisted of a protein shake and a barley and roasted vegetable salad with tofu. He drizzled some of that Mexican hot sauce over it. He'd been putting it over a lot of things recently, though not when he knew he was going to see Rozanov as it was hell on his digestion.

"Hey, so HR want to know if he's said stuff like that before."

That hadn't, actually, been why Shane had sent it to Wiebe. He'd been more concerned about his action of kicking Drapeau out of the team chat. So he was casual when he said, "Sure. Loads."

"Right." Wiebe was silent. "Shane."

"Yeah?"

"I'm trying to convey something here that I don't want to say out loud. I need you to get the message."

"About Drapeau putting homophobic shit in the team chat?" He shook his protein shake, the milky liquid sloshing around. "It's not on an official channel."

Wiebe sighed. "Do you think the kind of language Drapeau has been using in this chat is affecting the workplace?"

"Well. Probably. As well as the language he uses, you know, out loud." And the *sighing* in the team training. And the rolling of his eyes. And the bitchy phone calls in French to his wife. Jackie said Katrin was about as bad as he was.

"Then it is a matter for HR."

"Oh."

"If you want to raise a complaint..."

Shane groaned and leaned over his counter, rubbing his face with his hands. "I'm not going to do that, Coach. It's—it's pointless."

"It's not pointless. It's exactly the kind of thing we've been working on all season. It is *not* acceptable behavior and creates a hostile environment where people are afraid to be honest about themselves. What if there's a kid in the team who's gay? Or bi? What do you think they're thinking when they see a vet in the team talking like that?"

Shane couldn't help it; he snorted. "That they'll stay in the closet until they retire?"

"Exactly. You get what I'm saying here."

"Oh, God, I'll think about it."

"That's all I'm asking."

*

To Shane's absolute surprise, Alex was on his side. "I'd leave it," they said, shrugging.

He boggled at them. "You would?"

He'd come to visit Alex in their office, which was a few doors down from Petrov's and next door to the new GM. He'd never visited their office before – and probably never would again because it was extremely cluttered and Shane had removed three binders and an empty box of cookies to sit down on a chair. He was pretty sure he was sitting on crumbs. He itched.

"Yeah. The team supported you, right?"

Shane nodded, a little warmth blooming in his chest, easing some of the squirming worry that he'd been living with these last couple of days. Though he'd meticulously gone through the group chat, screen-grabbing anything problematic, he hadn't packed it up and sent it through to HR.

"And his contract is up at the end of the season?"

He nodded again.

"Then leave it. In a group dynamic, it's useful to have someone who is representative of what *not* to do. It'll tip the balance in our favor. Just make sure you remain professional. The worst thing to do would be to freeze him out."

"What the hell."

Alex smiled. It was very shark-like. "What? You thought I'd suggest something else?"

"Yeah, I thought you'd be all—" Shane waved a hand around, "—do things the right way."

"No. I want us to win, Shane. Sometimes doing things the right way doesn't get you results."

That sounded utterly counter-intuitive to Shane. In fact, he would go so far as to say he thought that fucking *sucked*.

He tried to smooth his expression into one that didn't scream 'what the hell'. He'd come to Alex for advice and he'd got it. It just hadn't been the advice he'd expected. Even if it was advice that, ultimately, meant he could lean into his instincts.

"Hey," Alex said casually, changing the subject, "you spoken to Mishka recently?"

As usual, it took Shane a moment to remember 'Mishka' was Petrov. "No, he's pushed back our last couple of meetings."

"And you don't talk? In between?"

Shane shook his head, a little confused by this line of questioning. Why were *they* asking Shane? He'd always got the impression that Petrov and Alex were close. The Russian

nickname was a clue. And there was a photo of them on one of the shelves in his office, arms around each other. “No. Why? Is he okay?”

“Oh yeah! Sure.”

Weird, Shane thought.

*

“Where is my present?”

Shane barked out a laugh, Ilya’s question really bursting the post-orgasmic bubble he’d been relishing. “Wow. What makes you think there’s a present?”

Big, rounded eyes blinked woefully up at Shane as he rested his chin on Shane’s chest. “There isn’t?”

So, turned out, Shane was absolutely unable to resist a Rozanov pout. Good to know. He should maybe work up some immunity to that. “Oh, God, of course there is.”

Rozanov launched himself off Shane, butt-naked and lightly speckled with Shane’s come and sticky with lube. “I have also got you a present.”

“Hey, no. That’s— this is your Christmas.”

He was ignored. In turn, Rozanov was rifling through the bag he’d brought with him. Neither of them were in New York for a game this time, instead they’d both flown in for the express purpose of having two nights and one full day together. They could have gone anywhere but there was something to be said for tradition; Shane had booked the same hotel, the same suite as last year.

Rozanov pulled a gift bag from his suitcase. It was, predictably, branded with the Raiders logo.

Shane was delighted. “It’s a bear, isn’t it.”

“You have to wait and see. Where is my present?”

“Can I wash first?”

This simple request was met with a dramatic rolling of eyes. “*Fine.*”

They washed. They made out in the capacious shower. They fucked on the floor of the bathroom on top of an excess of towels. They showered again.

Finally, dry, wearing clean pairs of underwear, they exchanged gifts on the bed.

“You got me a fucking Rolex?”

“*And* this year’s new bear. He’s got a little hockey stick now.” There was a magnet which meant the stick could move hands. He’d thought it was cute.

“Yes, Hollander, but the Rolex?” Ilya unclipped it from where Shane had cleverly attached it around the bear’s neck.

Shane was doing his best to ignore the blush that was spreading down his face to his chest. He knew it was an extravagant gift. He tried to downplay it, “I get them basically free.”

This was a huge exaggeration.

Ilya mouthed ‘wow’ and put the watch on. It was black, made of the special scratch-resistant ceramic that Rolex had pioneered, and limited edition. As soon as he’d seen it, he’d thought it would suit Rozanov’s style.

And he wanted Ilya to wear something he had got him.

Ilya stroked the face of the watch. “I love it, Shane,” he said wistfully.

“Good. Happy Russian Christmas New Year.” Relieved that he hadn’t overstepped, Shane opened his gift bag and smiled when he saw the expected bear, almost identical to the one the Metro’s sold except for the black and gold jersey and Rozanov’s name and number. “God. It even has your facial expression.” He pulled it out and held it up and for the life of him he couldn’t think of anything suitably acerbic to say. He *wanted* this bear. He wanted to keep it on his bed. He was sentimental about this bear.

Shane looked up, truly expecting to be on the receiving end of the patented Rozanov shit-eating grin. What he got instead was something much similar to his earlier expression. Big, woeful rounded eyes. Only genuine this time. “Hey? What’s wrong?”

“You got me a present.”

“I got you a present last year.”

Ilya clutched the Hollander bear to his chest and then his face crumpled. “My father is dying.”

“Woah. Hey, hey.” Shane crawled forward instinctively as Ilya tried to curl into himself, his knees digging into gift bags and the damp towel Ilya had used on his hair.

He straddled Ilya’s lap and wrapped his arms about him as Ilya murmured apologies into Shane’s increasingly wet neck. “No, it’s okay. It’s okay to be sad about that.”

Ilya shook his head frantically.

“It *is* okay. Is there—” Shane didn’t know what to say. What to ask. He didn’t even know what was wrong with his dad. He kissed the side of Ilya’s head a couple of times because it felt right. “Is there something I can do? To help?”

“No,” Ilya said.

Ilya's mouth moved against Shane's neck and started to travel up with a familiar intent. Shane turned to meet it – like some hungry part of his brain was conditioned to follow Ilya's lead – but when Ilya slid his tongue into his mouth, he resisted, drawing back just a little. Sex was usually their answer to everything but in this instance, Ilya blurting out a painful secret, Shane wondered if maybe he could be doing more here. If he should be. "Hey. You want to talk to me, maybe?"

Ilya's eyes were wet, eyelashes clumped together. He was a very beautiful crier, which was no surprise to Shane. "There is nothing to talk about."

He brushed his thumb against Ilya's cheek, chasing the streak of a tear. "Does he have... long? Do you need to be in Russia?"

"I don't know. It's— it's dementia. He is forgetting everything, even how much he hates me. It is only going to get worse."

"Okay." Shane stroked Ilya's head again, though his eyes bulged. *Hated Ilya?* How could his father *hate* Ilya? "That's awful. I'm sorry. Does he have someone looking after him?"

"I pay my brother." Ilya sneered, as if this was by no means a satisfactory arrangement.

"You... pay your brother. Okay." Shane guessed if this was a full-time thing then he would need to have some income. "That's good that your brother can be there."

It was the Wrong Thing to say, apparently, because Ilya's face went again, that full bottom lip trembling with upset. Preemptively, Shane pulled Ilya close, pushing his face into Shane's neck. His shoulders shook. Fuck. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Shane whispered. He kissed his head, the top of his ear, wherever he could reach. "I'm sorry."

*

Jane: *Did you see the game last night?*

Jane: *That hat trick was unnecessary lol*

Lily: 👍

*

Jane: *Gonna rewatch the Nagano Tapes tonight and eat my Snickers. Do you want to join me?*

Jane: *Guess that's a no then.*

Lily: *Sorry, didn't see this*

Jane: *no problem!*

*

Jane: *Think you spent more time in the penalty box than out of it tonight*

Jane: *You are definitely getting fined.*

*

Jane: *Is everything okay?*

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Being single, Shane's awareness of Valentine's Day either took him by total surprise or crept up on him insidiously, a fluttery-pink-heart reminder that he had no one to celebrate with, or at least no one with whom he could admit to wanting to celebrate.

Chapter Notes

Sorry, people 😞

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

Shane had mixed feelings about this year's All-Stars. On the one hand, it was an opportunity to showcase his skills with the cream of the MLH and give back to the fans.

On the other, it was a totally pointless waste of a long weekend that he could have spent being fucked down by Ilya, whom he hadn't seen for nearly a month.

Instead, he was having to make nice with his colleagues at a series of socials, a number of whom he'd now had quite awkward interactions with post-game thanks to TROL. He was pretty damn sure Hunter was avoiding him.

At least Ilya's room was on the same floor as his, which made things *slightly* easier. Or it would have done if their floor wasn't apparently chock-full of incredibly social players who kept having long conversations outside their rooms or hanging out in the weird cluster of seats by the elevators.

"Fuck," Shane muttered when he finally managed to slide his way into Ilya's room just before midnight. "I thought Murphy would never leave."

Ilya nodded vaguely and kissed him kind of hard. "Party floor."

"Apparently. Hi," Shane said, trying to shake off the irritation. He'd been hovering by his own door for the last thirty minutes. "How are you? You didn't answer any of my messages."

They were once again on opposing teams and it had been more irritating than normal, being subject to the rivalry chat. At least they hadn't had one of those press conferences scheduled this time, though Shane had been forced to do some social media video, one of those answer

ten questions things. Two of those questions had been about Ilya and he had asked to see the footage to check that he hadn't looked as annoyed as he'd felt.

"Been busy," said Ilya, backing him towards the bed and helping him remove his clothes. Ilya himself was only in his underwear, his erection tenting the soft material.

Shane dragged his eyes up by sheer force of will and licked his lips. "Yeah, I saw you being all social."

Ilya always seemed to be in a crowd at these things. Laughing, joking around. This year, a pleasant change, All-Stars was in LA so the hotel they were staying at had a pool. Most of the married guys seemed to have brought their families and Ilya and a few of the other younger guys had been horsing around with the little kids. Ilya had been blatant about flirting with the WAGs, too, which had been borderline bothering Shane until he realized it was a useful cover.

Shane had found himself wishing Hayden and Jackie were here – it would have been fun to play with the Pike kids and have some cover for himself. Instead, he'd been forced to sit on the sidelines and watch over the edge of his book, enduring being ignored by Ilya. If he had he joined in with the games everyone would have commented about the earth freezing over or something.

"Oof," Shane said, as Ilya pushed him back onto the bed and loomed over him sexily. He smiled, though his smile faltered a bit when he saw how seriously Ilya was looking down at him. "You okay?"

"Da." Ilya's shuttered eyes slid away from Shane as he pulled his boxers off and tossed them aside. He rubbed the side of his nose with his thumb. "Get on your front, Hollander."

*

The cancellation of all of the meeting invites to the upcoming 1-2-1s happened 9am Monday, as if Marlene had been given an instruction over the weekend and it was the very first thing she did.

Marlene had put a note in the cancellation. *Meeting delegated to GM.*

A funny feeling manifested in Shane's belly.

"Hey," he said to J.J., as he met him walking into practice. "Did Petrov cancel your 1-2-1s?"

"Yeah. Few weeks back."

"Weeks?"

"Well, they were pretty random anyway." J.J. gave Shane a bit of a knowing, sidelong look. "I don't think I was as important to talk to as you were, Capitaine."

Shane put that disquieting thought aside until he was able to get Hayden alone. "Hey, did Petrov cancel your 1-2-1s?"

“Oh yeah. Not long after... well, you know.” Hayden winced. “Do you think it was because of what I said?”

“No,” said Shane, firmly, though the answer was probably ‘yes’. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know, man, I felt like you’d been bothered enough.”

The last one he checked in with was Peetie, this time by text because he was at home with a sprained ankle.

Shane: *Do you still have 1-2-1s with Petrov?*

Peetie: *Nah.*

There was no further qualifying information and Shane wasn’t about to bother Peetie further with his paranoia. Instead, he asked what he should probably have started with. *How’s the ankle?*

Peetie: *All good, cap. Doc says I should be back by end of the week.*

Shane: *That’s great. Go easy on yourself.*

That was the kind of thing Shane said to people but never said to himself, of course. Because the rules were different.

Sighing, Shane opened up his chat with Wiebe.

Shane: *Hey. Do you still have regular meets with Petrov?*

Coach W: *There’s a monthly call he’s part of*

Coach W: *But expect that’ll taper off now that we have a GM.*

Coach W: *Why?*

Shane: *He’s cancelled all our 121s*

Coach W: *Guess that makes sense. Owners aren’t usually as involved.*

Shane: *Yeah. Guess so.*

Though what Wiebe said made total sense and was a logical conclusion, Shane was uneasy. They’d talked about moving their meetings to Christine, after all, and Petrov had denied it. Said Shane *kept him humble*. Now, only a few weeks later – and *after* he’d told Petrov he was gay – that had all changed.

Shane couldn’t help but feel that this sucked a little bit.

He opened up his chat with Petrov, the last message arranging their meeting in New York.

Shane: *Hey. It’s Shane. Hope you’re well.*

Shane: *Marlene has cancelled all our 1-2-1s. Is everything ok?*

He laid the phone down on the table, chat window open. To his surprise – and alarm – the typing bubbles started immediately.

Petrov: *Apologies – I asked Marlene to update you. Given the progress with the team, felt my focus could be utilized best elsewhere so handed the reigns over to Christine. She will be in touch. All the best.*

“All the best?” Shane said out loud, baffled that three ostensibly pleasant words could be so fucking hurtful. “*All the best?*”

Muttering to himself, Shane left the messaging thread and scrolled down a few to the one he had with Ilya. By the very fact it hadn’t moved to the top of the list he knew that Ilya hadn’t replied which was a bit weird since he knew he didn’t have a game that day.

He sent another message, in any case, and then headed for the showers.

*

Being single, Shane’s awareness of Valentine’s Day either took him by total surprise or crept up on him insidiously, a fluttery-pink-heart reminder that he had no one to celebrate with, or at least no one with whom he could admit to wanting to celebrate.

This year it had very much been the latter. He’d started noticing the sudden influx of tacky hearts in stores and online. His preferred podcast had a truly targeted, and annoying, ad for a local jewelry store, inviting the listener to visit and reminding them *to celebrate a loved one this Valentine’s Day with 20% off if you quote hockey4love*. Which was a gross manipulation and had no doubt led to a steady stream of desperate men to the store to get their discounted jewelry.

This year, Valentine’s Day would be punctuated by an away game, which the collective WAGs had been up in arms about. So, an unwilling witness to the unfolding of these plans, told in dribs and drabs in the locker room, they had all decided to arrange babysitters and book time off work to join their partners so they could ‘celebrate’ after.

Shane was not in an especially good mood about this. No one would shut up about it. It was a distraction from their jobs. And he was jealous.

Because the game was in Boston.

And Rozanov. Had. Not. Texted.

Rozanov’s messages had in fact tapered off *considerably* since Russian Christmas New Year, only Shane had been too stupid to notice. He’d seen him at All Stars, of course, and they’d hooked up a couple of times, which was always an intense business in a hotel surrounded by their colleagues. But in between then and now *Shane* had been sending messages like he always did and Ilya had replied occasionally but he *had* replied, so Shane hadn’t thought

much of it until he'd sent a photo of the Rozanov bear propped up on Shane's neatly made bed and got no response.

Which had been really embarrassing. At the time, he'd thought it had been a risky photo to send him – it was a little too sentimental, a little too... not them. But he'd hoped— he'd hoped it might have elicited a different kind of response. What that response might have been Shane didn't like to think about too deeply, as it sat very close to the feelings that Rozanov engendered in him that weren't about sex. That were, in fact, straight up Feelings. Capital F.

That had been four days ago and in the meantime, Shane had scrolled back through their chat over the last few weeks and noticed for the first time that Rozanov's replies had been two, three words at the most, sometimes nothing more than a thumbs up emoji, sometimes no response at all. And he – unlike Shane – never double or triple texted. There had been minimal sexting. Minimal *anything*.

Shane had seen this pattern before from him. It did not bode well.

Last night, a wounded Shane had resorted to an old habit and looked Rozanov up on Instagram. Sure enough, Rozanov's profile page was littered with a series of obvious thirst traps - his fucking obliques on full display in the gym, his thighs in slutty little running shorts that strained to contain him, some kind of brand deal for an aftershave brand where he was barely wearing a tux, his pecs all oiled up.

But the final, absolutely final straw, was the photo Shane had seen on some gossip page. He was 'stepping out' of a restaurant, as they always said, wearing a silky kind of black tank top, black jeans and sunglasses. He looked *astronomically* hot. Like, illegal.

And on his wrist was a flashy looking watch.

But it was not the one Shane had got him.

"We are going to fucking destroy them," Shane told the room, just before the game.

He wasn't normally one for speeches. He usually made a few targeted comments that picked up roles in intended plays, reminded everyone of the opposing team's weaknesses, asked them to watch their language and remember they were the Montreal Metros, Stanley Cup winners, and professionals. But here we were. "I'm talking a Valentine's *massacre*. I want to *ruin their lives*. Okay?"

"Woah, cap," murmured Comeau, looking at Shane askance, and obviously thrilled with this invitation for violence.

"Fucking yes," said J.J., delighted.

"Excellent." He clapped his hands. "Now, let's go."

*

Rozanov did not meet Shane's eyes over the puck drop. His mouth might have moved but if he spoke, Shane didn't hear it as he was perfectly happy listening to the blood roar in his

ears. He had experienced a powerful desire to win during the playoffs but it was nothing like this. This felt animalistic in origin.

The linesman dropped the puck and they were off.

Shane won the first face-off, not really recalling if he'd even *looked* at the puck, just instinctively sent it straight back to where he knew Hayden would be. Less than thirty seconds later, Hayden buried it in the back of the net. The Raiders looked dumbstruck, the Metros looked like they'd practiced this move in their sleep. Which they practically had.

This pretty much established the pattern for that first period.

His team seemed to be everywhere at once. Every time Shane looked up, someone was already where he needed them to be, ready for the pass or first to the loose puck. Maybe they really did share a hive mind. Maybe it was just chemistry and training and team bonding and all that shit. Whatever it was, it was electric and just what Shane needed.

Whenever Rozanov was on the ice, Shane made sure he knew it. Every bump lasted a second longer than it needed to. Every battle for the puck became personal. Every chance to knock Rozanov off balance – legally, of course – was one Shane happily took.

He could *hear* Rozanov grinding his teeth. What a joy.

The combative mood spread across the ice. Tempers flared after whistles. Every loose puck turned into a fight over who wanted it more and it became hard to tell who that was. Was it the Metros, fueled by Shane's sudden vengeful streak? Was it the Raiders, fighting back in their usual Masshole fashion? Who knew. But the Metros were coming out on top.

By the end of the second period, the Metros led 5–1, and the crowd had started booing every scrum.

Wiebe knew something was going on. He kept giving Shane the stink-eye after each shift, particularly as he caught Shane muttering instructions to his team that were not, exactly, kosher, reminding them that Rozanov was his but everyone else was fair game.

By the third period, Wiebe had started keeping Shane and Rozanov apart as much as he could, sending Shane over the boards only *after* Rozanov had come off. Smart – he really was paying attention – but fucking frustrating for Shane who had been getting a real *thrill* from the crunch of shoulder against shoulder, the satisfaction of giving as good as he got every time they crossed paths.

Fuck you, Rozanov. Fuck you.

Denied the opportunity to torment Rozanov, he took that frustration out on his next victim.

“Hey, Hollander,” Marlow murmured carefully, glancing up at him, almost nervous.

Shane recalled that Marly, ostensibly Rozanov's best friend, was probably a homophobe. “Marlow,” Shane replied blithely, just as the puck dropped and then he proceeded to ruin Marly's day as well.

*

The text message landed at 10pm when Shane was lying on his bed staring at the ceiling, only half listening to the highlights on TV.

Lily: *Come over?*

Jane: *Are you fucking kidding?*

Lily: *I will explain*

Lily: *Please*

Shane rolled onto his stomach and pressed his face into the pillow, biting down. He wanted to scream. Rozanov made him want to scream.

He rolled back furiously, blowing his hair out of his eyes, and stabbed out a reply.

Jane: *no, you come here.*

His attempt to take the power back failed because Rozanov immediately replied.

Lily: *ok. Are you at the Hilton?*

Ugh. That was not how this worked. Rozanov couldn't come here. It was too risky. They always went to each other's places when they played each other. *Hayden* was in the room next door to him and he'd heard nearly every word of his conversation with Jackie about their bathroom refurb.

Jane: *no!*

Jane: *fine I'll come to you.*

But he wasn't going to shower. Because they weren't going to fuck.

*

Shane apparently had the kind of face that – even if they didn't know him – taxi drivers liked to talk to. And then – because he was that kind of a guy – he would have to keep up a stream of inane polite chatter about whatever topic the guy wanted to talk about, hating himself and the situation the entire time. He was shit at chit chat with his *friends*, let alone strangers.

Tonight, the Uber driver took one look at Shane and didn't say a word. Which suited Shane down to the ground.

It took twenty minutes to get out to Rozanov's house and Shane sat, glaring out of the window, his phone clenched in his hand the entire time. He didn't know what Rozanov was going to say. And he didn't care.

Thanking the driver briskly, Shane got out in front of Rozanov's front gate and keyed in the code he knew off by heart. The walk to the front door was short and Rozanov opened it the moment he reached it.

He held it wide open, inviting Shane in. "Hello," he said quietly. Very seriously.

Shane said nothing. He actually contemplated leaving. Looking at Rozanov – wearing a shirt for once but still unbearably attractive, his hair all mussed and his eyes a dreamy shade of blue – he suddenly couldn't bear to even hear what he was going to say. He was increasingly certain he was about to be dumped. If you could be dumped by someone you weren't really sure you were— whatever they were doing.

"Hollander? Do you maybe want to come in?" Rozanov made a sort of gesture that said, *this way*.

Hollander. Sure, they pretty interchangeably used their first and last names, but this felt like a low blow.

Hands deep in the pockets of his hoodie, Shane walked into Rozanov's front hall and stared at him. "What the fuck, Rozanov?"

Rozanov winced. He gestured again, this time towards the living area. "Maybe we sit down?"

Shane's inner bitch had him mouthing *maybe we sit down* sarcastically as he automatically took his shoes off, then wished he hadn't. If he wanted to make a quick exit, he didn't want to be shoeless. Fuck, it was too late now. He took his phone out of his pocket, just in case he had to call a taxi urgently.

He shoved his shoes in the rack and followed Rozanov into the open plan living area.

They sat on the couch, about a mile away from each other. Shane folded his arms over his chest and glared at the coffee table. It was immaculate. It always was, whenever he visited. He had always liked that Rozanov kept a tidy home.

"You want a drink, maybe?"

"I want you to say whatever it is you have to say."

"Well. *I* want a drink," Rozanov muttered, getting up. He headed straight for his massive fridge freezer and proceeded to pour himself a neat vodka. He took a big gulp, his back to Shane.

Shane never really drank the stuff – Moscow Mules aside – but he so often tasted it on Rozanov's lips that he could almost taste it now. It made anticipatory saliva pool in his mouth.

"You said you wouldn't get weird again," Shane spat accusingly, unable to hold it in any longer.

Rozanov's shoulders hunched. He turned around. He looked stricken. "I know. I am... sorry, Shane."

Shane refused to be mollified. "What the fuck?"

"I— Shane, I cannot come out."

Shane's eyes bulged at this unexpected and seemingly unrelated statement. "Okay? I'm not asking you to?"

"No, you are not understanding me." Rozanov approached, warily. He sat on the edge of the couch, rolling the glass between his hands. "I cannot come out. I could not go home again. I am... too public. It would be dangerous."

"I know that," Shane muttered. He had no idea why this was suddenly an issue.

"We would only be able to keep doing this... in secret. Yes?"

"Yes?"

"Even though you are going to come out to your team. Your family," Rozanov said with heavy meaning. "Eventually the world will know that Shane Hollander is gay."

The thought of it made Shane feel a little queasy. "That's... that's a while off."

Rozanov continued in the same gentle but firm voice, "It is not possible for me. Not... not while my father is alive. Not if I want to see him buried. Not if I want to know my niece."

"Rozanov, I'm not forcing you to come out." Shane was now holding his cell phone so hard that it hurt. "I don't have, like, expectations."

But of course Shane did. He was suddenly *burning* with expectations. It took him by surprise. Because when had he managed to get expectations? When had he had the time to subconsciously imagine *anything* about them at all? Certainly not picturing them, what, holding hands in public? Hard launching on Instagram?

He hadn't pictured that. Had he?

If he hadn't, he sure as hell was now. And he *wanted*. Shane *wanted* so badly it took his breath away.

And here Rozanov was, telling him that it was something Shane couldn't have.

Rozanov continued, still gently, "We have maybe been a little foolish."

Shane needed to *leave*. He didn't want to hear how they had been *foolish*. How he had humiliated himself by unconsciously creating *expectations*. He wanted to get up and go.

In fact, he was going to do that. Right now! He was going to get up from this couch. This couch he had kissed Rozanov on, fucked Rozanov on, *blown* Rozanov on. He had watched

TV with Rozanov on this couch, played video games. They had napped on this couch, entwined together, hands in each other's hair. Fuck. *Fuck.*

"Okay. Fine." Shane was caught up. He knew what was going on here now. It was exactly what he thought – check him out, being so emotionally attuned to a situation. What a winner. "So, we end it, right?" He managed to stand. He had to go the long way around the coffee table, so he didn't have to go past Rozanov. Didn't have to brush past him. Touch any part of him.

"Shane."

Shane hurried back to his shoes, breathing hard through his mouth. He knew he shouldn't have taken them off. And they were an annoying new pair, where he could pry them off without undoing the laces but couldn't get them back on the same way. He sat on the floor. "Why the fuck did you make me come out here? You could have told me this over the phone. Hell. You could have just kept on not talking to me. That's how you usually do it, isn't it? Don't fucking come any closer to me," he ended up shouting, as Rozanov followed him.

White faced, Rozanov came to a halt, his hands held palms out. Earnestly, in a way he had never done before, he said, "Shane, you deserve better than a shitty text message. I am sorry."

There was nothing Shane could say about that. Yes, he deserved better, but he wasn't sure exactly what that might look like. Not this, that was for certain.

*

Mobilizing every ounce of physical and mental willpower he had, Shane managed to keep it together until he got back to his hotel room. Until he was in the shower, where he couldn't tell the tears from the hot water beating on his head. He cried for so long, so hard, that he started to wheeze from it, chills overtaking his body even though the water was warm.

Eventually, he made himself get out and sat at the end of the bed on a towel, dripping, exhaustedly staring into the distance.

Rozanov had ended things. It was over.

Shane guessed... he guessed he had known, realistically, that there was something *to* be ended. Even he, unpracticed as he was in the art of sex, had known they had passed 'hook-up' territory a while ago. Somewhere between daily text messages and fucking New Year Christmas.

You didn't spend holidays together with a hook-up. You didn't give your hook-up presents, certainly not very expensive watches. You didn't have sleepovers or eat meals or watch TV together.

Shane covered his face, the embarrassment sneaking up and surprising him. God. Had it... had it just been him? Had he mistakenly – and unconsciously – behaved as if they were something more? Had he done this?

Worse. Maybe Rozanov had recognized that Shane had gone too far. That he was the problem. Maybe Rozanov had been doing him a kindness, pulling back, setting the record straight. Ending things with a reasonable excuse.

Which, if that was the case, was humiliating.

Shane wracked his brains for any evidence that might counter this argument, that might give him a shred of hope.

They'd last seen each other at All Stars. It had been good, hadn't it? Shane had been almost overwhelmingly preoccupied about fucking in the hotel – sneaking into each other's room late at night and definitely not staying over. They hadn't talked much, like they usually did, but he'd put that down to the situation. Before that, there had been New York for Russian Christmas New Year. Shane had obviously massively miscalculated – in retrospect, what else could it be? – and given Rozanov a disproportionately lavish gift. The far more appropriate Rozanov bear was sitting on his nightstand at home now, judging him from afar.

Hell, maybe he shouldn't have even given him that first bear. What had he been thinking? It was the kind of gift teenage boys gave their girlfriends. And he'd thought he'd been so clever. How *childish* he was.

More tears prickled in the corners of Shane's eyes. He was so pathetic. So deeply, deeply pathetic.

*

Jane: ~~*We could keep being a secret*~~

Chapter End Notes

Posting this made me feel a bit sick with nerves btw.

As you can see, the chapter count keeps creeping up. This was a bit longer of a chapter before but I thought it worked rhythmically ending it there.

114k now! That's... well it's more than I expected tbh.

Big love to the people who come back to comment 

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Shane didn't know for definite that Sargent was gay. He knew enough now to know that eyeliner and false eyelashes and – today's addition – dark red nail polish, didn't actually confirm a guy's sexuality. It could just be part of his style. Sort of emo, at a guess. Shane also didn't know much about style.

Chapter Notes

There is a nasty slur in this chapter.

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

Thank God for hockey.

This was Shane's refrain over the next few weeks as he bottled up every thought, every other emotion *apart* from hockey; he bottled it up tight and sealed it and locked it away. Hockey was majestically all consuming. If he wasn't playing hockey, he was training for hockey, reading about hockey, watching hockey, analyzing hockey. With very little effort at all, Shane could fill every single second of the day with hockey.

And he did.

"You've lost a little weight," Ali told him, frowning at the scales. "A little more than I would like this close to playoffs. You doing anything different?"

"I'm training a little harder," Shane said, attempting to sound nonchalant.

"Oh? Well, we should adjust your meal plan." Ali smiled. "Maybe a second Snickers, too."

Shane accepted the new meal plan, with the additional protein and carbs. Eating was also about hockey, so that was okay. But the Snickers bars were currently taking up an increasing amount of space in his freezer, waiting for a treat day. He didn't feel much like treating himself at the moment.

He flew to New York in March to have a fitting for his new game day suit, an entirely bespoke suit that was also entirely out of Shane's comfort zone. Instead of the ubiquitous black, it was a deep burgundy, tightly fitted. An open-collar white shirt and black leather

shoes completed the outfit and as Shane looked in the mirror a brief flash of not-hockey crept in, imagining Rozanov's reaction if he saw Shane in something like this.

Then he crushed it. It hurt to do so.

"It's great," he told Sargent, summoning shards of enthusiasm from the very depths of his soul.

He'd had a couple of sessions with the stylist Sargent had recommended, Hana, as a way of adding more Things in his life that could fill the Rozanov-shaped gaps. She was a Korean-American woman of indeterminate age who had kind of a reassuring, stern vibe. She hadn't required that he visit her in Boston – which Shane had been relieved about, for obvious reasons – and they'd instead had a couple of virtual calls where Shane told her about himself in clothes terms, his likes and dislikes, which he had found very hard, and what he was looking for as a general vibe. And then she'd set him about a hundred things to try on.

From this they'd whittled down a menu of options and now he got a package a month from her with little print outs of what to wear with what. Occasionally she asked him to send photos and she'd gently correct him.

His game day suits – there was going to be more than one – were a little more elaborate and had involved collaboration between all three of them, with Sargent sharing designs and Hana making suggestions and Shane just agreeing when necessary.

Sargent fussed with Shane's collar. "You're looking a little pale. Are you getting enough sleep?"

Shane didn't know for definite that Sargent was gay. He knew enough now to know that eyeliner and false eyelashes and – today's addition – dark red nail polish, didn't actually confirm a guy's sexuality. It could just be part of his style. Sort of emo, at a guess. Shane also didn't know much about style. But he suspected Sargent *was* gay and it was interesting because Shane wasn't in the slightest bit attracted to him. After Petrov he'd kind of wondered if that was how his sexuality worked. "Not really," he admitted, letting Sargent fuss next with his sleeve.

"Worrying about the big hockey thing?"

Shane's mouth twitched. *The big hockey thing*. Sure. "Not really. I don't worry like that."

"You don't?"

"No. I just get... really intense. I mean, I guess that could be how my worry manifests."

"Probably. But you're not sleeping well."

"No." The issue was he couldn't make sleep about hockey. Oh, he had tried. He had tried to convince himself that a solid eight hours was important to rejuvenate his body so he had optimum rest. Rest was important for recuperation. For energy. For all the things that made him good on the ice. But. "Can't seem to switch off."

“Sounds like nerves to me.”

“It’s not.” Shane grunted and wondered if saying it out loud would help. Sargent didn’t know him. Didn’t know his friends, his team. He knew Petrov but Petrov was out of the picture now, as well, and he didn’t think that Sargent would be as unprofessional as to gossip about him. “I’m kind of— I kind of broke up with someone. Or they broke up with me.”

“Oh.” Sargent stood up straight, immediately sympathetic. “I’m sorry. That’s totally shit, Shane.”

“Yeah. It is.” His voice broke a little. He cleared it, not certain if this had made him feel any better at all. “So, Hana says no socks, hey?” Shane wiggled his foot, where his bare ankle flashed.

“That’s right,” Sargent said gently. “No socks.”

*

Jane: ~~*I miss you so much it hurts*~~

*

On Sunday, he gave his mom his phone so she could flick through the photos Sargent had taken of him at the tailor’s. As well as the game day suit, he’d finished off a linen suit he was planning on wearing to Lachy’s wedding in June. Because that was what he really wanted to do this summer. Celebrate someone else’s love.

“Shane, you look so good,” his mom said, smiling down fondly at the photos. “You really... seem to have come into your own sense of style.”

“Not sure if any of that is me, Mom.”

His mom put down his phone and watched him chopping up watermelon. He’d had a whole two days to himself with no distractions and had, if he was honest, been avoiding his parents. It was only a two-hour drive to Ottawa; he couldn’t put it off. “So how have you been?”

“Yeah, good. Working hard. Did you sharpen the knives? This is cutting through this so easily.”

“Yes, the knife man was at the farmers’ market last weekend.” His mom changed topic to what Shane imagined had been her entire reason for inviting him down this weekend. “That game against Toronto was brutal.”

“Their new rookie is a piece of work.”

“Dallas Kent?”

“That’s the one.”

“Mouthy.”

“Yes.” He’d had *plenty* to say about the Metros. They’d already written off Toronto as being a potential ally – so Shane had made no plans to meet their captain either at this game or the one earlier in the year – but Dallas Kent had really exemplified everything Shane had come to dislike about the MLH.

“I saw that you reported him.”

Everyone had. “Yup.”

“Do I get to know what he said?”

“He called me a cocksucking Chink,” Shane said, glad his back was to her.

His mother gasped. “My God, Shane.”

“No one heard him. So, it was my word against his.” Shane shrugged as if it didn’t matter. It did.

He had never been someone who reported language on the ice because if he did it was almost like he was reinforcing that he was different, that the language that was used against him was different to the language used against others. Other guys shrugged it off, so why couldn’t Shane?

Well, fuck that. He wasn’t going to accept it anymore. What Kent had said was vile. What the fuck was the point of being a role model for kids if they were going to go through exactly the same thing he did? He didn’t want that for some nameless, faceless boy who spent his entire childhood idolizing a sport that wouldn’t return the favor. *Fuck* that.

And fuck Dallas Kent.

“That’s— sweetheart, that’s appalling. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not the first time, Mom, and probably not the last. But I’m sure as fuck going to make sure it gets better, not worse, and if I have to report people, or wear a fucking mic all the time, I’ll do it.” Shane arranged the pieces of watermelon neatly in the Tupperware container and fixed on the lid. “Dad mentioned he wanted my help with something in the yard. Something about the patio?”

His mom struggled for a moment to find her voice, probably too caught up in the words that had been thrown so vitriolically at her son, the anger in his voice. Shane wondered if he should have kept it from her, like he’d kept everything else. “Oh, you shouldn’t do that, honey. We don’t want you to injure yourself.”

“It’s fine,” he said, feeling the need to make it up to her. “What do you need doing?”

*

Shane carried several extremely heavy patio slabs from the driveway to the back yard which if he was honest was slightly more of a workout than he’d been expecting. He should probably have stretched beforehand. And changed.

“Why didn’t you get the delivery guy to do this?” he asked, wiping sweat from his brow.

Yuna Hollander scowled. It was a particular expression of dissatisfaction that his dad always said – usually laughing – that Shane had inherited. “He arrived when we were out, a full three hours before the estimated delivery time. I have written a strongly worded complaint,” his mom explained, handing him an icy glass of water.

Knowing his mom, she would get a hefty discount for this inconvenience.

“Stay for dinner?” his dad asked him. “Nothing fancy. Garlic chicken and salad.”

“Sounds good.”

These days, his dad cooked a lot. It hadn’t been the case when he was younger. Before she’d quit her job to become his full-time manager, it had been his mom putting meals on the table every night after she got home from work. At some point in his mid-teens, they’d had a blow-out fight about this arrangement – Shane listening in terror up in his bedroom, afraid his parents were on the verge of divorce – but the result was the redrawing of the domestic spheres.

Admittedly, his dad’s meals tended to be very simple – spaghetti and steak and grilled chicken – but Shane wasn’t very picky about food. Or he hadn’t been until food became fuel and then it had to be a very specific kind of fuel and then he found himself becoming pretty damn picky.

As his freezer full of Snickers bars would now attest to.

So Shane ate his chicken and salad and didn’t look at the crispy little potatoes on his parents’ plates and after they had fruit salad with Greek yogurt and a drizzle of honey and then they sat on the back porch with tea, bundled up in fleeces.

His dad paced the yard, explaining what they were having the landscaper do. “This bit here,” he said, marking out a few square feet with big stretches of his legs, “is a real sun trap first thing in the morning. We thought a little patio set right here. Show him, honey. And I’m wondering some kind of water feature?”

Yuna duly showed Shane the patio set and he made the right noises. Four chairs, he noted. It was always four chairs. For his mom and dad and Shane and the partner Shane might one day have.

“Hey,” he said, haunted by this image, “so I should probably tell you guys something.”

His mom smiled at him, totally no idea what was about to hit her.

“I’m gay.”

Because he was looking at his mom, he didn’t know what his dad did, but his mom kind of jolted in her chair, a tiny movement that sloshed the tea in her favorite bone china cup. “Oh, Shane.”

“Shane,” his dad said, moving quietly up the steps of their back deck. Shane glanced at him then. His face was soft – kind of sad, maybe? “Son.”

“I’m... I’m sorry?” Shane managed because he had been utterly calm, just before, when he’d decided on this spur-of-the-moment announcement, but now his heart was racing. He couldn’t tell what they were thinking. He couldn’t tell.

“Sweetheart, don’t be sorry.” His mom got up, the blanket falling from her lap. She came over to the little loveseat he occupied, squeezing herself in next to him. Her arm went around his shoulders. “Thank you, thank you for telling us.”

“Okay,” he squeaked, wide-eyed.

His dad rested his big hand on Shane’s head and smiled down at him. “I think you could say we’re not totally surprised, Shane.”

“What? Really?”

His mom hugged him against her. “We do know you pretty well, Shane.”

“Oh.”

Shane hadn’t imagined that.

“You were never very interested in girls,” David said in explanation, a little wry. Just... totally fine with this.

And then his mom, *his mom*, laughed, and said, “You were, however, pretty passionate about certain hockey players.”

“Jesus,” Shane said, wishing the earth would open him up and swallow him whole. So, they had noticed his preoccupation with Scott Hunter too then. Awesome. “You could have maybe told *me*.”

*

Jane: ~~*I came out to my parents just like you said I would*~~

*

On Fridays, Wiebe had introduced an excruciating new feature to their team bonding called ‘The Retro’. Shane more than suspected the existence of this exercise was wholly his fault, as he had been the one who had gone to Wiebe to request ways to get the team to gel better, so he had only himself to blame.

The Retro involved the team getting into one of the conference rooms, where facilities had arranged chairs in a circle and put up inspirational posters that said inspirational things like ‘*Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much*’ over clearly stock bought images, and they all sat around and Wiebe brought up topics that had been friction points during the week to discuss.

And then they bitched about each other.

Some of it was the kind of shit that should never be discussed again and *genuinely* made Shane question his life choices, such as today's play-by-play of an 'argument' between Mitty and O'Conner about Mitty's choice of bodywash.

"But it is literally for women. It says so."

"It's a neutral scent."

"Yeah, for *women*, you fucking—"

"Language!" Shane barked compulsively, pre-empting what was inevitably going to descend into exactly the same argument he'd witnessed on Tuesday and he really couldn't do that again.

"Thank you, Shane. I think we get it, gents. And let's just put a blanket ban on gendering body wash chat in the showers," Wiebe decided, looking up from his tablet, slightly despairing. "Any other issues anyone would like to raise?"

Everyone looked at each other, hoping that this could be wrapped up so they could go home and there was a small groan when Michaels tentatively raised his hand.

Wiebe nodded at him, giving him a small, but slightly hesitant smile, as if he was afraid of what inanity awaited them all.

"Thanks, Coach." Michaels shuffled on his chair, sitting forward a bit. He fixed his attention on the puck that sat in the middle of the floor. They'd found pretty early on that it helped if they addressed their complaints to an inanimate object. "So my mom is on end-of-life care now and, um, I think I'm probably not going to be doing so great over the next couple of weeks."

The team as a whole sucked in a shocked breath. From body wash to dying moms – what a ride.

"Fuck, Mikey," Lachlan, sitting next to him, said. He reached over to grab his arm. They had become pretty close, bonded over their shared pain of being Shane's past and present lineys, probably. "Had no idea, man. I'm so sorry."

There were murmurings of similar support from everyone, including Shane.

Clearly trying to convey that he was super fine about it, Michaels shrugged casually and was brusque, "Yeah. It's— she's not been well for a few years. It's not, you know, unexpected."

"Nevertheless, Michaels, that's pretty heavy stuff. If you need to take time off, that can be arranged," Wiebe said, frowning. Like Shane, he was probably thinking this was something he should have known about.

"No, no. The whole family is in Montreal. So I see her regularly. She doesn't— she's not actually conscious anymore. Just a matter of time. Obviously for the funeral..." Michaels's

voice faded away and he looked down at his track pants, tugging at an invisible thread on his knee.

“You can take all the time you need,” Shane said quietly. “Family first.”

“Yeah, family first,” everyone reiterated.

There was a moment of genuinely reflective silence before Wiebe clapped. “Okay, everyone, group hug.”

Shane stood first, holding back a sigh and trying to appear as neutral as possible because Wiebe had told him it looked like he didn’t want to participate. Because he *didn’t*. But today at least there was a good reason.

They all crowded around, making sure to get as much contact with Michaels as they possibly could. He was beginning to look a bit wet around the eyes.

This touching moment was effectively ruined a few seconds later.

“This is so gay,” Franks muttered, acknowledging that something that on the ice would be absolutely natural, totally fine, but in this room felt fucking awkward. Then, visibly panicked, he corrected, “I mean— not in a bad way. Love the gays. And the theys. Respectful of the... ladies...?”

Shane tried to keep it in, he really did, but the snort came out of nowhere, came up so deep from his belly it hurt and couldn’t be contained because he currently had his arms around J.J. and Mitty. The laughter that followed was almost hysterical. And *infectious*. J.J. lost it next, then Mitty and Hayden, then the rookies and Michaels and the rest of the vets, until they were all bent over, half laughing, half crying, still holding on to each other because now if they didn’t, they’d fall over.

“Fuck you guys,” Drapeau said, shaking his head and escaping the scrum, “you’re all so fucking weird now.”

*

The team was playing good hockey. Excellent hockey. People kept telling him that and Shane kept nodding. He didn’t feel it, himself, or he did but in a once-removed kind of way. Like he was looking at himself through a pane of glass, glass smeared with Vaseline. A blurry Shane played hockey, ate six meals a day, slept maybe four hours a night and got up and did it again. Ali upped his calorie intake twice more. Sargent sniffed disapprovingly at Shane’s waistline. All blurry.

He knew in some remote sense that he wasn’t doing okay, and that the reason for his not doing okay was shaped like a hockey player and had a Russian accent and probably wasn’t thinking of him at all – but he pushed that aside and told himself that it would get better. That’s what they always said about heartbreak, which was what this surely was.

Rozanov had broken Shane’s heart.

Broken it. Because Shane had been in love with him and hadn't known it.

No.

That was a Lie. Capital 'L'. He could call it out now. He'd had plenty of time to think about this, to do his own mental tape review and come to terms with his own fallacy.

Shane had been *in love* and he had pretended he wasn't. Because he'd known, he'd *known*, that Rozanov wasn't with him for the same reasons. That he liked Shane, sure, and he liked what they did together. But Shane had been one of many. Maybe he got a thrill from the danger – Shane sure as hell had – but that was it.

Meanwhile Shane, inexperienced, *stupid* Shane, had let himself fall in love with someone utterly unobtainable, someone who would never – and could never – love him back. Had told him plainly that it wasn't possible. The life Rozanov wanted did not include Shane.

And so here he was. Broken hearted.

It would get better. Time healed all wounds. That's what they said in all the songs and stuff. It was really inconceivable to Shane that people willingly fell in love, if this was what it felt like when it ended. He didn't plan to do it again.

Hayden, sitting on the bench, scrolling through his phone, whooped obnoxiously, "Looks like Rozanov's been locked down."

Shane stared into his locker, originally rifling around to find his deodorant but really now totally blind. He wanted to grab Hayden's phone. He wanted to run from the room.

The nosiest members of the team drifted over, surrounding Hayden and, by association, Shane. He hunched his shoulders protectively.

"And all the women across North America weep. Show me," J.J. demanded, snatching the phone out of Hayden's hand. "Who is she?"

"Some chick he's been seen with a few times." Conscientiously, Hayden pointed to the screen. "Look, they have all the dates and if you scroll you can see the photos. Rozanov is totally wasted in one of them. She's practically holding him upright. Oh, hey, looks like he's got a new car..."

"The *dates*. What page is this?" Mitty laughed, taking the phone. "Do you *follow* this?"

"It's, like, a hockey fan account." Hayden flushed. "Fuck off. They post about us sometimes. Jackie likes it."

Comeau was involved now, a towel draped around his waist and another around his shoulders. "I've gotta see what kind of puss—" He stopped himself, literally stopped dead in the middle of the word like he'd been reset.

"I think that was going to be complimentary?" Lachy suggested, not sounding totally sure of himself.

“Not sure. Still technically about a woman’s...” Mitty gestured downwards and whistled.

Everyone looked at Shane, who was apparently arbiter of language these days. He sighed. “It’s not great,” he said. “You’re basically reducing a woman down to a body part, which is sexist and derogatory. And for all you know,” Shane swallowed and yet his voice came out croaky anyway, “this woman is the love of his life.”

The team seemed to find this concept amusing which was good because Shane was struggling to control his facial expression. He suspected he looked devastated. Had Rozanov found what he wanted? So quickly?

“It is Rozanov, Capitaine,” J.J. teased, “it’s not going to be *love*.”

Please God let that be the case, Shane prayed, though the specter of Rozanov’s no doubt imminent coupling now loomed in the back of his mind. Hockey players married young. Everyone knew that. It was only a matter of time.

“She *is* really hot, though,” Mitty said unhelpfully.

Shane gave in and grabbed the phone. He’d stayed off social media, for obvious reasons, but if he ignored this it would just look weird, right?

The image of Rozanov made Shane’s heart double-throb. He looked spectacular. Fucking European though, with a silky shirt covered in— leopards? What the hell. Why was he so beautiful? It was agony.

He barely glanced at the woman by his side but, yes, by any measure she was also very beautiful. Tall, dark curly hair, tanned skin – mixed-race, he guessed. She had her arm looped through Rozanov’s and was laughing. He was smirking.

He looked... fine.

Shane, who now wanted to get out of the locker room as fast as humanly possible, handed the phone back. “Good for him.”

“Good for him?” half the room chorused.

“Yeah. Good for him,” Shane said, dragging on his T-shirt without deodorant. What did it matter? He was just going to go home and cry anyway.

*

Jane: ~~*Fuck you, you fucking asshole.*~~

The end is in sight. I mean, not from here, there's 8 more chapters, I mean in the story sense as I wrote the ending. Now I just have to fill in some (many) gaps and also rewrite a large portion of one of the upcoming chapters....

I added the HEA tag lol. I'm not used to big fandoms and I had no idea this was very important and its absence was very distressing for some people. SORRY.

Thank you, as always, for the lovely comments. I read them all. Usually first thing in the morning in a state of astonishment...

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

He looked first for the one name he wanted to see, scrolling down and down and down to where all his older chats were.

Lily had sent him nothing.

Chapter Notes

Gird your loins. One of the most hotly contested tags is in action in this chapter.

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

Shane got Noro. He caught it from babysitting the twins and Arthur so Hayden and Jackie could make googly eyes at each other at an expensive restaurant. Neither of the Pike adults caught it which Jackie – wincing – put down to being exposed to more of their kids' germs than Shane.

He missed three games which – obviously – was unbelievably irritating, except one of them was against Boston, the last time they would meet before the playoffs. Not that Boston would be making the playoffs.

He watched the game from the couch, a big plastic bowl within arms reach, though thankfully he hadn't thrown up, or anything else, since that morning. If things had been the way they were before, he wouldn't have seen Rozanov anyway – he couldn't have come over when Shane was incubating the Bubonic plague and there would have been absolutely zero chance of him going anywhere near his ass. He'd have been exactly here, watching Rozanov from the couch, frustrated about not being able to see him. And probably secretly very sad.

And probably also thinking that the Raiders were playing like shit, too. Which they were.

One of the worst parts about this situation – and this really was only *one* of many – was that Shane hadn't realized how much he talked to Rozanov. The number of times he saw something – a meme, a cute dog, a particularly beautiful play – and his first thought was to send it to Rozanov probably numbered in the dozens every day. And every time it was a punch in the heart to remember he couldn't do that now.

Right now, Shane wanted to message him and ask him why his team was playing like shit. Why Rozanov himself was barely on the ice. Was it just because Shane wasn't there? The

Raiders would be lucky to get the wild card spot in the playoffs, whereas Montreal had been leading their division for the last three weeks, so it surely couldn't be that their coach was protecting their best player.

Maybe he *could* message Rozanov and ask.

In Shane's feverish brain, this evolved into a genuine option. They were professionals, right? His phone was in his hand anyway – he'd been messaging the team chat with positive reinforcement and been on the receiving end of Jackie's thoughts on Hayden's game – and he scrolled all the way down his chats to find the one with Lily.

Over the last few weeks, Shane had opened and closed this thread probably hundreds of times, starting messages, deleting them, over and over again. Their last messages from February 14th, fucking *Valentine's Day*, sat there. Boldly.

He re-read them with fresh eyes, though he could probably quote them all in his sleep.

Lily: *Come over?*

Jane: *Are you fucking kidding?*

Lily: *I will explain*

Lily: *Please*

'Please'.

Shane's eyes prickled. Fucking 'please'? *Please come over and let me dump you, Hollander. Please.*

"Asshole," he muttered thickly. On screen, the buzzer went and the ref's whistle blew. Montreal 5-1. A pathetic showing by the Raiders.

Sniffling, Shane began to type.

What the fuck was that, he wrote.

And then he deleted the letters, one by one, pressed his face into the sweaty pillow to let it absorb the tears.

*

The night the Metros won the Stanley Cup for the second year running, none of them slept. It was an alcohol-fueled blur from the moment they were off the ice until they stepped foot in the last club. To say Shane's memories of the evening were hazy would be a huge understatement.

The morning after, Shane woke up in Hayden's guest room with a massive, truly massive hangover.

He had no idea what time it was – his phone was absent, which was concerning but Shane couldn't really summon as much energy to be as concerned as he should be.

It took him several tries to actually get up. His brain was twice the size it should be, pressing out into his skull, which seemed to throb hotly with every beat of his heart.

Once up, he took a piss in the ensuite and leaned against the wall as he did so, because he had to, and contemplated throwing up.

He did not look in the mirror.

The shower he took was brief, cold, and made him feel better for about thirty seconds and then he contemplated throwing up again.

Last night's clothes were on the floor but Shane ignored these, knowing that Jackie kept the chest of drawers full of Hayden's old Metros tracksuits. He had to sit down to get dressed. He contemplated throwing up.

The twins met him in the hall, where they had clearly been waiting for him to emerge from the guest room. There was a blanket on the floor and a sippy cup and what looked like a box of cereal.

"Are you sick?" they asked him as he studied them silently. Ruby was wearing what looked like a swimsuit. Jade was still in her favorite pajamas, the ones patterned with little skulls.

"I don't know." He really didn't. "Are *you*?" he replied suspiciously, recalling the Bubonic plague from before.

They shook their heads in unison, eerily identical for a moment. As they grew they became more easily identifiable to Shane – slightly different face shape, the way they walked and talked, their personalities – but their mannerisms were always synchronized.

He touched his throat, which he was realizing now was pretty sore from shouting. "Where are your mom and dad?"

"Daddy is still in bed," said Ruby, concerned.

"He's *very* sick," said Jade, delighted.

If Shane was feeling like this, he could only *imagine* what Hayden was like. "I'll bet."

"Mommy is in the kitchen."

Jade scrutinized Shane. "You *look* sick. Are you gonna be sick?" she asked, with a hopeful air.

"No," said Shane firmly. More firmly than he felt.

Waving them off, he made it downstairs to the cluttered, familiar kitchen, but only just. The Pikes had a big house and their staircase had two turns with a little landing area. Each landing

area had a decorative chair and he'd had to sit down on both, breathing shallow for a couple of minutes.

"Help me," he told Jackie, when he saw her.

Jackie Pike snorted and rose from where she was hunched over the sleek little laptop Hayden had got her for her birthday. There was a cup of coffee at her elbow. In denim shorts and a striped tee, she looked fresh and clean and not remotely hungover. "Look, all of Hayden's usual cures are things you will hate."

At this point, Shane was willing to try *anything*. "What are they?"

"A greasy breakfast."

Shane blanched. Okay, not that.

"Or a beer."

He blanched again. Or *that*. "Is he *insane*?"

"How about a peppermint tea to start? And some Tylenol."

"Acceptable. Thank you." He carefully edged himself onto a bar stool and watched through his fingers as Jackie made him a tea. It took him a moment to realize he'd seen the twins but not Arthur, which was about as long as it took Arthur to sneak up on him and yank at his pants leg.

Looking down did *not* feel good. Could you get vertigo from a hangover? Because if so, he had it. Sweat beaded unpleasantly on his top lip. "Hi, buddy," he said, trying to imbue his words with, you know, love.

Arthur raised his arms into the air expectantly.

"I can't pick you up," Shane said with genuine regret. There were few things in life more comforting than cuddling his godson. But puking on Arthur's head was a distinct possibility. Jackie would find this funny, no doubt, but he didn't want Arthur to have some early life trauma related to Shane.

"Uncle Shane is not feeling well, Arthur," Jackie told her son, who dropped his arms mutely with an adorable little pout and returned to playing with his trucks on the floor.

"Hey, also the brutal playoffs," he protested, maybe a mite too pathetically. He was basically one massive bruise at this point.

"Mmm, I think it was mostly the Moscow Mules," she whispered, passing him the steaming hot cup of tea and a bottle of pills.

Great.

Shane concentrated on swallowing the pills and keeping both them and the peppermint tea down while Jackie returned to whatever she was doing on her laptop, which turned out to be a grocery order. They were heading off to stay with her parents for a week and she always sent food ahead.

“I don’t suppose you’ve seen my phone?” he asked when he was sure the tea would stay down.

“Oh! Yes. It’s—” Jackie spun around and pulled open a drawer. “You insisted I hide it from you.”

“Right.”

“Something about you sending texts to someone you shouldn’t.” She gave him an arch look as she handed his phone over.

“Ah. How weird. Haha,” Shane managed, unconvincingly.

“Mmm, weird.” Jackie leaned on the counter, watching predatorially as he powered his phone up. “Are you... seeing someone?”

“No.”

“Not even Lily?” she whispered with an arch look.

Like being stabbed in the heart. “Not even Lily.”

His phone loaded and, after the win, he wasn’t surprised to see the messages ping in their dozens. His parents, his grandparents, Matilde, his cousin Kiko, old friends from school, players from other teams, old coaches. They poured in, one after the other. Some of these people he only heard from after a win like this and he would feel obliged to reply to each and every one of them. *Thanks for reaching out, so great to hear from you! It was an amazing team effort. I’m so proud to be a Metro.*

For now Shane ignored them. He looked first for the one name he wanted to see, scrolling down and down and down to where all his older chats were.

Lily had sent him nothing.

Nothing.

He couldn’t allow himself to react. Not here, not in front of Jackie who had asked so pointedly about Lily before. He couldn’t show how hurt he was that even now Rozanov wouldn’t reach out, knowing how much this win meant to him.

Uninspired now, Shane scrolled back up and there, among the many congratulatory text messages, was one that Shane didn’t expect.

Petrov: *Did you get home all right?*

He stared at this message for a long time before he was able to string a sentence together.

“Hey, was, um, Petrov there last night?”

“Yes, you guys talked for quite a bit. Looked intense.”

Shane squinted, as if that would help him remember. It was nearly there, the memory.

Petrov’s face... close up.

Jackie snickered. “Shane. Your tolerance is so bad.”

This was unfair. It wasn’t as if it was something he had practiced at – unlike apparently every one of his teammates. “Do you know what we talked about?”

“No. His security was pretty antsy. You really can’t remember?”

No, and he *really* wanted to. It felt important, somehow.

He looked down at his phone, at the message on his screen. It had been sent at nearly five in the morning. “What time did we get back?”

Jackie thought back. “The sun was just up. You and Hayden got real emotional about it. You also got emotional about the protein bar I made you eat and the dissolvable aspirin I forced you to take.”

Sounds about right. “You love us really.”

“I do. How about a piece of dry toast?”

He thought about it. “Whole grain?”

“What am I, a savage? Of course it’s whole grain.”

*

Jane: ~~*I can’t believe you didn’t message.*~~

*

Shane bit the bullet.

Shane: *Hi.*

Shane: *I did get home okay, thank you for asking. Though technically I went back to stay with the Pikes. But I’m home now.*

Shane: *Did I do anything weird last night?*

Several minutes passed while Shane, once again, waited anxiously for a text message from a man. He’d assumed that in his drunken state he had wanted Jackie to hide his phone so he wouldn’t message Rozanov. But there was a small possibility he might have wanted to get in touch with the other confusing man in Shane’s life who had *also* recently disappeared.

His phone vibrated and yet again Shane got a shock.

Petrov: *No, you were very cute.*

Shane blushed. What the hell did that mean? Rozanov had never called him cute. He had no basis for comparison here. Was it an age thing? Like – Shane was young and silly?

Well. He guessed he could just ask.

Shane: *What does that mean?*

The bubbles bubbled for a while before the next message came through.

Petrov: *You were drunk and happy and pleased to see me.*

Petrov: *Ergo. Cute.*

Shane did *not* know what to do with this information. Mostly because he was worried how exactly ‘pleased to see me’ had manifested. Had he done anything inappropriate?

Petrov: *Don’t worry, I was drunk, too.*

Petrov: *And we just talked.*

Hurriedly, Shane put his phone away. He was too hungover to deal with this.

*

Lachy’s wedding was in California at some super fancy vineyard, which Shane found baffling as both Lachy and his now-wife were both from Toronto and had no sentimental attachment to California.

“Is it legal to get married in California if you’re both Canadian?” Peetie mused. He was holding a glass of champagne that, honestly, made his hand look preposterously large. Shane looked at his own hand and wondered if his looked the same. He always considered his hands to be proportional. Maybe they weren’t.

This was his second glass of champagne. He should maybe have some water.

“I think they do the paperwork part before,” Shane said. That was how Hayden and Jackie had done it.

“Then this is just a fancy party?”

“Pretty much.”

The Pikes arrived shortly after, joining Peetie and Shane where they were standing in the dappled shade of a tree. Shane had slathered on sunscreen but wasn’t going to risk mixing alcohol *and* sun.

It was the offseason. He planned to get a little buzzed, okay?

“Wow, Shane,” Jackie said, kissing both his cheeks after looking him up and down. “You look a-mazing.”

“Hey,” was Hayden’s mild protest. “You only said I looked good.”

“You do look good. Shane looks *amazing*.”

Both Hayden and Shane mouthed ‘wow’ to each other.

“You look beautiful,” Shane told her, obediently. And she did. Her hair had been curled and she was wearing a very pretty, long dress in a color Shane would probably find on his chart. Sort of a bright blue-green. She had green eyes so the whole thing was probably intentional.

Jackie really got into his personal space, then, touching his jacket, making him turn. “Hayds, I think you should go to a tailor. And a stylist.”

She was now really obviously staring at his ass. “I’m starting to feel vaguely objectified by your wife, Hay.”

“Vaguely?” Hayden questioned drily as he grabbed a couple of champagnes from a passing waiter. “Jacks, can you stop perving on my captain, please?”

“Sure. Hi, Peetie. You look very handsome, too.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Pike,” Peetie said bashfully, blushing to the hairline of his recently re-dyed peroxide blonde hair. His suit was a pale baby blue and he wore a pink shirt with it. He looked like some kind of ersatz ice cream treat.

Shane mouthed ‘handsome’ at Hayden and waggled his eyebrows.

*

Shane didn’t really drink wine, not more than a glass of red with his parents at dinner, and he was sick of champagne, so after the lavish sit-down dinner and the speeches and after the music started and people started to pile onto the dance floor, he escaped to the bar inside.

It was pleasantly cool and dark. He acknowledged the bride’s parents who were having a quiet confab in a corner with, he thought, one of her sister’s. Dina, maybe? Diana?

“Do you do Moscow Mules?” he asked after staring, uninspired, at the bottles at the back.

The bartender, a tanned, tall man with dark, tightly-curved brown hair and slumberous dark eyes, nodded. “I can do.”

“Great. One of those, please.”

Hopefully it wouldn’t give him flashbacks to the Great Stanley Cup Hangover. Apparently, he’d exclusively only drank Moscow Mules that night which he had mixed feelings about. But he really did like the taste.

Shane had given his phone up to Jackie, earlier – just in case – so he had no other distraction available to him than to watch the bartender prepare his drink. It appeared pretty simple. Ginger beer, vodka, fresh lime juice. Ice and mint. Maybe he could make this at home. It might be a good thing to have at the cottage, sitting out on the deck, watching the water.

Alone.

“So, you’re all hockey players?”

Shane glanced up to find himself being studied. “Some of us.”

“And hockey players... look like you.” He presented Shane with his drink.

“Um. Well, actually, there really aren’t that many— oh,” Shane said, realizing what was happening. The barman was not, in fact, asking about the statistics of mixed-race players in the MLH.

He was flirting.

With Shane.

The barman smirked as no doubt this realization passed transparently across Shane’s face. “Yeah, that’s what’s happening here.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Shane swallowed, a prickly heat climbing his face. He lowered his eyes, clocking the nametag. *Zeke*. “I am not... good at this.”

“Being flirted with?”

“Ah. Yeah. Also recognizing when it’s happening?”

“I’ll bet it happens to you a lot.”

Shane scrunched his shoulders up. “Yeah, I really wouldn’t notice.”

“I notice,” Zeke said, leaning on the bar, his soft brown eyes looking Shane up and down, slow blinking, “that you’re not running for the hills.”

No, he wasn’t.

*

Shane didn’t think about it.

He didn’t think about it when he rejoined his table. He didn’t think about it when he bobbed ungracefully on the dance floor. He didn’t think about it when he finished his Moscow Mule and he drank another glass of champagne.

He *did* think about it when he watched Franks strip naked and jump into the decorative fountain. “All the staff here signed an NDA, right?” he asked a laughing Lachy.

“Fuck, yeah.” Lachy threw an arm about Shane’s shoulders, joyful, relaxed, *in love*. “Half of Hannah’s family are lawyers.”

Good.

He met the barman – Zeke – around the back of the kitchens, just after 1am. The party was still in full swing but Shane had made his excuses, and no one had batted an eye. Shane always left early.

They walked the long way around to the guest bungalows, not touching, not talking and yet all the hairs on Shane’s body were standing upright, like he had touched an electrical current.

In his room, Zeke took off his waistcoat, looking around. The bungalow was open concept, with a little kitchenette, a seating area and a preposterously large bed over which a ceiling fan rotated slowly.

At a loss, Shane fell back on manners, looking at Zeke through lowered eyelashes. He was tall and strong-looking but leaner than... than Rozanov. He couldn’t really remember the guy in Mexico in all that great detail now but he thought he had been probably similar. “Do you want some water?”

“No. Do you?” was the return, obviously an assessment of Shane’s level of drunkenness.

Shane shook his head.

“Okay. Top or bottom?”

Oh my God. “Bottom,” said Shane, swallowing hard.

Zeke nodded, though Shane thought he saw a brief flicker of surprise cross his face. He reached out and pressed a hand against Shane’s chest and slowly backed him toward the bed. “I want to come all over your freckles.”

Oh my God. Shane flushed hot, all the way down. “Okay.”

*

Zeke left just after 4am but he didn’t sneak out. He kissed Shane’s cheek, told him he was gorgeous, and that he should hydrate.

Which Shane did, getting up when the door closed to drink half a bottle of water.

It had been good. It had been very good. Sure, there were moments where he thought *Rozanov would have done that differently* but it wasn’t catastrophically distracting. Zeke gave good head. He fucked him good and hard, on his back and on his front.

He had indeed pulled out and come over Shane’s freckles. He didn’t know what it was about his freckles that got people going. He’d have rather he didn’t have them, thought they made him look childish.

As he drank his water, Shane gave himself a bit of a mental assessment. He felt a bit weird, but not in the way he thought. A bit sad. Not in a *I-miss-Ilya* way, though he did, he always did, more in a *I-didn't-know-I-was-this-person* way. Sure, he'd fucked that guy in Mexico but that had been more experimental than anything else.

He'd fucked Zeke because he had wanted to get laid and he had no intention of ever seeing him again. It had been purposeful. He had flirted with Shane and Shane had been receptive and when he had made the proposition, Shane had immediately thought *this is what I want*. He had *needed* to be held down and fucked. To see if the lingering taste of Rozanov could be erased from his mouth.

Was he a guy who had one-night stands now? He'd never thought he would be. He'd seen his teammates and friends do it and always slightly judged them. Hell. He'd judged Rozanov. A lot. It had all seemed so tawdry. So meaningless.

Maybe it was just because he hadn't had anyone to have one-night stands with.

Or maybe it was because he'd had Rozanov, a permanent one-night-stand, and so he focused all his sexual urges on that handful of times a year.

Which wasn't probably all that natural for a guy in his twenties. He'd just thought he was a bit different, that he channeled all his energy into hockey.

Caught up in his thoughts, Shane thought he imagined the soft knock on the door. When it came again, a little more definite this time, he pulled on a pair of underpants and hurried to open it.

Zeke was there, sheepish, his waistcoat over his arm. "They've locked the day staff exit," he whispered. "I think I can go out the guest one, but you need a card?"

"Oh. Oh, sure. Let me just... get dressed."

He left the door open as he dressed in sweatpants and a T-shirt. He shoved his feet into his slides and grabbed his card.

"Sorry. I didn't think about it."

"No, no, I wouldn't have either." Shane closed the door softly behind him. He had the bungalow next to Hayden and Jackie. Their windows were dark so he was sure they were asleep. He didn't know what time it was.

They followed the path back to the main building. Even the little path lights were out now. The darkness settled around them, filled with the humming noises of the insect nightlife. In the distance, among the darker, rolling hills of the vineyard, Shane could see the occasional light, but otherwise the only illumination came from the stars.

It might, in other circumstances, with another man, have been romantic.

"Do you— how are you going to get home?" he thought to ask.

“My car’s in the staff overflow. Thankfully they don’t lock that.”

There wasn’t much to say after that. Or Shane couldn’t think of anything. The guest gate flickered green when Shane scanned his card, the door sliding open automatically on well-greased gears. Zeke gave him a kind of awkward smile-grimace. “Thanks. I had a good time.”

“Me too.”

“You’re hot as hell.”

“Oh. Thanks. You too.”

This made Zeke snicker and he walked off, waving a hand in the air. “Sleep well, Shane.”

Shane strolled back to the bungalows, hands in his pockets, unsteady thoughts still meandering around.

He turned left onto the short path that took him back toward his and the Pike’s bungalows and instinctively he checked theirs to see that the lights were still off, that he hadn’t managed to wake them, escorting his one-night-stand from the premises. That would be hard to explain. The bungalow was still dark but before relief could claim him, he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye, a curtain by the patio doors swaying slightly, as if it had been recently disturbed.

He stood there for a moment, waiting to see if Hayden or Jackie appeared. He held his breath.

Nothing happened.

Exhaling with relief, Shane hurried back to his room. Probably it was his imagination. Or the ceiling fan disturbing the curtains. He dismissed it in the way he often dismissed things he didn’t like to think about. Like that it had been odd (wrong) to have a man moving above him and no gold cross dancing in front of his mouth.

There was a breakfast scheduled at 10am. If he managed a few hours sleep, he might be able to get a workout in beforehand.

*

For once, Shane was glad he had a busy, distracting summer. As well as a few shoots, most of which he appeared to be nearly nude for, he’d taken his parents on a spur-of-the-moment trip to London for Wimbledon, accepting some last-minute tickets one of his sponsors had offered. He liked tennis. He liked the little cups of strawberries. He liked London, as well, or at least the parts of it he saw. No one knew anything about hockey in the UK, not like in Montreal, so he could walk anywhere and no one batted an eye.

They went to Paris for a long weekend after Wimbledon, again it was Shane’s treat, Shane’s idea, and that night after dinner Shane went for a walk and found himself – purposefully – in a gay bar. Within fifteen minutes, he was approached and about five minutes after that he was on his knees in a bathroom sucking off a stranger.

Apparently, his accent was charming.

The next night, Shane followed the same routine – a different bar this time, he wasn't an idiot – and this time went back to the guy's apartment, which was a tiny apartment up about nine flights of stairs. He did have a *whisper* of a concern at one point that he was being lured to his death but apparently this was just the way some old Parisian buildings were built.

It was hot. Actually hot, like the apartment had no central air and was right at the top of the building. When Gabriel – which might not have been his name – fucked Shane, sweat dribbled down from his face onto the back of Shane's neck. It was kind of distracting. In the cold shower afterwards, they blew each other, which was better, though the shower was tiny and it was awkward to move around.

The night before they flew home, Shane stayed in and watched a movie. One of the X-Squad ones, which were terrible but something for his brain to connect to instead of the racing thoughts that sometimes befell him when he wasn't busy. He really liked one of the lead actresses – Rose Landry. He'd seen quite a few of her movies and also caught a few of her interviews on YouTube. She was the type of girl he'd always imagined he would end up with, back when he imagined such things. Beautiful, accomplished in her own field. Eloquent and witty.

Ah, well. He was beginning to think that maybe he wouldn't end up with anyone, now. That fucking strangers in bathrooms and one-night-stands would be all he could manage for the next few years. Maybe after he retired he'd download one of those apps and start again, though the thought made him feel weird and heavy and tired and he found he didn't want to think about that at all.

*

Jane: ~~*I still miss you*~~

Jane: ~~*Do you miss me?*~~

Chapter End Notes

Absolutely astounding (and flattering) to see the debates in the comments and elsewhere. I love that you're enjoying reading as much as I have loved writing (and rewriting....).

All I can say is... some of you have been Very Right.



Current WIP update: 123k and it's mostly edits now.

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Still. The worry... it niggled. Maybe this was what happened, when you loved someone. Even if they were no longer part of your life, you still cared.

Chapter Notes

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

When he was back in Montreal for training camp, with a tan, two ad campaigns and three sexual escapades behind him, Shane accepted the usual post-summer invitation to dinner at the Pikes, absolutely unprepared for what awaited him.

“Shane, this is Casey. Casey, this is Shane, our very best friend,” Jackie said, waving between them, giving Shane one of her big, warm smiles. She really was a knock-out. She and Hayden made a really picture-perfect couple which gave Shane a little bittersweet tinge of regret.

“Shane, Casey is a pediatric nurse at MUHC. Shane plays hockey with Hayden. You might have heard of him.”

Casey, a tall, curly-haired blonde with delicate bone structure, laughed a husky laugh. “Maybe once or twice.”

Perplexed at this introduction of a stranger to what Shane had assumed was going to be a family night in, he nevertheless pulled himself together and summoned a smile. “Hi. Nice to meet you.”

The potted history of how Jackie knew Casey was regaled to him over dinner. Jackie had met Casey through a spin class, bonded immediately over their shared love of intense exercise, trashy murder mysteries, and, of course, hockey.

“I played in college,” Casey confided in Shane.

Seeing her glass was nearly empty, he reached for the wine to top it up, then did Jackie’s glass. This was definitely wine that Casey had brought with her because the Pikes, like Shane, were not particularly wine drinkers and this was some fancy imported red wine. “Oh yeah? What position?”

“Center.”

“The best one.” He sought for something erudite to say about women playing hockey that wasn’t, you know, *hockey is the best*. Something that showed his support for women fighting the battle to succeed in a sport that only ever invested in men. “I’ve, ah, been to see the Victoires play a few times. They’re a great team.”

“And I’ve seen the Metros play once or twice.” She glanced over at Jackie and they both laughed knowingly.

Oh God, Shane thought, feeling immensely stupid. This was a set-up.

He spun his head to glare at Hayden, who, shame-faced, looked down at his plate. “Hayd. You want to help me clear the table?” he asked through his teeth.

Hayden jumped up. “Sure, sure. You ladies take it easy.”

In the kitchen, Shane shoved the plates onto the island and rounded on his former best friend. “What the fuck, man?” he hissed furiously.

“I didn’t know she was coming! I found out about five minutes before you did.” With an anxious look towards the door that separated them from the hallway that separated them from the dining room, Hayden began to rinse the plates and stack the dishwasher. “She’s been on about this chick all summer. She’s *convinced* she’s perfect for you.”

“I *cannot* tell you how wrong she is.”

“Well, that’s part of the problem, isn’t it, man? It’s always been one excuse after another. *I don’t have time for that. Or I just don’t meet any women I like.*” Hayden waved his hands around. “When you could have told us the truth and that— that your interests don’t lie in that direction.”

“My interests?” Shane blustered, flatlining. “What do you mean?”

Hayden glared at him. “Shane. I fucking saw you.”

“Swear jar,” Shane said faintly. “What do you mean you saw me... oh. *Oh.*” He sucked in a breath. The bungalows. The curtain. His wedding hook-up.

“Yeah. ‘Oh’,” said Hayden bitterly, kicking the door to the dishwasher closed with his foot.

*

“So, there’s something I want to talk to you about.”

“Sure, Shane. Shoot.” Wiebe snorted as he went through his filing cabinet. He liked to have printed stuff even though the Metros were clamping down on printed material as part of the environmental initiatives. “Wow. Try saying that fast.”

Shane opened his mouth to do just that, then realized it was hypothetical. He closed Wiebe’s door and took a seat, waiting for Wiebe’s full attention. He wasn’t nervous, *per se*. He respected Wiebe, and part of that was for his professionalism. Whatever happened here, Shane knew he would be treated well.

It was just awkward. It would probably never *not* be awkward. How many times would he have to do this? Would there be a time in his life where he would just be *known* as gay? Or was he going to have to keep pointing this out to people?

Were there badges for this shit? *My name's Shane and I like dick.* No, probably not. And it wasn't like he could wear that at work.

Finding what he was looking for – looked like a contract of some kind – Wiebe dropped down into his chair, which creaked in a way that suggested it needed some WD-40.

He smiled at Shane blandly.

Shane didn't beat around the bush. "I, ah, plan to come out to the team at some point this season."

Wiebe's bland smile slipped a little into confusion. "Come out. Come— oh, *Shane*. Right."

"Yeah."

Politely, Shane gave Wiebe a moment to regroup, staring at the magnets that were stuck to the side of his filing cabinet. One of them was an unfamiliar flag in some pinks and purples. Shane didn't recognize it. He'd have to ask Mitty. Mitty was really good with flags.

To Wiebe's credit, it did not take long. "Thank you for letting me know, Shane." He folded his hands on his desk. "However you want to do this, I will support you. One hundred percent."

It was nearly word for word the role-play scenario that they had watched in one of those training videos. Shane smiled. "Thanks, Coach."

"Ah. On a personal level, I'm really glad you told me. I know that must have been hard."

"You were actually one of the least difficult people to tell, actually."

"Oh. Thank you." Wiebe looked genuinely pleased and seemed to want to sit with that for a little bit, a wistful little smile on his face that eventually faded as he turned back to business. "Do you know when you might tell the team?"

"I don't know. When it feels right, I guess." Shane rubbed his hands on his knees. "I was waiting for Drapeau to go but now I'm not sure about saying something in front of the rookies."

Seemed a bit much, to unearth his personal business in front of literal children. And yet Ivanov had been really chipper during training camp about Montreal's new 'reputation' and Johannes Virtanen, a sweet Finnish kid, didn't look like he'd hurt a fly.

"You could just tell the core team?"

"Maybe. I was— Hayden knows." Wiebe nodded, as if he had anticipated Shane's best friend knowing. Which made Shane feel just a little bad, given that Hayden had found out by accident. "I will tell J.J. privately, first. I'm not sure how Comeau is going to react. He's been better but still..." Shane raised his hand and waggled it in a 'so-so' gesture.

Wiebe exhaled deeply. "Yeah. I know what you mean."

“I guess... I guess we can only know when I tell them.”

“I hope they’ll surprise you.”

It was Shane’s turn to exhale. “Yeah. I hope so.”

*

He ends up doing it in the Retro, with Wiebe’s permission. He spent the whole of the week stressing about it, repeatedly going to Wiebe’s office to pace and suggest they push it, only to come back an hour or so later and put it back on the agenda.

Wiebe was *not* helpful. “Whatever you want to do, Shane. Tell them. Don’t tell them. I will support your choices.”

“Can’t you force it?” he ended up muttering, wanting to be told what to do.

“I can force you to get out of my office.”

Fuck. Okay.

So Friday, Shane sat slumped in his chair in their circle of trust, his leg bouncing. They had just done a round of ‘highlights’, so everyone else was in a good mood.

“Shane?” Wiebe prompted him, giving him an aching *gentle* look. “You have something to share with the group before we wrap up?”

This was it. This was the moment.

Slowly, Shane pushed himself upright. J.J. and Hayden tensed on either side of him. They knew this was coming and he could practically *feel* their nervousness on behalf of him.

“Yeah, Coach,” he said.

He had a speech prepared.

“I wanted to share something about myself that I’ve been... I guess I’ve been processing myself. For a while.” God. This was the most awkward he had ever felt. And he’d once put a suit on before hooking up with Rozanov for the first time. “I want to tell you,” did he? Why did he want to do this again? “Because it’s part of who I am and you are my team—” Fuck, he should just get on with it. “Anyway. I’m gay.”

He sat back, all the breath knocked from his body.

“For real?” Mitty asked, for some reason looking at Hayden and J.J. for confirmation.

Both of them nodded but it was Shane who answered, “Yeah, for real.”

The team was mostly silent. Not, Shane thought, desperate for once in his life to accurately parse human emotions, *entirely* in horror. More like they were all processing.

For the sake of his sanity, he didn't look at anyone too intently. He didn't want to remember any flickers of unpleasant thoughts crossing their faces and to have that burned on his retinas. He fixed his gaze on the end of his sneakers. Reebok was very supportive of gay athletes, his mom had told him, during one of their weekly pep talks. She was sure when the news got out that they wouldn't drop him.

She was less sure about Rolex. They had signed him for his values and for the youthful but wholesome energy he would bring their brand. 'Gay' might be a step too far.

It was Lachy who spoke first. "Erm. Thanks for telling us, I guess?"

Awkwardly, the rest of the guys made some noises that suggested they were also grateful for Shane's sharing of this so-very-private and so-out-of-character information, while they all still looked kind of shell-shocked.

"You didn't need to," Comeau said.

Everyone's head spun to look at him. Shane's breath caught and Wiebe sat upright, ready to angrily protest.

"No, I kind of meant... I guessed already?" Comeau explained quickly, firing back at the semi-glances he was getting.

"*You* did?" Shane asked, appalled. Comeau of all people?

"Yeah. Like." Comeau held up a finger triumphantly. "You've never dated a single woman the entire time we've known you." He held up a second finger. "You don't even check them out, even when they're total smoke shows." Another finger. "When girls hit on you when we're out you fucking exit the building like it's on fire." A fourth finger. "And there's that whole thing with Petrov—"

"Hey, hey, hey, to be clear, there's nothing going on there."

You were very cute.

"I don't know, dude, at the Cup celly there was *definitely* something going on," Mitty put in thoughtfully. He gave Comeau a vaguely admiring look, as if Comeau was suddenly fucking Poirot or something.

There were a lot of murmurs of agreement at that. An alarming number. Shane, who had not remotely been expecting to defend his relationship with Petrov in this conversation, sought for something to say.

In the meantime, Wiebe cleared his throat and tried to take back control of the situation. He pasted on a patient media smile. "Ah, guys, we are not here to unpack any speculation."

"But, *sincerely*, there is nothing going on," Shane put in, finally, kind of urgently. That was the sort of thing that needed to be shut *down*. This was a *workplace*. And Petrov would hate it.

“Hey. He’s a good-looking dude,” was Lachy’s very unexpected and matter-of-fact point of view.

What?

A few of the guys nodded. Johannes, one of the rookies, was very enthusiastic on this point but wisely said nothing.

“Also loaded, Hollander, you could do worse,” Comeau said, nodding along as if this was a perfectly fucking normal conversation.

“*Are* you dating anyone?” Peetie wanted to know, his tone bright and breezy.

“What the hell is happening?” Hayden asked Shane, *sotto voce*.

“My physio’s gay,” Michaels chipped in, with the same kind of *painfully* eager enthusiasm he’d used when Shane had suggested they work on drills one-on-one, “and he’s a really great guy. Single, too. But he’s like, *gay* gay, Shane. Are you into that?”

Panicked, Shane appealed to Wiebe. “I need this to end,” he told him. Bluntly.

Wiebe looked similarly affected. “All good, Hollander. Good session, team. We covered some big topics.” He clapped his hands with finality. “Let’s... skip the group hug for today, huh?”

“Why? Because Shane’s gay? That doesn’t seem right, Coach,” Peetie said, the disappointed chastisement clear in his voice.

Beside Shane, J.J. wheezed out a little laugh which he muffled when Shane shot him a death glare.

“Fuck, okay, group hug.”

*

Jane: ~~*I told the team. It was fucking weird*~~

Jane: ~~*I wish I could talk to you about it*~~

*

The next week, an invitation for a 1-2-1 with Petrov arrived in Shane’s inbox at precisely 9am, proposed for the following day.

“What the fuck,” he said. He showed it to Hayden. “Did you get one of these?”

“Nope,” said Hayden, squinting at the screen. “Also, he sent that himself.”

“Huh?” Shane looked.

“When Marlene schedules things, it says ‘sent on behalf of’. He arranged that meeting directly.”

That was surprisingly observant of Hayden. “Maybe he’s finally let her go,” Shane suggested, a note of professional hope in his voice.

“Before her retirement? Sure, and maybe she’ll burn the rink down with all of us inside.”

He checked with J.J. and Peetie and neither of them had 1-2-1s. It seemed Shane was, once again, special. He was so sick of being special.

He leaned into Wiebe’s office on the way home. “Did you tell Petrov about me?”

“Tell him what about you? That your backhand could do with some work?”

“Ha, fucking, ha, Coach.” His backhand was canon-esque. It was the best backhand in the league.

Wiebe grinned, obviously pleased with himself. “No, I did not *tell* Petrov about you. Who do you take me for?”

“I don’t know. I just thought it might have come up.”

“What, you think we have regular gossip sessions? Get out of here, Hollander, you’re not that interesting.” Wiebe jerked his head to the side, indicating the door and his desire for Shane to depart.

“Sorry, Coach.” Slightly abashed Shane ducked back out, and then ducked back again, unable to let it go. “You weren’t being serious about my backhand, were you?”

*

“You cut your hair,” was the first thing Shane said to Petrov which was nowhere on his planned list of appropriate openers. He supposed he had been surprised to see a demonstrable change, a sign that time had really passed since he’d last seen him at the Cup celebration.

And he preferred it longer.

Petrov’s eyes drifted over Shane. “And you’ve grown yours.”

Shane touched the ends, a little embarrassed that this personal detail had been noticed. No one else had said anything. “Just a little. I’m trying something new.”

“Suits you.”

At Petrov’s gesture, Shane dropped down in the chair opposite his desk and Petrov returned to his seat, fidgeting with his pants and then his shirt. He didn’t often see Petrov fidget.

“So how have you been, Shane?”

Shane immediately became very aware of his hands and how they were gripping the armrests of his chair. He moved them to his lap, first folding them, then placing them flat on either thigh. Only then was he able to speak, “Good, thanks. You?”

“Busy, very busy.” Petrov nodded. He picked up a pen – just a normal ballpoint pen – and then put it to one side. “But productive.”

Shane nodded, too. He had zero clue what Petrov did with his time, except have meetings and send emails and be on planes.

“How has the season been so far?”

This was familiar ground. Shane had de-briefed with Christine only yesterday and he had a spiel ready to go. “Good. Excellent, actually, for the most part. Team is cohesive. Our points are above where they were this time last year. Feel pretty positive.”

“That’s good to hear,” Petrov said, as they continued to talk to each other like they had never met or shared a single meal together. Or one had described the other as ‘cute’. “New defenseman working out?”

“Yeah, Jefferson. He is good, actually. Quiet.” That was probably in part because he was on a new team, a trade from the Pacific Division. In some senses, it was easier for the rookies to find their place – they were all new, new to the MLH, new to the team, and it was expected they might wobble a bit. If you were traded with a few years under your belt, it was different. You had to hit the ground running, show everyone you had what it took.

From Shane’s perspective, Jefferson played good hockey, didn’t look at Shane like he was a freak of nature for being gay, and that was all that mattered to Shane. Probably he should spend some more time with him, come to think of it. J.J. had taken him under his wing a bit, added him to his group chat with Leroy and the others, but Shane needed to do his job too, not spend his time nurturing the rookies.

“And how is Comeau faring without his partner in crime?”

Shane’s smile teased muscles in his face that he rarely used. He was *so pleased* with Comeau and it was that pleasure that broke him through the façade of politeness. “Aw, man, he’s great. Like. Totally transformed. A real example of the work we’re doing here, honestly.” Petrov’s eyes crinkled in response, the first genuine expression he’d shown since Shane had walked into his office. “He’s also happier. I think Drapeau was really dragging him down.” Which, yeah, Shane sometimes reflected on with a sense that this was something he should have noticed. But he reassured himself that this was a better late than never scenario. “Also, he and Elaine are dating again.”

“I know. I saw the paperwork.”

Shane tilted his head. “Paperwork?”

“Yes. You have to disclose personal relationships in the workplace with HR.”

This had obviously not been something Shane had ever worried about. It maybe rang a bell, like someone had mentioned it to him once.

“We are currently amending the language on that one, actually,” Petrov said cautiously, “as previously it was worded in a way that ignored the possibility of relationships between players.”

“Ah. Well. Guess that’s not so surprising.” Shane pulled a face as he imagined the absolute cluster-fuck of dating a teammate. What the hell happened if you had an argument? Broke up? The prospect of facing Rozanov on the ice in a couple of weeks was already keeping him up at nights. “Probably the most important scenario *to* declare a relationship.”

Petrov cleared his throat delicately. “Indeed.”

Obviously, there were *other* things that Shane could tell Petrov about the season. He had come out to the team. It had gone surprisingly well. There had been a couple of weird moments in the locker room, mostly awkwardness about the showers with a couple of the guys, which Shane solved by going last and stewing in his own filth for a few more minutes. Last week, Franks had made some joke about a bar of soap that went totally over Shane’s head and got him yelled at by Peetie and then they’d had a kind of naked wrestle about it in the shower which had been – in fact – really gay.

Franks, after, apologized and sheepishly asked if he could buy Shane a ginger ale which led to one of the most awkward evenings of Shane’s life as Peetie felt obliged to accompany them. Like he was somehow *Shane’s* mentor. To make matters worse, he then got to hear all about Peetie’s uncle’s long years of closeted gayness before being interrogated about aspects of the gay community for which Shane had no frame of reference.

No, he didn’t have a ‘type’ (he did, he really did).

No, he didn’t know what a bear was (well, in retrospect he could have worked that out).

No, he didn’t know where he was on the Kinsey scale (they did a quiz together, so that was good to know and was maybe something useful he could put on his future app profile).

Yes, he’d had sex with women (about as many men).

No, in retrospect, he hadn’t enjoyed it much at all (duh).

After, Franks had appeared genuinely enlightened and Peetie had patted Shane on the shoulder and suggested they should go to a couple of gay bars next time they were in New York. His uncle had held his fiftieth birthday at one last year and he’d had a whale of a time. Hooked up with a girl, in fact.

“There are straight girls there? In gay bars?” Franks had asked, enthused by this plan.

“Oh yeah, sometimes. It’s often a safe space.” He narrowed his eyes at Franks. “And should remain so.”

“Sure, man, sure. Just asking.”

Fuuuuuuck.

Shane came out of this reverie to find Petrov staring at him in a particularly penetrating way. Maybe expectantly. Perhaps he *did* want Shane to confirm that he had come out. He smiled, a little shy. “I guess you heard I’d come out to the team?”

“I didn’t, no. How did that go?”

“Seriously? No one mentioned this to you?”

“No.”

Shane just couldn’t believe it. Hockey was full of gossips. The idea that he had come out to his team in the Retro and *no one* had told *anyone* was a foreign concept to him. “It went well,” he said, realizing Petrov was still expecting an answer. “They almost immediately tried to set me up with any gay guy they knew.”

“Ha,” said Petrov, his eyes crinkling up again.

Did Petrov know what a bear was? Probably. Shane bet he knew where he was on the Kinsey scale too. Naturally, these were not questions he was ever going to get to ask him because this was a Professional Working Relationship.

“We should go out for dinner. To celebrate,” Petrov said next, casually. He was very studiously looking at his phone so he couldn’t see that Shane’s brain had imploded.

“We should?”

Why was his voice a whole octave higher?

“Yeah.” Petrov put his phone down. “Maybe with Alex.”

“Oh yeah! With Alex.” Shane managed, just, to push down the burble of no doubt high-pitched nervous (relieved?) laughter.

“I’ll speak to them and we’ll send you some dates.”

“Sure.” God, for a really wild moment there, he’d thought... no, Shane wasn’t going to even think about what he had thought. “Sounds great.”

*

Shane was dreading playing Boston again. Really, truly dreading it.

In the weeks up to it, as they watched tape, analyzing the latest Boston plays, he had developed a nervous habit of bouncing his foot that was not present when they watched any other team.

He wasn’t even sure he could say he was *watching*. Certainly, his much-famed analytical skills had left him. He was unable to look at the screen without being blinded by longing,

tracking every move Rozanov made on the ice.

Fuck. He'd really thought that his summer of – for him – sexual excess might have cured him of this blazing desire. But Rozanov still sat in his heart like a heavy weight.

“Rozanov is having a shocker of a season,” was Comeau’s almost mournful view on Saturday morning, three days before they played the Raiders as they reviewed their latest game against Tampa. Rozanov, they all agreed, was an asshole, but he was an asshole who could play Good Hockey and everyone respected that.

“The team is all over the place.” J.J. grunted, arms folded. “What the hell is happening in defense?”

“Marlow and Rozanov are *not* connecting. Did they fuck the same girl or something?”

“Language,” Wiebe said automatically, his eyes on the screen.

“Sorry,” Franks corrected himself eagerly, “did they all take the same girl out for a nice meal or something?”

“Jesus,” Wiebe muttered. “That’s not— oh never mind.”

Distantly, Shane could acknowledge all this as being true. The Raiders had lost all six of their last games. Obviously, brutal, shameful, etc. etc. But all he could really think about was the moment they would face off once more, only inches between them. Last time they’d played Shane had been angry. He’d played angry.

He needed that anger if he was going to survive this.

Because this was what he did now, after tape he tracked Wiebe down in his office.

So used to Shane being in his office, Wiebe barely looked up at him, tapping away on his phone with a flirty little smirk. Shane had spent enough time with his coach now to know that smirk was associated with his wife.

Without asking, he helped himself to an energy drink and a banana, half of which he ate before he announced, too loudly, too boldly, too everything-ly, “Rozanov and I were hooking up for a while.”

“What?” Wiebe said, in that amused way people said it when they were absolutely sure they had misheard you because it couldn’t *possibly* be what they thought they’d heard. He put down his phone to give Shane his full attention. “Say that again?”

“Rozanov and I. We were—” There was nothing for it. “—fucking pretty regularly.”

“You and Rozanov.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry, I think we need to take several steps back.” Wiebe placed his hands on the table, like he was about to start a séance or something. “You and Ilya Rozanov, center for the Boston Raiders, have been engaging in a... romantic—”

Shane shook his head urgently. “Not romantic.” He finished the banana and tossed the skin into the trash. Then, remembering that they had a pretty intensive recycling program now, fished it back out of the trash so he could put it in the special trash can in the player lounge for compostable waste.

“... in a casual... sexual.... relationship?” His voice climbed up with disbelief.

“It wasn’t really casual, either.”

“Understood.” Wiebe did not sound like he understood. At all. And you know what? Neither did Shane. “But you were—”

“Fucking, yeah.”

“For...”

“For a while. Like. A few years.”

“YEARS?” Wiebe yelled, he actually yelled. Wiebe did not, as a rule, yell.

His coach sat back in his creaky chair and took a deep breath, searching for calm. His eyes darted around the room in panic before settling back on Shane. “Okay. Okay. This is not a practical joke?”

Shane shook his head. “I wish.”

He snorted. “Yeah, I guess I can get that. I guess... that’s how you knew he was an ally.”

“Yeah. That’s how.”

“You know, there is no manual for this one, so I’m just going to have to... get through this with... *why* are you telling me this?”

Shane leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, the protein shake dangling from his fingers. “I think I am not okay. About the game.”

Wiebe paled. “Jesus.”

“Like I can’t—I can’t picture it. I can’t picture the plays. I can’t see past—” Shane licked his lips. “The first face off. I’m worried I’m gonna do something insane.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Punch him, probably. Or—” Shane whined just a little, on the tip of his tongue to say *cry hysterically*. He couldn’t, absolutely couldn’t say that. “Maybe puke?” Also equally possible.

His coach floundered, as well he might. His best player just unloading on him without warning. *Again*. “I just— when did— when did you, ah, break things off?”

“Valentine’s Day.”

“Valentine’s— shit we played them.” Wiebe’s eyes bulged as he put two and two together and made 81. “Emily came to— *that* Valentine’s game?”

“Yeah. He broke up with me. Was breaking up with me,” to be more precise.

Wiebe was appalled. “On *Valentine’s*?”

Shane threw up his hands, nearly lost the shake, tossed it onto the couch. “I know!”

“Fuck. So Rozanov is—”

“He’s not out.” Shane stood. He needed to *move*. Why was Wiebe’s office so small? There were meeting rooms bigger than this place. He paced between the leather couch and the chair. “He’s bi, so he still... likes girls. And I know this doesn’t need saying but I shouldn’t have told you, not without his permission. It’s *so* dangerous for him.”

“Shane, Shane, calm down. This is a safe space. I’ve signed NDAs up the wazoo. I am not going to out *anyone*.”

Shane realized he was breathing funny. *Way* funny. As in, sit down and breathe in a paper bag funny.

He sat back down and rested his head in his hands.

“What do you want to do here?” Wiebe asked as Shane tried to get himself under control.

“How serious is this? Do you want me to take you out for maintenance?”

“*No*. I want to play. I need to play.”

“I can alternate the lines so you and Rozanov don’t play each other, again.”

“Fuck,” said Shane, squeezing his eyes shut, a real swell of hockey-related misery pushing down on his chest. “This *is* ruining my career. I knew it would. I just thought it would be while it was still happening.”

“Shane.” Wiebe’s chair creaked. “Was it acrimonious?”

“I... ah.” He sighed, “No. Yes. A little I guess. At least, on my side. At least, I got pretty angry.” He was not going to tell his coach that Rozanov had broken his heart. “He was pretty straight about it. You know. Not a good idea. And so on,” he finished, vaguely. Christ. Would this ever stop hurting? He’d broken bones that hurt less.

“Have you spoken at all since?”

Shane shook his head.

“Maybe you should talk.”

He peeked through his fingers. “What?”

“You’re both professional hockey players. You will play each other at least three, four times a year. Maybe you should clear the air. At the very least establish some boundaries?” Wiebe was hopeful. Plaintive. “I’m assuming he’s not a total asshole if you’ve been... involved with him.”

Clear the air. What a concept.

He sat back up. Shane *hungered* to speak to Rozanov. It was an itch he could never scratch. All the fucking cliches. The thought that he could somehow couch this in *professionalism* made his mouth actually water.

“He’s... not, no. Not a total asshole. But he’s probably fine,” Shane said faintly caught up in the intoxicating idea of hearing Ilya’s voice. “Not like me.”

“I’m not so sure about that. Rozanov has been playing very badly. Do you think it’s a coincidence?”

“He dumped me. So, yeah. Besides, I think he’s got a girlfriend.” The sneer was reflexive and very much not professional.

Wiebe gave this some thought. “My suggestion is that you speak. Otherwise, we can switch things up so you don’t play him as much, but that is a temporary solution. A one-off. You two,” Wiebe heaved out a sigh, “have the most publicized rivalry in the MLH. It will get noticed if you are avoiding each other.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re right. Yeah. Speak to him. I can do that.”

“Never a dull minute with you, Hollander.”

“Sorry, Coach.”

*

Shane spent all day writing various messages to Rozanov.

Jane: ~~Hi, it's me. I was wondering if we could talk.~~

Jane: ~~Hi, it's me. I've gotten really in my head about the game and I think it would help if we could talk so it doesn't seem like a big deal?~~

Jane: ~~You broke up with me on Valentine's Day, you fucking asshole~~

Jane: ~~Hi Lily. I'm sure you're busy. Do you have a few minutes so we can talk about our conduct on the ice during our upcoming game?~~

Jane: ~~I miss you so much.~~

Jane: *Hi. Hope you haven't deleted my number! It's Jane?*

Jane: *Hey. I need to talk to you about the game. I think I might be losing my mind.*

Shane concluded that there was absolutely *no way* to write something that would come off as professional and chill, and also likely to get a positive answer back.

He was going to have to call him. Cold.

Shane didn't like calling people at the best of times. He preferred email, when it came down to it. A nice, brisk email, perfectly formatted and re-read a few times for grammar. If necessary, sent to his parents for a quick sanity check, depending on the level of seriousness. Then hit *Send*. And the person at the other end could read it at their leisure.

But he did not have Rozanov's email. And he sure as hell wasn't putting anything down in writing.

So, he waited until early evening, poured himself a ginger ale muddled with a lot of mint and lime, and hit *call* on Lily's contact details, braced over his kitchen counter and heart rate pounding like he'd just done an hour of bag skates.

The phone rang and rang and rang and just before Shane was about to give up – relief warring with disappointment – it connected. He held his breath.

"Ilya Rozanov's phone," an accented-English voice said, a little breathless.

A woman's voice.

"Hello?" she prompted, when Shane didn't say anything.

His brain did some easy, unbearable math. This was the girlfriend. The woman he had seen in the photos. She was answering Ilya's phone. Wherever they were, she felt comfortable enough to pick up his phone, a phone that said 'Jane calling' and answer it. Or maybe – even worse – Rozanov had told her to answer.

There was no way Shane *could* say anything. He actually, physically couldn't speak. Hand shaking, he pressed the red call-end button and slid down into a crouch on the floor, where he burst into shocked tears.

For the last time, he promised himself as he sobbed into his hands. This was the last fucking time he cried over Ilya Rozanov.

After, exhausted, Shane put his phone in a drawer, took a couple of prescription sleeping tablets and took himself off to bed.

*

Three days later, Wiebe put both his hands on Shane's padded shoulders in the tunnel before the game and met him eye to eye.

“You are going to get through this,” his coach told him, quietly. Or comparatively quietly because surrounding them was his team in various states of nervous preparation and just beyond that the low-level roar of the crowd. Boston-Montreal games were always sold out.

Shane nodded, though he thought his skin was going to vibrate from his body. He rubbed his lips together; they were smothered in a greasy ChapStick kindly donated by J.J. He had been picking at his lips, which were dry from all the deep breathing exercises he had been doing. “I am.”

“You are Shane fucking Hollander. Say it back to me.”

“I am Shane fucking Hollander.”

Wiebe’s eyes bored into him, uncomfortably. “More convincing.”

Shane summoned *something* from deep within. “I am Shane *fucking* Hollander.”

Wiebe leaned forward and knocked his head against Shane’s helmet and finally the eye contact ended. “You will get through this, Hollander, and be stronger for it. And after we win, we’ll go for a drink. I think you should tell me all about it.”

*

True to his word, after he’d done press, Wiebe had bundled Shane into one of the team cars but instead of going to a bar – which, if the objective was to have a quiet, private conversation, was an impossible feat in Montreal after a winning game – they went back to Wiebe’s.

They were welcomed by his wife just getting home from work, still in a smart dark pantsuit. Wiebe and she kissed in a perfunctory but affectionate manner. Having only seen Emily at social functions, this version of her with a slick-back bun and slightly worn makeup took Shane by surprise. She looked frighteningly competent.

“You know Emily, of course.”

Shane nodded and stuck out his hand. “Great to see you again, Mrs. Wiebe.”

Emily’s mouth twitched as she shook Shane’s hand. She had a very firm grip. “Shane. Please don’t call me that. I’m going to,” she looked to Wiebe and gestured up and down her body, “wash all this off. I would like a *very large* glass of wine.”

Wiebe grinned. “Gotcha.”

Like the Pikes, the kitchen of the Wiebes house was cluttered in the way that all family kitchens were cluttered, just like his parents’ kitchen had been as he had grown up. There were kids’ paintings stuck to the fridge. There was stuff *everywhere*. School books and tablets and toys on every available surface. This morning’s breakfast was still on the table and there was a cold French press in the middle of the kitchen island. It was the kind of clutter that would drive Shane insane but Wiebe ignored it and went straight to the wine fridge.

“What does Emily do?” he asked, studying one of the pieces of children’s art on the fridge. It looked like a family of stick figures on fire. Disturbing.

“She runs a management consultancy. They just acquired a new arm here in Montreal – bit of a hostile takeover – and is trying to get it off the ground.”

Shane was none the wiser. It sounded important. “Is that, ah, tough?”

“It’s a cesspool. She loves it.”

“Oh.”

Wiebe poured a large glass of red wine, arranged it – along with a small bowl of olives – in the middle of the island. He then grabbed a beer from the fridge and held up a Perrier to Shane. “This okay?”

Shane thought about it. “I’ll take a beer.”

Wiebe nodded, grabbed another beer, a large bag of Doritos from a cupboard and gestured for Shane to follow him.

“So where are the kids?” Shane asked as he was led out into a large backyard filled with children’s play equipment and – their destination – a sunken patio area with a firepit. He had no idea on the gender of the Wiebes’ children, or the ages, or, come to think of it, how many there were. But he knew there were some so it was a safe question.

“They are with Emily’s parents. One of the reasons we moved here was the proximity to her family; they’re in Ottawa.”

“Hey, I grew up there.” He liked when he had easy connections with people. It meant he could open a whole topic of conversation with Emily with whom, thus far, he had only exchanged banal pleasantries.

“I’m well aware. They’re both obsessed with you. Ottawa’s own Shane Hollander,” he repeated, as if quoting someone.

Wiebe dropped down onto one of the soft couches. He offered Shane a beer which was at least one of those light ones. “So. Tell me about you and Rozanov. I’m guessing not many people know about you two.”

Shane was feeling remarkably fine about this interrogation, given he’d been sobbing on his kitchen floor three nights ago. Maybe he had nothing left?

Or maybe – new thought – he was now so used to *telling* his secrets that he was getting inured to it. Used to be *keeping* secrets was all he did. Now he just blurted them out to everyone.

It was kind of freeing, actually. “Just you. I mean, assuming he’s not told someone.”

“Is that likely?”

“I don’t think so. His team would not be good about it, apparently.”

“Except maybe Connors. He was a green on the Excel table.”

“Yeah. Except maybe him. Though I always thought the guy thing was only half of the problem.”

“The other part being you’re rivals.”

“People would not be cool about that.” Shane took a sip of his beer and maybe it was psychosomatic, years of watching guys sip beers after a hard day, but he sighed with relief.

After all that build-up, the game had been fine. Well. Not *fine* fine. But manageable if he really, really just *crushed* all his feelings down. Rozanov had been professional, greeting him with a simple ‘Hollander’ which Shane had been able to return. He had looked like shit though. He had played worse. Halfway through the second period, Shane checked him against the boards, pretty lightly all things considered, and for a moment it had looked like he was going to slump to the ice.

“Something is really wrong with him,” Shane mused. He was worried.

“Yeah. I asked around. There are some problems with the room.”

“Oh?”

“Mmm, people are being cagey about it. They’re obviously trying to keep it under wraps.”

That tallied with a couple of questions Shane had got after the game. Pointed ones about Rozanov slipping in the scoring race neither of them had paid attention to for some months. That asshole from Sportsnet asked him about the tensions in Boston’s locker room affecting their game in that sneery way he had.

“You didn’t talk.”

Shane shook his head. “I tried calling. He didn’t answer,” he said shortly. And in the end Shane had wrung out all his emotions on the kitchen floor. Rozanov had moved on. Shane needed to work out how to do that as well.

Still. The worry... it niggled. Maybe this was what happened, when you loved someone. Even if they were no longer part of your life, you still cared.

*

It wasn’t too late by the time Shane got back to his apartment and he’d only had a couple of beers. He was maybe a little distracted, by the alcohol, the conversation, by the ideas Wiebe had put in his head, the concept that he’d been to his coach’s house and had a heart-to-heart and walked away feeling... feeling like he’d been honest.

Honesty was a concept Shane was only recently getting used to. It was novel. It was *good*.

He took off his shoes in this distracted state and only noticed as he was slotting them into the rack that there was a pair of sneakers in his hallway that did not belong to him.

Nikes. Limited editions.

He stood bolt upright, heart in his mouth.

“Hello?” Shane whispered, too afraid to raise his voice to actual speaking level.

Movement in the living area, the rustle of clothes. A figure appeared at the end of his hallway. Familiar. Achingly familiar. “You haven’t changed your code,” Ilya said quietly.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, I know, that was mean.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Right at the back of his fridge there was a can of Coke. Bought for Rozanov and purposefully pushed further and further back over the weeks so he didn't glimpse that iconic red color each time he opened the door. He moved everything aside so he could get it. Coke didn't go off, right?

Chapter Notes

I reckon this chapter is going to be polarising, which makes me nervous. Some of you are very bloodthirsty... but I love these boys equally and they have both hurt enough.

Anyway, sick of editing it now. Have at it!

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

A tug in his belly had Shane stumbling toward him, like there was a thread that was attached between them and Rozanov was pulling on it. Shane was a fish caught at the end of a line.

Shane stopped himself within touching distance and held his breath for a moment, his brain on a repeating, unhelpful loop. *He was here. He was here. Hewashere.*

“You look fucking awful,” he blurted out, which hopefully went some way to neutralize any desperately confused and eager vibe he was no doubt giving off.

Rozanov *did* look awful. His usual black outfit seemed to have drained the golden tones from his skin. His hair was limp. His eyes had dark circles underneath them.

He was still the most beautiful man Shane had ever seen. He drank him in hungrily from head to toe and then the worry from earlier returned, swamping absolutely every other rational thought, like the fact that this man had *broken his fucking heart* and was now *in his house uninvited*. “Are you... hurt? Sick?”

Rozanov's hand twitched to his side protectively, but he shook his head, eyes slanting away. “No. Is fine.”

Well. That was a lie, wasn't it? Even if Ilya hadn't very obviously indicated he was hurt, Shane would have been able to tell from the way he was standing alone. There was a tenseness to his body that anyone who played a physical contact sport could recognize.

Shane reached for that same side, gently pinching the material of his T-shirt and lifting it. Rozanov let him, tracking his movements like a lazy, blue-eyed predator studying new prey.

Shane sucked in a breath at what he saw. The bruise was massive, climbing halfway up his torso and around, and based on the rainbow of colors, several days old. “What is this? Did you hurt your ribs?”

Maybe if Shane remembered any of the tape he’d watched, he’d have recalled Rozanov being checked badly.

Helpless, Shane laid his hand over it, feeling the intoxicating heat of Rozanov’s body. His heart was pounding. His knees trembled with the urge to just... drop. It both was and wasn’t a sexual urge. He kind of wanted to bury his head between Ilya’s thighs. “Anything broken? Shit. I checked you pretty hard.”

“Shane. Do not be kind to me,” Rozanov whispered despondently.

Insane as this was, Shane now wanted to do nothing *more* than be kind. This was about more than a hockey injury. Rozanov was *wounded*. And it wasn’t just the possible hematoma. Jesus Christ, should he have been playing? “What’s wrong? Is it your dad? Or— has something happened with the team?”

Pain fluttered across Ilya’s face. “Shane. Please.”

It was something awful. Shane knew it.

He couldn’t bear it.

A wave of nervous energy had him stepping back, that thread tugging unhappily. He rubbed at his chest. “Have you eaten?”

Shane remembered the time he had come here, and he had basically starved Ilya. He’d made sure to have a few more things on hand now for unexpected guests, guests who might not appreciate his diet. Frozen pizzas. Pop-Tarts, which he didn’t think ever expired. Oh, and of course he had that freezer drawer of Snickers.

Rozanov’s hand twitched again, this time toward Shane. He pulled it back and pushed it into his pocket, frowning hard. “You don’t have to feed me. It’s okay.”

“That’s not the same thing. You should eat.” Fueled by action now, by something he could *do* that required no brain power or emotions, Shane spun toward the freezer, took a pizza out and turned the oven on. One of his meal preps this week was a kale-based salad. That would work as a side. He tossed it on the counter and found the hot sauce. He’d had to buy a new bottle. “Ah. What are you—” He cleared his throat. “What are you doing here?”

“You called me.”

“Yes. I did. I did do that.” *Three days ago*. “And your— a woman answered.” That was right. That was what had happened. Rozanov was here now – in his *apartment* – but there was a woman answering his phone.

Why was it so hard to focus?

Right at the back of his fridge there was a can of Coke. Bought for Rozanov and purposefully pushed further and further back over the weeks so he didn't glimpse that iconic red color each time he opened the door. He moved everything aside so he could get it. Coke didn't go off, right?

"Sveta. She did not tell me until after the game."

Sveta. *Svetlana*. The girl Rozanov spent his summers with. The one he casually fucked, on and off. It made sense. "That was her?"

"*Da*."

"Well. I'm sure it was weird for her, another supposed girl calling her boyfriend." God. He was so proud of himself for getting that out there. *Her* boyfriend. Not Shane's, never Shane's. *Hers*.

"That's not— Shane, she is not my girlfriend," Rozanov said carefully, watching Shane flit around his kitchen. "She didn't tell me because she was worried it would confuse me."

Shane clutched the Coke close to his chest, a lifeline, briefly tempted to press the icy-cold can against his neck where his pulse was beating wildly. "She's not your girlfriend."

"No. Maybe a little, when we were teenagers. And maybe we used to fuck, sometimes. But not for a while." Ilya eased himself down onto the kitchen stool, wincing a little. "She respects herself more than that, I think."

That was a lot of information for Shane to work through. But it wasn't the most important information. "Wait, why would it confuse you?" He placed the Coke in front of Rozanov and wiped the condensation on his hand on his pants.

Rozanov was shifty-eyed. Apologetic, somehow. "She knows Jane is a man. That we were involved and now we are not."

"Right." Present tense. "Sure."

"And she maybe also worked out that Jane is another player. She's smart. She... knows me." Rozanov blew over this detail quickly, saying, "She is outside, actually. She drove me here. I should tell her you haven't thrown me out, yet." With another wince, Rozanov leaned forward to get his phone out of his pocket.

"Svetlana's outside?" Shane hurried to the windows to look down onto the street. There were too many cars and the apartment was too high up for him to see any details. Unless it was that bright orange sports car. Fucking subtle.

"She came with me to Montreal. We are driving back tomorrow afternoon."

This was odd. The whole thing was odd – why wouldn't Ilya be traveling with his team? *Why was he here?* "Why?"

Having finished with his message, Rozanov put his phone face down on the table. He rubbed his face. “You are full of very boring questions tonight, Hollander.” It was a half-hearted chirp at best.

“I’m just— you’re *here*.” He couldn’t believe it. It was like he was having an out of body experience. Ilya Rozanov. Sitting at his kitchen island. After *months* of wishing for that very same thing. So he could—

Well. Either kiss him or punch him in the face.

Shane drifted back, anchoring himself on the other side of the island so he didn’t do either of those things or anything else stupid like, you know, lift up Rozanov’s T-shirt and put his hands on him like he had permission to do that. “I don’t know why you’re *here*, Rozanov.”

“Ilya,” he corrected, then winced. “And you *called* me,” he said again, stubbornly. He shrugged, so casual, and pried open the can of Coke, the snap of the tab unfathomably loud. “You wanted to talk. So I came.”

It was an aggressively big leap, even Shane – desperate, hopeful Shane – could see that. “Sure. When I want to talk to someone, I, too, break into their house.”

Ilya cleared his throat. “I knocked, first. But you were out.” He turned the Coke around, watching it carefully. “Maybe with the team?”

Shane nodded, not prepared to admit he had been unloading on his coach about their relationship. “So you wanted to talk, too? That’s why you’re here?”

Rozanov’s eyes grew sleepily soft. He nodded. “Yes. That.”

Okay. That was... okay. Something. The little light went out on the oven, and Shane shoved the pizza in, sliding a baking tray underneath it to catch any drips. He stared into the oven cavity, the hot air bathing his face. Talk. That was what they had to do. Set boundaries. Clear the air. He breathed in and out. It would have been easier, over the phone. He might not have been so distracted by the sheer physicality of Rozanov. The scope of his own want.

Boundaries. Clear the air. He closed the oven. *Boundaries. Clear the air.*

What the hell had he been going to say? Had he had a plan? He couldn’t remember. Everything had been wiped out by *Svetlana* answering his phone.

Behind him, Rozanov announced, “I came out to my team. That I like boys— I mean, men. As well as girls.”

“Oh fuck.” Shocked, Shane spun around, caught something wobbly and uncertain on Ilya’s face before he smoothed it over.

“It did not go so well.” He accompanied this statement with a crooked, wry smile. Shane guessed he was trying for blithe. Uncaring.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean—” Ilya pulled a face and took an entirely unnecessary large slurp of Coke. “They were dicks. Are dicks. Is fine.”

He was lying again. It was blatant and infuriating and *just like him*. Shane leaned against the kitchen island, his knees suddenly wobbly. “It doesn’t *sound* fine. Why did you do it?”

The *you fucking idiot* was implied here. Clearly.

Rozanov shrugged. “I don’t know. I just needed to say it.”

“You needed to say it,” Shane repeated because he didn’t really understand the words. They reverberated around his skull and each time they repeated, they were accompanied by an increasing surge of—of fury.

Real, bone-deep fury.

“But— but *Russia*?” Shane found himself blurting out. “What about fucking *Russia*?”

Fucking *Russia*. The reason for their break-up. The reason for Valentine’s Day and sleepless nights and crying like a fucking loser on this very kitchen floor.

And, what, Rozanov just decided to – on a whim – tell his team he liked to fuck men, too? Like it didn’t matter? That telling his team was *more important* suddenly?

Ilya winced and looked away, toward the windows.

“Hey!” Absolutely not. They were *having a conversation*. They were *clearing the air*.

Shane rounded the island, slightly too fast in slippery socks. His fingers found Ilya’s chin and turned him to face Shane, really intending to shout at him some more. To really get in his face about it because, what the fuck. What the actual fuck.

But instead of anger, or Slavic stubbornness, or any of the other more usual Rozanov emotions, tears tumbled from Ilya’s blue eyes.

“Oh. Hey, hey,” Shane said, the anger transforming in an instant. A hot-air bubble, burst open, all the fiery heat turning to warmth. His arms went around Ilya before he really thought it through – there went those boundaries again! – but it was okay because Ilya folded into him like his spine wasn’t really holding him up. Like he needed to be held.

“I’m sorry.” Ilya’s hands came around Shane’s waist, pulling him tight, his face pressed into Shane’s neck. “I’m sorry,” he repeated and it was *devastating*.

“It’s okay. It’s okay.” Shane buried his nose in Ilya’s hair. God, he smelled so good. *Not the time, Shane*. “You told me they were assholes. That they wouldn’t accept you. That you *couldn’t*.”

“Well, I was right,” Ilya said, a shaky, wet laugh following this. “Marly isn’t speaking to me and Connors can’t do *his* job as well as his own. My defensemen won’t do their fucking jobs

at all so I'm being battered in every game. I'm probably going to have to marry Sveta for a fucking Green Card—"

"Hey, *no*."

Absolutely not.

"I had to do it, Shane." Ilya pulled his head back. His eyelashes were clumped together with tears, which he wiped at with his hands. "I had to do it. If the team knew, it would mean that I could— that maybe we could— that maybe it might be possible. For us."

Shane gawped at him.

This was an *insane* decision for Ilya to have made without talking to Shane first. Or talking to Shane at all *for months*. Putting aside the way in which Rozanov had delivered his reservations about publicly coming out – in that he swore he couldn't and he used it as a reason for them to fucking break up – he did have legitimate reasons to be concerned. Namely Russia. And his dad who was apparently murder-inclined.

There was absolutely no chance of Shane articulating that now, though. Not with a wet pair of blue eyes peering at him beseechingly.

"For us," he repeated, his heart fluttering.

Ilya's eyes darted all over Shane's face and shyly away. "I mean— maybe. If you want," he swallowed, so loudly, "Maybe you have moved on. Is fine also."

If he wanted. As if this was, somehow, Shane's choice now.

Gently, Shane touched trembling fingers to Ilya's face, traced a tear-track. "No," he said. "I haven't moved on."

I could never.

Ilya exhaled, and with it seemed to release some of the tension he was holding. He closed his eyes and pressed his cheek into Shane's hand.

The oven beeped, startling them both.

"Okay," said Shane, dropping his hand. This had been a lot, and he didn't think he could take *more* on board. He was at capacity. "We are going to eat something, then I'm going to put arnica on your bruise." He thoughtfully studied the dark purple bags under Ilya's eyes. "And then we're going to sleep. Okay? I think we both need to sleep. It's been a long day."

Ilya leaned toward him again, once more folding like he was structurally unsound. He exhaled into Shane's neck. "Okie."

So they went to bed. It was wholly functional. Shane gave Ilya a T-shirt to wear and a toothbrush. He brought out some of the weirdly-shaped pillows he used when he was injured and they worked out a position Ilya could sleep in that didn't hurt.

Ilya was, the entire time, docile and utterly unlike himself, watching Shane through his eyelashes as if expecting a sudden, violent movement at any moment. Which was kind of freaky but Shane was too focused on *Action* and *Solutions*, now, to worry about things like that.

While Ilya was asleep in his bed, one hand reaching over the pillows between them to hold onto the hem of Shane's T-shirt, Shane sent a succession of messages.

The first one was to Wiebe. *Can't come to practice tomorrow. Family emergency. Nothing serious.* He didn't even feel guilty about this. *It was a family emergency.*

The second one was to his mom. *Can you investigate Canadian immigration law for me. Specifically, from Russia. Would be an MLH player. Possibly persecuted.*

There were two Russians on the Metros roster. It could plausibly be about them.

The third one was to his agent. *Are you in a position to take on additional representation? Another MLH player from a rival team. International, currently US-based. Maybe need permanent residency support.*

The last one was to Petrov and was a touch riskier, but Shane didn't care. *Do you think you could buy the Boston Raiders?*

He put his phone away and turned on his side so he could watch Ilya as he fell asleep.

*

It was remarkable what a solid ten hours of rest did for a person. And also a shower. Ilya looked significantly better as he sat at Shane's kitchen island, wearing Shane's clothes, eating a mountain of scrambled eggs and bacon on sourdough that Shane had made him, after Shane had scheduled an early-morning DoorDash. He'd even bought real butter, the good stuff with the salt crystals.

He'd also ordered Ilya an iced latte with extra vanilla syrup, which he'd kept in the freezer until he woke up and Ilya's smile when he received it made the morning's sun look half-assed in comparison.

Deciding he deserved it, Shane dragged his own stool as close to Ilya's as possible and drank his protein shake, going through his messages.

Wiebe had given him a thumbs up and a 'Hope everything goes okay, let me know if you're good for tomorrow's game'. One of the most useful things about the improvement in Shane's team was that he didn't feel catastrophically guilty for missing games. He was still the best player on the team, but it wouldn't collapse without him. It no longer felt like life or death if

Shane took the day off because he was puking his guts out and no one treated him like a traitor for taking time for himself.

Obviously, he still felt a little guilty. But that was genetic.

His mom had sent him back a question mark, followed by a 'Emailed you some information'. Shane skimmed this, one hand on Ilya's thigh. Marriage *was* an option, but Ilya would need to be a Canadian resident which might be logistically challenging if he still worked for a US team. Asylum was also an option. None of these things meant that Ilya would be able to go home and bury his father.

Which took him to Farah's response. *I'm certainly open to new clients, Shane, if you are comfortable with me taking on an additional player from a rival franchise.*

And finally he read Petrov's. *My plans for world domination don't quite stretch to that. Why?*

Well. It had been a faint hope.

"So many messages," Ilya murmured, sucking noisily on the straw of his drink and watching Shane through his eyelashes. It was a decidedly livelier expression than the reticent one he had worn the night before. Possibly on the edge of flirtatious.

No, Shane.

"You have a No-Trade clause, right?" And Ilya had signed a six-year contract after his ELC.

"Yup."

"Okay. And your agent is that Russian guy who reps all you guys."

Ilya snorted. "Not all Russians, Shane."

"But like, most of them."

"A handful," he said, pedantically, as if the top players in the league weren't *all* basically represented by the same agencies. Except for Shane. "And he has a sports agency, so many agents. Not just him."

"Yeah, but everyone dances to his tune." And from what Shane remembered, he was old school. The little Ilya had ever mentioned of him had confirmed that. "I think you need to get new representation. My agent will take you. She's great."

"And you know this how?"

"I asked her. Last night. I think we need someone to be briefed on your circumstances. A professional opinion. She can maybe start talking to immigration lawyers. You don't *have* to get married to get a Green Card. You're a professional, high performing athlete, you should be able to apply for some special thing—" Shane started to scroll to his Google search but was distracted by the way Ilya was fidgeting. "What is it?"

Ilya behaved in a way that suggested his head had suddenly become very heavy, dropping down on Shane's shoulder. He groaned. "Do we have to talk about this now, Hollander?"

Shane was quite keen to nix the marriage-to-Svetlana thing, actually, but he guessed he could table it for other priorities. "What would you rather talk about?"

"Us, maybe."

"Oh." His heart skipped a beat. He gave in and stuck his nose in Ilya's hair, inhaled deeply. His hair, back to its bouncy curls, smelled like Shane's seaweed shampoo and his shower gel. "Is there an 'us' now?"

"I think, probably. Yes. At least, I would like there to be." If Shane had thought Ilya was speaking quietly before it was nothing to how small his voice was when he issued this tentative statement.

"You didn't seem too sure about that before."

"I was maybe... not right before. Maybe panicking." Ilya rubbed his cheek against Shane's shoulder. "I'm sorry. I have missed you. So much."

It was odd to think of Ilya panicking. A puzzle piece that didn't fit in the overall picture Shane had of him – suave, aggressively confident, boisterous. He supposed that was ridiculous. Everyone panicked. Everyone got sad. Everyone had bad days.

But.

"You really hurt me," Shane whispered, his voice betraying him by cracking in the middle. It was hard to say, to admit to the person who had *done* the hurting, but he *had* to say it because it was honest. Because he'd had no idea someone could be capable of hurting him like that and Rozanov needed to know that. He needed to take responsibility for it.

Ilya's arms came up around him. "I know, Shane. I am sorry. I thought I was doing the right thing for us."

Shane's bottom lip trembled. He firmed it with the kind of willpower that had got him two Stanley Cups. And would get him another. "Well, it felt shitty."

Ilya nodded. "It felt very shitty."

They held each other for a long minute, breathing each other in and if a tear or two were shed, neither of them had to admit it as their faces were hidden. It was remarkably regulating, feeling Ilya's chest rise and fall, being contained in his arms. The warmth of him. God. He had missed being held like this. Ilya was the only person who could do this right.

Given Shane had spent the last few months in actual, physical torment from the emotional incapacitation that was being severed from Ilya *by* Ilya – he was surprised how quickly he was adjusting to the idea of Ilya being back in his life. That this had been a mistake. That Ilya had recognized it. That he was *apologizing*.

The relief of it was incalculable. And, also, kind of insane. He could picture himself just glossing over this period of their lives, never talking about it again because it was easier than the alternative. Because it felt *right*, being together, even if neither of them had acknowledged it, so obviously not being together was wrong. Ridiculous. An aberration.

Fuck. Shane was going to have to be an adult about this. He was going to have to express his *needs*. For the good of them both.

“I think maybe it would be best if we talked. And... took things slow,” he said to Ilya’s neck which he absolutely wasn’t having thoughts about licking. “Not— just jump back in.”

Ughhhhh. He hated himself a little bit.

Shane tried to be as articulate as possible, among the unhelpful licking thoughts. “We didn’t really know what we were doing before. It was one thing and it sort of changed and we didn’t really recognize it. Yes?”

He waited for Ilya to nod. Which he did.

“Maybe this time we should talk about what we want from each other?”

Ilya adjusted his hold on Shane a bit more, a little tighter. “I want you. Whatever I can have.”

Shane exhaled, controlling the obvious smooshy feeling that threatened to overwhelm him. Yes, on the face of it, that statement was *very romantic*. Sort of the kind of thing he’d dreamed about. But if you scratched the surface... “See, that’s— that’s kind of what I mean.”

He needed to have this conversation with Ilya’s face, so he pushed at Ilya to sit up. Shane couldn’t quite look Ilya in the eye – that was definitely too hard, too vulnerable – but he could look in his general direction, at the mole on his cheek. One of his favorites. He’d missed that mole. “What does wanting me mean?”

“Um. I should think that is obvious, Hollander,” Ilya said, giving Shane the kind of one-up, one-down look that was usually a prelude to one of them dropping to their knees. It would maybe have been more effective if it had been more of a leer and less of a *genuinely* earnest expression.

Still. It was pretty effective anyway. Shane flushed and willed his dick to ignore this. “Yes, but is that it? We see each other four times a year to fuck?”

“You are so *boring*, Shane,” Ilya groaned, doing that floppy thing again, this time onto the island.

Shane shoved him. “Hey, you came here! *You* wanted to talk about ‘us’.”

“Yes, but it doesn’t need to be so serious.”

“Because it *is* serious, you asshole,” he said, his voice climbing. “You *broke up with me* on fucking *Valentine’s Day*, fucking *Valentine’s Day*, you asshole, do you know what that did to me?”

Ilya groaned. “I fucking know, Hollander, *I was there*, okay? I tried— I’m sorry. I’m fucking sorry. I have— regretted it every single day.”

This apology slid off Shane, like water off a duck’s back, too het up to absorb it. “I didn’t even know we were together!”

“That’s because you are very stupid,” Rozanov said quickly.

“Fuck you.” Shane shoved him again and jumped off the stool, too infuriated by Ilya’s blatant emotional avoidance to be close with him now. “It’s not like we ever had a conversation about it,” he muttered furiously. Which was not entirely Rozanov’s fault but was definitely *half* his fault.

He began to tidy up, furious, only Rozanov snatched back his plate when Shane reached for it. “I can do this, Hollander,” he insisted, getting up and defensively gathering the silverware.

“You’re a guest.”

“No, I’m your fucking *boyfriend*.”

Shane gasped with outrage. “That is not how this works. You don’t just get to waltz back in here, all sad and sorry after *months*, and just make us boyfriends.”

Ilya gestured around the kitchen with his dirty plate, his eyes bulging. “You don’t want to be boyfriends?”

“Obviously I do!”

“Then why are you shouting?”

“Because of the fucking principle of the thing, Rozanov! Fuck!”

*

Shane took a twenty-minute break after that, just a few minutes of deep breathing exercises in his room with the door closed to get his head straight. And, yes, some of that was to get his anger under control – the intense need to scream *Valentine’s Day* over and over again – but also to try and curb the intense feeling of jubilation.

Boyfriends.

What the fuck.

He splashed water on his face in his en-suite and leaned on the sink to meet his eyes. “You are Shane *fucking* Hollander,” he told his reflection. He was going to maintain control of this situation.

When he returned, Rozanov looked up from the couch anxiously. His phone was in his hands, and he was clearly mid-message.

“Svetlana?” Shane asked, digging his hands into his pockets and trying to convince his spine to unbend just enough to make him look like a man who knew what chill was.

Not a girlfriend. Not. A. Girlfriend.

Rozanov nodded tentatively, looking Shane up and down with obvious concern. “She wanted proof of life.”

Shane dropped down next to him, close enough that their thighs nearly touched but not, you know, actually sitting in his lap. *Progress.* “What did you tell her?”

The corner of Ilya’s mouth lifted. “That I made you so crazy you had a panic attack, but you have not murdered me yet.”

Look, Shane didn’t know Svetlana, but he wasn’t thrilled that *this* was the kind of detail Rozanov was sharing about him. It made him sound kind of lame. He made an annoyed noise. “It wasn’t a panic attack.”

Rozanov pulled a face and made a ‘so-so’ gesture with his hand. “But I did make you crazy, yes?”

Shane felt the corner of his mouth lift, reluctantly. “Yes. That part is true.”

“Mmm. She sympathizes. I have been making her crazy, too. I’m sorry.”

They sat for a moment in a contemplative silence. Every so often, one of them would nudge the other’s knee, a little back and forth that grew in intensity until they were just pressed together.

Ilya was the first to break, his eyes downcast. “I was not honest, before. I did not know, what we were to each other. Or I knew but I— maybe pretended it was not what it was?” He glanced at Shane, nervously looking for agreement.

Grimly, Shane nodded. “Same.”

“But— it *was* true. What I said. You are safe, here. I was, am not,” Ilya amended, slowly. His hand, resting on his thigh, turned over, his fingers slightly open, loose. “*You* should not have to hide because I am... complicated.”

Slowly, Shane edged his own hand over to his, until they were palm to palm. Their fingers interlinked. Fuck. The feeling of someone’s palm shouldn’t be so special. “I don’t want you to hide, either. We can find a way to make you safe. And still be able to... go home if you need to.”

Ilya looked doubtful but said, “I hope so.” Smiling grimly, he squeezed Shane’s hand and leaned over until their heads touched. “I did not plan to tell them, Shane, not the way it happened. I just— broke.”

This did not sound good. Shane manfully held back the urge to climb into Ilya’s lap.
Boundaries.

“That doesn’t sound good,” Shane whispered. “How— how did it happen?”

He felt Ilya’s nose touch his hair. “You are making noise, Shane. You and your little rainbow brigade. It is... gossip, in locker rooms. In mine. In others. At first, I ignored it, thinking it would be old news eventually. But it did not die. Then I told them to shut their mouths. To worry about our own business. We have been playing like dogshit. We have our own problems. But they got louder. It made me so angry. Your name on their lips. Dragging what you are doing, who you are, through mud. I was ashamed, *dorogoy*. And angry. I had to say something. I will never forget the look on their faces.”

Helpless, Shane leaned a little more into Rozanov. Maybe rested his head on his shoulder. Just a bit. “I’m so sorry, Ilya,” he whispered, his heart breaking for him. “I’m so sorry you felt you had to speak up. I... did not want that for you. Not if you weren’t ready.”

“Is okay, Shane. Maybe it had to happen. It’s made me... rethink things.”

Shane swallowed. “Have you spoken to someone? LeClair?”

“Yes. He is pissed at me. But he thinks it will go away if I don’t talk about it and just, you know, shout at them like usual.”

Shane reached around Ilya, laid his free hand on the bruise he knew was under his t-shirt. “Is *anyone* on your side?”

“Connors has been good. One of the assistant coaches. The rookies.”

That was something. Ilya was not alone. And he had Svetlana, of course.

“Shane?”

“Yeah?”

“I know we need to talk more.”

“We do,” Shane said firmly, so impressed with himself – with both of them – and faintly disappointed that he had no one to tell, no one to award him a gold star for excellent progress in Relationship Management. Maybe Wiebe could... no, weird, very weird, thought.

Ilya nuzzled Shane’s head and then gave him a very definitive kiss just above his ear. “Maybe we could talk more *after*, though?”

Desire, banked low, suppressed, sparked. “Oh? After what?”

“I see, you are a tease now.” Ilya nuzzled his way down to Shane’s sensitive neck, sending shivers down his spine, right to his dick. “Who have you been practicing this on?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” he said, in an offhand way, tilting his head to give Ilya better access. He’d lasted twelve hours. That was long enough, right? Longer than they’d ever lasted before.

“I would not like to know, actually,” Ilya said, very seriously, reaching for the hem of Shane’s T-shirt to pull it up.

“Yeah, ditto,” agreed Shane enthusiastically, lifting his arms to help. And then he *did* climb onto Ilya’s lap.

*

In the last few years, Shane thought they’d covered most of the types of sex two bodies could have. Hand jobs, blow jobs, penetration. They’d fucked on beds, sofas, on floors, tables, against walls. Once on the hood of one of Ilya’s cars which Shane had found vaguely nerve-wracking, kept worrying that their fucking would set off the car alarm or they’d damage something and then how would Ilya explain it to his insurance company?

They had never fucked like this.

To start with, they kissed for maybe an hour. It probably wasn’t really an hour, Shane wasn’t exactly looking at the time. Instead, he was trying to remap Ilya Rozanov’s mouth. It was *vital* that he fully plumb the depths under his tongue, along his teeth, count the ridges of his molars, lick the insides of his cheeks. They crawled all over each other, occasionally pausing to adjust for Ilya’s ribs, and then started again.

Chin wet with spit, Shane eventually dragged his numb mouth down Ilya’s neck, licked the tendons and nibbled his collarbone. He squeezed his pecs, the soft-but-firm give. He wanted to bite. He wanted to suck. He wanted to *mark Ilya up*. “When do you next have practice?”

“Tomorrow.” Ilya’s voice hitched as Shane sucked lightly, only enough to create a reddened mark on his left pec, no lasting damage, before he toyed with a nipple between his teeth. “Oh fuck, Shane.”

He kissed down, lightly tracing the bruise with his lips before rubbing his cheek against the yellow and green edges. *My baby*, Shane thought fuzzily, never to be said out loud. They had fucked plenty of times injured. But this injury, to Shane, was personal. It was a battle wound from a battle Ilya had been fighting on his own.

Down and down Shane went, laying his devotions on the altar of Ilya’s body. The carved abs. The juts of his hipbones. The tangled curls from bellybutton to dick.

He buried his face in Ilya’s pubic hair and *breathed*.

Ilya’s hands tightened urgently in Shane’s hair. “Shane, *moy lyubimiy*, it has been a while, if you put me in your mouth I will last maybe a second. Two at most.”

“Hadn’t got there yet.” Shane’s voice sounded slurred to his own ears, his mouth tripping over unnecessary vowels. He turned his head and mouthed the base of Ilya’s hard dick, around springy curls and silken hot skin, down to the tender balls, drawn tight up against him.

“I know, I know, but do not, do not,” Ilya huffed, squirming, “I want to be inside you.”

That was usually his line. But Shane wanted Ilya's dick in his mouth more than he wanted to breathe. "Please," he whispered. "We have time."

"Okay, okay." Ilya panted, just a man after all who couldn't say no to a blowjob. He tugged at Shane's hair, guiding him up so that he was poised at the tip. Their eyes met. For a moment Ilya looked almost frightened, then it was gone, his eyes shuttering with desire as Shane lowered his head.

Shane had sucked more dicks than just Rozanov's now, but it was almost laughable to compare the experience, the pleasure he got from sucking *this* dick versus the others. The familiar smell. The taste. The *size* of it. He gagged, a little, a bit out of practice, and forgetting to breathe through his nose. Ilya was moaning now, a non-stop stream of noise interspersed with Russian.

Tears running down his face, Shane pulled back, all the way off, a line of spit running from his lips to the wet tip of Ilya's dick. "What are you saying?"

"Fucking—" Ilya laughed weakly. He pushed at Shane's head. "Put me back in."

He licked the tip with just the point of his tongue and Ilya groaned. "Tell me."

"I will, I will, if you put me back in your mouth I will tell you anything, everything."

Shane relented, slurping noisily as he swallowed Ilya back down again, one hand reaching up to squeeze at Ilya's chest, only to have his hand swallowed by one of Ilya's own.

The Russian speech started up again, only this time Ilya interjected with strained English. *Your mouth, featured a lot. Your fucking mouth. Like that. Like that. Please, so tight. Can't believe you're real. Need to come in your hot little mouth. I missed you so much. I need you so much.*

Gasping out a warning – "Shane!" – Ilya jerked beneath him and the familiar, salty taste of him filled Shane's senses. He kept sucking, cheeks hollowed, until Ilya's hands began to tug at his hair again. "Shane, Shane, Shane, too much, *dorogoy*, so perfect, please come up here."

Carefully crawling up Ilya's body to his lips once more, Ilya took his aching cock in hand. "So beautiful, so wet for me," he whispered, licking back into Shane's mouth, before pushing him over.

"Your ribs," Shane protested mildly, hands reaching above his head to grab onto the pillows.

"No matter," was Ilya's response, kissing his way down to take Shane into his mouth.

Shane's eyes rolled back into his head as he was enveloped in heat. "Oh my God."

*

Shane had a crazy, crazy thought as Ilya rolled a condom on later, that maybe they could do without them. That it would feel different, even better, as Ilya eased himself inside him,

without that layer of latex. Probably it wouldn't. Probably it would feel the same. Probably it would be hot as fuck.

He panted, a death grip on the bars of his headboard, his legs hooked over Ilya's shoulders, folded like a pretzel, his dick leaking on his stomach. "You feel so fucking big."

"Fucking *don't*," Ilya grunted, wobbling a bit on his knees.

Shane grinned, triumphant, overjoyed. *Present*. "A bit trigger happy, huh-uh!" he yelped as Ilya pulled back and thrust *hard*. And again. And again. A familiar warmth began to build, fast. Ilya's aim was very precise.

This, *this* was what Shane had needed. Everyone, anyone, paled in comparison. What the fuck had he been thinking?

A thumb hooked into Shane's mouth, Ilya hovering over him, a look of intense, heated concentration etched into the mobile muscles of his face. Shane sucked and clenched around Ilya at the same time as he thrust and Ilya's eyes fluttered closed briefly. This time the stream of Russian was not translated before Ilya was pulling out, slapping Shane's ass and barking, "Over."

Shane rolled obediently and was putty in Ilya's hands as he lifted him onto his knees and spread his cheeks apart. A wet tongue speared into him and Shane buried his face into the mattress. "Fucking hell, Rozanov," he groaned. He reached beneath to grab hold of his dick, hard and leaking again, tugging.

Ilya noisily ate Shane's ass, slurping and spitting before pulling back and pressing the head of his dick back when it was needed, pushing inside easily. They both moaned. Ilya leaned over him, pressing kisses to Shane's spine as he started thrusting, one hand going to Shane's hair, grabbing a handful and pulling tight. Shane *loved* that. "Come soon, hmm? Want you to come soon."

Ever the obedient bed partner, Shane's orgasm hit him like a bullet train, ropes of wetness spilling into his hand, and it truly felt like he was coming from his spine or something. His vision blurred at the edges with all-consuming, near-painful pleasure. He was pretty sure he yelled.

Ilya must have followed shortly after, because when Shane came back to himself, he was slumped over Shane's back limply.

In slow motion, they collapsed down onto the bed.

"Your ribs?" Shane slurred.

A trio of kisses were pressed to his neck. "S'okay, Shane."

"Okay."

He was pretty sure he passed out then, at least for a nano-second, before being awoken by Ilya carefully easing out of him. A horrible thought occurred to him. He jerked. "I didn't

shower.”

Ilya kissed his shoulder tenderly, fingers running down his spine as he got up. “I know this is important to you, but I do not care about it.”

“I do care,” Shane muttered, a little mollified, as Ilya disposed of the condom in the bathroom. Water ran and he came back with a washcloth. It was broad daylight, which did absolutely no favors to the bruise across Ilya’s body but did plenty of favors to the rest of him.

“Stop looking at me like that,” Ilya commanded, wiping Shane down.

Unsure what his face had been saying, Shane brushed his fingers against the bruise. Ilya’s stomach muscles twitched in response. “I think I should apply more ointment.”

Ilya’s face was a complicated mess of emotions. He leaned down to kiss him once more, all minty. He’d obviously swirled some mouthwash around, which was an unfair advantage. “If it would make you feel better, I will fetch.”

*

Belly to belly, they lay in Shane’s bed and stared into each other’s eyes. Shane could count on one hand the number of people he had ever willingly made eye contact with for a prolonged period of time before this moment, and that list started with his parents and ended with his parents. And maybe Arthur.

Ilya brushed his thumb over Shane’s cheek. “We should talk now, yes?”

Shane nodded, nerves disturbing the happy hum that had settled in his bones. “I don’t want it to be like before,” he said quickly, before he could chicken out.

Ilya shook his head. “Me, either.”

“I want—” God. He couldn’t say it. He settled for the easier thing. “I want us to be honest with each other. As honest as we can be.”

“Okay. I will try.”

Say it, Shane. “Is there anything you want?” *Goddamn it.*

“I want it to be just us,” Ilya said, immediately. “No one else.”

“Oh my God,” Shane breathed out with a rush of relief that he hadn’t been the one to say it, he hadn’t been the one to bring exclusivity into the conversation, to introduce the unlikely proposition of Ilya Rozanov and monogamy to the world, “me too.”

“No other men,” Ilya reiterated pointedly, as if Shane had some kind of line-up of prospects all ready to go.

He withheld the urge to snort at this preposterous idea. “Same to you. No more girls. Or men,” he added, equally, if not *more* pointedly. The word ‘roster’ had been used to describe Ilya’s parade of women but he didn’t know if there was also a secret roster of men. He didn’t *want* to know. It made him feel a bit sick, actually.

Ilya smiled toothily, as if Shane asking this of him was an enormous gift. He could hear the susurrations as Ilya rubbed his feet together. “No one else. Of any gender. I just want you.”

“Me too,” Shane whispered, caught in the terrifying freefall of unexpectedly getting everything he had ever wanted. Just think – twenty-four hours before he had been in a state of nervous anticipation. Sick with it. And now here he was cuddling with his boyfriend. It was too good to be true.

Ilya leaned forward to press their lips together, sealing this monumental step forward and then utterly ruining it by jerking back and saying, with wide, panicked eyes, “Fuck. Sveta.”

“Yeah, she’s included in that,” Shane said crossly, *instantly* pissed.

“No, I mean— she’s probably— um.” Ilya half sat up, clearly aware that bringing up his *whatever* in bed with the guy he’d just committed to was a fairly sizeable *faux pas*. He winced. “Ah. Sorry. I just probably need to message her. We need to be back in Boston in time for some dinner she has with her work.”

“Sure,” Shane said, bitchily.

Ilya’s entire face collapsed with utterly inappropriate softness. “You are giving me angry kitten face.”

Shane was unable to do anything about that, whatever *that* was. He could *feel* how scrunched up he was. He rolled onto his back and folded his arms. “Fuck off.”

“Even more so now. I have missed this face, so much.” Grinning, Ilya leaned forward to kiss the end of Shane’s nose. “I want you to meet her.”

“Um. Are you being serious now?”

Another kiss. Then another. He crawled over Shane, bracketing him with his arms and his legs. “Shane, my best friend must know my beautiful boyfriend.”

“But—” A series of protests balanced at the end of his tongue. *No one could know. Career-ending-threat. She’d seen Ilya’s dick. She’d more than seen Ilya’s dick.*

Ilya cradled Shane’s face, his big hands framing his cheeks. “Please. This is honesty. I would like— I would like someone to know. So when I go back to Boston, and we are apart, I know it’s real.”

He could feel himself wavering. “It is *real*, Ilya. This is really real.”

Ilya nodded frantically. “Please? Please can I tell her? I think I need this. Very much.”

Shane chewed his bottom lip. “She won’t tell anyone?”

“She would never. She knows the risks to me.”

He supposed that made sense. Svetlana was probably in the unique position to know that best of all.

Slowly, Shane nodded. “Okay. Okay, you can tell her.” He flushed with sudden guilt. Honesty, that’s what they’d agreed. And he had to be honest. “It’s only fair. I— told Wiebe.”

Ilya’s eyebrows went up. He slumped over on his side, shocked. “Your coach? When?”

“Um. A few days ago.” Shane looked down. God. Now that he was in his right mind again, healed by Ilya Rozanov’s dick, he felt really shitty about this. “I was— he was the one who told me to call you. I was really freaking out about seeing you again. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that, not without your permission.”

Ilya stared at him for a long moment, processing. His eyes flickered around Shane’s face, his lips tight. Eventually, after an agonizing wait, Ilya asked, “He is a good man?”

Shane nodded. “He is. He would never say anything. But even then, I shouldn’t have done it. I’m sorry. That’s kind of a big deal.”

“Hey. It’s okay.” Ilya reached up again and brushed Shane’s cheek. “Has been a hard secret to keep.”

Shane closed his eyes, the warmth behind his eyelids prickling with the threat of tears. “So hard.”

“Maybe I should meet your coach, too, one day.”

Totally out of nowhere, an image of them sitting in the Wiebes garden with beers and chips, just talking about hockey and life, popped into Shane’s head. And he longed for it. Longed for the scenario where it would be normal to visit friends and socialize with his boyfriend. “I would really like that.” Shane let a tear fall. God, was it possible? Some day? “I won’t do that again. Tell anyone. Not without you knowing.”

“I know, Shane.” Ilya leaned forward to kiss him, curled around him once more. “I know.”

*

Ilya presented Shane like a trophy. “Shane, this is Svetlana. Sveta. Svet, this is Shane.”

The young woman in Shane’s living room stared at him, eyes bulging a little from her sockets. She looked from Ilya to Shane and back again. She said something in Russian which had Ilya smirking. “*Da*,” he said. Smug.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Shane said, not sure it was nice. Certainly, Sveta didn’t seem all that thrilled to meet him.

Also, you know, she'd fucked Shane's (details still to be negotiated further) boyfriend.

"It is a pleasure," she said in familiar accented English, the woman who had answered Ilya's phone and led to one of Shane's probably top five meltdowns. She thrust out her hand, which was at least a familiar gesture to Shane in this entirely unfamiliar social scenario.

They shook. Svetlana's hand was very, very firm but pleasingly dry. Her nails were painted a deep, dark red, a shade or two darker than the boots she was wearing. She looked very put together. Beautiful.

Shane was wearing his most comfortable track pants and an old Metros T-shirt which he favored because it was washed super soft but only wore at home because it had a hole in the armpit. He had forgotten about the hole. It was okay. Only he knew about that hole. He would just have to keep his arms down and not gesture wildly which was a thing he had never in his life done before but was now mortally afraid of doing.

Svetlana adjusted the purse over her shoulder and sniffed, giving off an entirely disapproving air. "Ilyushka, we need to go. Traffic will be terrible."

Shane's ears pricked at the strange pronunciation of his name. Was this another one of those Russian things?

Ilya made an affectionate but impatient noise. "Yes, yes, and you have plans, I know."

He leaned toward Shane and, panicked, Shane flinched back. In his defense, he'd only kissed a handful of people publicly before, and all of them girls. And never in front of their ex—whatever.

Ilya narrowed his eyes. "What? You do not want kiss goodbye?"

"Um." Shane's eyes slanted to Svetlana, but she had turned and appeared to be studying his bookshelves. The purpose of this introduction *had* been so that Svetlana could know about them, could be Ilya's co-conspirator as they navigated this new phase of their relationship.

Bravely, Shane darted forward and pressed his mouth to Ilya's because *of course* he wanted a kiss goodbye. More than one, if he was honest. He should have thought this through. "You'll message when you're home."

"He will probably message you from the end of this street," Sveta murmured, taking down his well-worn copy of *The Game*.

"Not while you're driving," Shane said automatically, grabbing the hand that had migrated to his ass and trying to remove it. Ilya was grinning. The beautiful asshole.

Sveta snorted. "*I'm* driving. He is banned."

"What?"

"Small issue with license. No big deal, Hollander." Ilya gave up on groping him and brushed his thumb over Shane's cheek. He kissed him again, more lingeringly. He lowered his voice,

“I will message you. And I will call, later.”

“Promise?” Shane whispered, tamping down the urge to cling on and never let go.

“I promise.” He gave Shane another kiss and then pulled back with a determined breath.

“Come, Sveta, I’m sure you’ve read all those.”

“What issue with your driver’s license?” Shane followed them both to his door, sniffing a problem, distracted from the looming prospect of losing Ilya just as he had gotten him back.

“Did you get your license suspended? How? What for?”

Ilya said something crossly to Svetlana in Russian which had her rolling her eyes. He let her leave first, then darted back to kiss Shane again. “I will tell you later. I promise. Is not so bad really.”

Shane grabbed his hand, holding him back, their fingers tangling together. “Is that because you think I will be less mad over the phone? Because that will not be the fucking case.”

Out in the hallway, Svetlana barked out a laugh.

*

Petrov: *I could maybe buy Ottawa.*

Petrov: *Technically possible, though would probably not be approved by the Board.*

Petrov: *Crowell would lose his mind.*

Petrov: *On reflection, almost more reason to try it.*

Chapter End Notes

Just so you know, I considered ending it here 😞

Additional note: I have read a lot about NHL contracts to try and be as accurate as possible but, to be honest, you may need to take some of this with a pinch of salt, in this chapter and in future ones.

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

“I would prefer you didn’t touch other boys, Shane.”

Chapter Notes

Just a reminder - I don't know much about hockey and hockey contracts. Please be gentle! I also don't know Russian, come to that. Or much about Canada...

Not that it wasn’t obvious what the options were, but Ilya downloaded Farah’s conversation to him on FaceTime, about half an hour after he had hung up on her. Long enough for him to message Shane and for them both to nuke their dinners to a satisfactory temperature.

“Option one – I request a trade, waive my NTC.”

Shane speared a piece of tofu. He had propped Ilya up against his fruit bowl. “Do you think Sullivan would go for it?”

“I... don’t know. Team is still shit. Is obvious chemistry is missing. Probably Coach has mentioned something to him.” Ilya lifted and dropped a shoulder and stabbed at something on his plate that Shane couldn’t see. Similarly, Shane was propped up on something on Ilya’s kitchen island. “He could say no. I am a big name. Won them a Cup.”

This was said without ego and Shane wasn’t such an asshole that he would dispute this when they were discussing Ilya exiting the team that had drafted him. “Would he be pissed?”

“Not if it remained private. He respects straight-talking. We position it as in the best interests of the team, blah blah blah. The team is older, needs fresh blood. I am expensive and willing sacrifice. Farah thinks he might go for it. Then she says if he doesn’t, we are just a pest about it.”

Shane nodded and went to fetch the hot sauce from the fridge. “You’re good at being a pest.” It was actually one of Ilya’s best playmaking skills. Getting under people’s skin on the ice and then skating away. Letting *them* start the fights. People fell for it all the time. It was one of the things Wiebe lectured the team most about when it came to playing Boston. *Don’t let Rozanov trick you into a fight.*

Hockey players were not bright, though, and his team was no exception.

Ilya continued, a voice from his tablet. “I would need to make list of teams I would be interested in. And Farah checks who has cap space.”

Shane – and he was sure Ilya did too – already had a rough idea. The cap space narrowed the options down considerably and so did the number of teams that were a convenient short flight from Montreal. They hadn’t talked about it, but the distance was definitely on his mind.

If only Scott Hunter would retire. Ilya would be *perfect* for New York.

Shane slid back onto his stool and liberally hot-sauced his food. “Option two?”

“Wait for free agency.”

“Could you do that?”

He shrugged. “Maybe it’s fine.”

Shane leaned a little closer. “Ilya. Real thing.”

Ilya rolled his eyes. “It is *fine*. It’s better for me, now that we’re, you know,” he said, a little bashfully, and Shane got a little bashful in turn. He exhaled, bracing himself for telling Shane something that was closer to the truth. “But sometimes I feel—” He paused and then gently laid his hand over his chest. “Bad.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Is not your fault. Stop being so Canadian.”

Nevertheless, Shane felt some culpability. “Is there... something you could do? Maybe speak to people one on one? Talk to HR maybe? Or just—” Shane tried to imagine what he would have done, had his coming out been so rejected by his team. Probably he would never have come out. It would certainly have been unfeasible a few years ago. “Just never mention it again?” he suggested weakly.

Ilya’s eyebrows rose sardonically. “You think I am bringing it up? What, you think I’m bringing boys back to my hotel room?”

“I sincerely hope not,” Shane said frostily.

Ilya’s smile was broad. “I am not doing that,” he said, ending the sentence with a Russian endearment that Shane could not parse. He’d worked out the one for ‘sweetheart’ and there was another one that after much Googling he’d discovered meant ‘baby’. Both of these now triggered an absolute intense horniness from him, which Ilya wielded indiscriminately. But this word, or maybe it was two words, had so many syllables that his attempts to recreate it for Google Translate had gotten him nowhere.

“What does that mean?”

Broad smile unwavering, Ilya shook his head. “You’re just going to have to learn Russian.”

“I’ve downloaded an app,” Shane grumbled. “I’m still learning your stupid alphabet.” He alighted on his revenge. “I could ask Petrov. I’ve got a dinner with him and Alex this week.”

His boyfriend pushed aside his plate so he could loom closer. “You will do no such thing, Hollander,” he growled.

Wow. It was probably really wrong but that – the tone, the *growling*, the surname – was an absolute turn-on. Predictably, his dick swelled in his pants. “Are you, ah, done with dinner?” he asked, adjusting himself.

“No, you will sit there like a good boy while I eat my peas,” Ilya said knowingly, the monster.

*

They planned to meet at the restaurant and of course Shane arrived first because of the compulsive Hollander need to be early. He was escorted to a corner booth table, laid for three, and it was Shane’s least favorite configuration because, being early, that meant he had to do that awkward shuffle around to sit in the middle.

Which, sighing, he did. He messaged Ilya straight away to complain. Ilya’s prompt suggestion was that Shane leave, which was very on brand.

It was precisely 7pm when a familiar figure – Rene – breezed past the table with nary a glance at Shane and disappeared through the back. A few moments after that he returned and Petrov was given permission to enter the restaurant.

He slid into the booth on Shane’s left and then gave the empty third seat a startled look. “Ah. Alex isn’t here yet?”

“No.”

Petrov cursed quietly in French and fished his cell phone from his pocket, checked the screen with a little frown. “They are running late.” He gestured impatiently to the waitress. His sweater was a deep, sea-green. “I’m going to order an aperitif. Would you care for something, Shane, or will you stick to water for the time being?”

“I’ll have water. I’ll have a glass of wine with dinner, though,” Shane said, quickly.

“You don’t have to.”

“No, a small glass,” he said forcefully, channeling Ali very hard, “won’t do any damage.”

Petrov’s eyes crinkled. He ordered two Negronis from the waitress who gave Shane a definite double-take which he politely ignored. “One for me and one for our absent friend,” he said, gesturing to the spare seat.

The waitress left, giving Shane another wide-eyed look that thankfully didn’t turn into an awkward expression of fan-behavior.

“What’s a Negroni?” Shane asked, wondering if it would be something he’d enjoy. He’d branched out to Moscow Mules. Maybe there was something else he could try?

Petrov shook out his napkin and laid it across his lap. “It’s gin, sweet red vermouth and Campari. You can try mine, though I anticipate you will hate it if ginger ale is your go-to drink.”

Shane did hate it. He hated it very much. It tasted like drinking an orange rind. He gulped some water while Petrov crinkled at him and checked his phone again. “Alex will be a few more minutes. They’re always late.”

“No worries.”

“Lots of worries, actually,” Petrov sighed. He took a large sip of his horrible drink. “But perhaps I can take this opportunity to apologize to you.”

“Apologize?” Shane repeated, suddenly nervous. What did Petrov have to apologize for?

“Yes. I— don’t think I conducted myself well. After you told me you were gay.”

Flushing, Shane glanced around the restaurant. There were no tables around them, which he imagined had been purposefully orchestrated by Petrov’s people, and only Rene could conceivably be in listening distance. “I mean. You were surprised.”

“Ah, no, that’s not what I meant. I mean, it may have appeared that I disappeared.”

It *had* appeared like that. Obviously, Shane had been too consumed with the other disappearance in his life. “Oh. You were busy, right?”

“I was. I am. I am always busy.” And something about that sounded odd to Shane’s often rarely perceptive ears. He couldn’t say for sure why though. “But sometimes I am busy because I don’t want to face up to something.” Petrov adjusted his knife and fork. “I distanced myself from you abruptly with no explanation. I am sure— you might be able to guess why?”

Shane stared at Petrov and slowly shook his head. Lots of thoughts were pinging in Shane’s brain but none of them were helpful. He wondered if it had anything to do with the conversation that he couldn’t remember at the Cup celebration. He swallowed. “No?”

“No?” Petrov repeated gently, looking doubtful.

“I really don’t know,” Shane said, blushing, not *entirely* sure he was being honest with himself. “Did we— that night at the cup celebration did we talk about anything in particular?”

His tone must have sounded worried because Petrov switched immediately to consoling him, “No, no, Shane. You were fine. You were just very keyed up and excited. It was good to see you like that, you are normally so restrained. It’s—”

“I’m here, I’m here!” came a flustered voice, making Shane, very much caught up in a panic spiral, jump, whereas Petrov mouthed something to himself.

Alex landed, carrying – conservatively – one-hundred bags with them. And their hair was pinker than before, freshly dyed, and very precisely matched to their shirt. Bright pink was also on Shane’s color chart but he would *never*.

“Don’t ask. Well, you can,” they said, as they distributed those bags under and around the booth, including a leather laptop case that they put behind Shane’s head and another behind Petrov’s. “Sorry. Did I interrupt something?”

“You promised me you would be early. And why do you have so much stuff?” Petrov asked in French, in a tone Shane had never heard from him before. It was almost petulant.

Alex made a scoffing noise, ignoring Petrov. “Shane. Hello,” they said, smiling brightly at him. Petrov got a less bright look. “And I’m going to Elliot’s tonight, working from his next week, and he wanted me to bring a ton of Metros merch.” For some reason, this made them grin a little maniacally.

They slid into the empty seat and their eyes alighted on the drink gathering a wet ring of condensation on the table. “Oh, is this for me? *Merçi*. We’re visiting his parents. They’re conservative with a capital ‘C’ and Toronto fans.”

“That sounds... fun?” Shane suggested, really not sure that this sounded fun at all. But *he* liked visiting his parents and Alex was kind of smiling so...

“Oh, it will be. I’m aiming for a family row before dinner so we can leave early.”

Petrov snorted.

Shane caught up. “They don’t like you?”

“I am not who they imagined for Elliot, no.”

He wasn’t stupid. He knew *why* someone’s Conservative parents might not like the idea of Alex, just as they might not like Shane. Different with a capital D. “I’m sorry. Maybe when they get to know you...?” he suggested.

Alex patted his hand. “It’s been ten years, Shane.”

“Oh.”

“It’s okay. Elliot’s sister’s son has just come out so the target,” Alex held their fingers up and mimed shooting like a machine gun taking out most of the other patrons, “has been relocated.”

“That’s— really shit.” Shane was struggling. He and Alex hadn’t really spoken on any personal level before so this— this was a lot. He couldn’t help but feel he wasn’t answering well. He was failing the conversational exam. He glanced over at Petrov, who was staring into his drink with narrowed eyes and thus no help.

He wondered what Petrov had been going to say.

“She thinks so. Andy couldn’t care less what his homophobic asshole grandparents think.”

Shane, who, unfortunately, still cared what most people thought, even the homophobic assholes, could appreciate this for the achievement it was. “Hey, that’s kinda cool, though, right?”

Alex’s smile was wobbly and genuine. “Isn’t it? The kids are alright, Shane.”

*

Both Alex and Petrov each ordered a second Negroni, so Shane ordered a ginger ale to branch out from water.

Shane hadn’t been precisely nervous about this dinner. He enjoyed Petrov’s company, even if there were moments where he felt a little out of his depth, and Alex’s presence took some of the pressure off of the perception. And the restaurant wasn’t as fancy as the one that Petrov had taken him and Wiebe to. The atmosphere was decidedly casual, in part because of the bickering, close relationship between Petrov and Alex.

“Where did you two meet?” he asked as they made their way through their appetizers. He could tell it was a friendship of long-standing by the way they bounced off each other. He and Hayden could do that, sometimes.

“Boarding school,” they chorused, then gave each other nearly identical sly looks.

“You were at boarding school together?” Shane aimed this question at Alex. He had read what little information that he could find about them; their biography very definitely said they were born in Montreal. In Outremont, no less, which was a very affluent area. “I thought you grew up here.”

“I was born here. I was shipped off to an international school in France when I was ten. Where I met this one.”

“Wow. That’s... really far.” And ten was *really* young.

Alex shrugged as if this was no big deal. “My *Grand-mère* lives in Paris.” Their eyes slid to Petrov’s eyes again, knowingly. “She was... friends with Mishka’s grandfather.”

Petrov snorted delicately then and took a sip of his wine. There was clearly more to this story and Shane looked expectantly between them, waiting for an answer. Once again they exchanged a glance and had some kind of silent conversation. “It is possible,” Petrov said slowly, turning back to Shane, his eyes crinkling, “that my mother...”

Apparently well used to this routine, Alex followed up with, “And my father...”

“...are half siblings,” Petrov finished triumphantly.

They both lifted their glasses to toast each other.

“Wow. Really.” Shane tried to see if there was any resemblance between them. They did both have blue eyes. Maybe a similar shape, too? “That would make you, what, some kind of cousins?”

“Possibly. We’ve never actually gone to the effort to validate this theory.”

“Because of the nepotism,” Alex said, pursing their lips.

Petrov winced. “Well. Yes.”

“And *now* it would cause issues with the inheritance if we did,” they added thoughtfully.

“Oh, for you?” Petrov asked, genuinely interested. He leaned over and stabbed at a piece of beet on Alex’s plate, pushed to the side. “Because of Cecile?”

“Yes. Can you imagine.”

He grunted. “I can, unfortunately.”

Shane did not know who Cecile was, nor why this would cause problems for ‘the inheritance’. Until this conversation he had no idea that Alex was of a similar generational wealth to Petrov. It did not feel as if he could dig into the details of this. Money was not a subject Shane was comfortable talking about with anyone who wasn’t his mom.

Alex turned their attention to Shane. “What about you, Shane? Any siblings?”

“None. Full or otherwise.”

“And you’re absolutely sure about that?” Alex’s eyes twinkled with mischief.

Shane laughed. “Yes. My dad is— yeah, no.” He shook his head. The thought of his dad cheating was laughable. His parents were *so* in love. It would have been gross – it *had* been gross, when he was younger – had Shane now not felt like maybe, definitely, he was in love too.

He took a small sip of his wine, sure that his smile was *not* appropriate for public consumption.

*

Shane had roast chicken and an undressed salad and put his sides – mashed potato, creamed spinach – in the middle of the table after putting a sizeable spoonful of each on his own plate. He had some of Alex’s fries and some of Petrov’s Dauphinoise. Today was his treat day. The Snickers – he was back to a half bar – would have to wait until next week.

He tried not to moan about the taste of butter and garlic. But it was a near thing. He was going to eat very, very slowly.

Alex had returned to the subject of their family updates. Petrov nodded when they mentioned Andy once more. “Knew it,” he said.

“Everyone knew it. You’re not special.” Alex smirked at Shane and rolled their eyes. “All gay guys think they have amazing observational powers, that their gaydar is like a sixth sense.”

Shane shook his head rapidly. “I do not have that.” He considered a forkful of spinach and pre-emptively blushed. “Did you guess about me?”

Petrov carefully put down his own knife and fork. His head inclined to the left, a flickering expression Shane couldn’t quite grasp the nuances of passing over his face. “Ah. No.”

Alex huffed out a laugh. “You blindsided him.”

“No, not, *blindsided*.” Petrov’s mouth became a little pinched. “When we first met I’ll admit I had a moment. I wondered, maybe more than wondered. I—”

Very obviously, Alex kicked Petrov under the table, stopping whatever he was going to say. They glared at each other and, wow, actually, for a moment they really did look alike.

“Why did you wonder?” Shane wanted to know, pulsing with restless unease. Did he do something? Give off some vibe? All this time?

Petrov blinked at him, his mouth softening. “It wasn’t anything about you specifically. I just thought I saw something. Once. With you and another player.”

Shane’s heart tripped. “What? When? Where?” Wait. He was being dumb. “I mean. You didn’t. You couldn’t.”

He knew. He knew. *He knew he knew he knew.*

Petrov laughed softly, a breathy noise. “I could be wildly off base. At least, I convinced myself I was until you came out to me and then I admit I... wondered.”

“You know, we don’t need to discuss hypotheticals here,” Alex said, reaching across the table to touch Shane’s arm. “It’s fine. We’re not fishing.” They switched to French to hiss in Petrov’s direction, “*Shane’s private business is his private business. We agreed this.*”

Petrov opened his mouth with what was no doubt going to be a sharp rebuttal by the glint in his eyes but Shane got there first. “*You know I speak French, right?*” he interjected, in French, before this could escalate any further, before he could hear more than he wanted to hear. That there was a possibility that Shane had not been as discreet as he thought. That *their* secret was not so secret.

Fuck. He had asked Petrov if he could buy the Raiders. Practically staking his claim in Ilya. He was a smart man. He could put two and two together. *Fuck.* He knew he shouldn’t have done it.

“Good point.” Petrov smiled blandly and reached for the wine to top up Alex’s glass and then Shane’s. “Alex is right. I should not have said anything. It was probably my overactive imagination.”

Shane chewed his bottom lip. He kind of needed to know, now. “What did you think you saw?”

Alex sighed. “Shane. Please. There’s no need for this.”

“I want to know.”

Petrov glanced over at Alex, almost challengingly. “Well, then. It will sound preposterous if I have misread this. But I thought I saw you and Ilya Rozanov disappear into a restroom together. It was after the awards, the year before last. He had been— very interested in you before. I noticed that.”

Shane was prepared for the sinking feeling. After all, it was extremely unlikely Petrov might have seen him do something with anyone else. *You and Ilya Rozanov.*

He managed to keep himself from reacting, glad that fear had drained the blood from his face so his usual humiliating flush didn’t give him away. Obviously, the best thing for Shane to do in this circumstance was to frown, deny it hotly – *His rival! Crazy!* – but he knew his limits. He would not be convincing.

So instead he just stared at Petrov blankly and channeled his mother. “Sounds like a coincidence.”

Petrov leaned forward. “Of course. I then saw you both come out of the bathroom and head back toward the elevators together... he had his suitcase with him.” His eyebrows rose, as if Shane was supposed to infer something from this.

Shane swallowed. “Rozanov is a Russian citizen and a public figure. It’s really dangerous to insinuate that he might be gay, or bi, or whatever.”

“Yes, of course,” Petrov’s voice was gentle, his eyes crinkling softly. “Of course, Shane. I’m done,” he warned Alex as their body language indicated they were prepared to go to battle again. “Your message has landed.”

“Then why are we still talking about this? Jesus Christ. Pour me some wine.”

They changed the subject. Thank *God*.

*

It was gone eleven by the time Petrov paid the check and both Shane and Alex were yawning.

“You’re taking a car, yes? Not driving all the way there tonight,” Petrov told Alex, firmly, as they waited for their coats.

“I am. Jean is waiting for me outside.” Alex yawned again. “This was a nice evening. Sorry about the interrogation, Shane.”

“No problem.” Shane thought he had neatly sidestepped the conversation about Ilya. Just about. He would have to go through it in his head a few more times to check but he didn’t

have that squirming feeling he sometimes got when he had poorly managed a social situation.

When the hostess handed them their coats, she did that thing that suggested she was going to help everyone put them on. Shane watched as Petrov and Alex accepted this with good grace, shrugging into their own coats easily, but Shane always found it awkward, stooping down clumsily, always missing an armhole or something, so he declined the offer and just took his coat himself with a murmured, “I’m good, thanks”

“Wait, I left one of my bags, didn’t I?” Alex said, rolling their eyes at the collection at their feet that was indeed missing one. “Give me one sec.”

Petrov grabbed the remaining ones. “We’ll be outside.” The little foyer wasn’t really big enough for them to loiter, not with all the bags.

Shane was still shrugging his coat on as they stepped outside and his collar got caught. But it was one of his new purchases, something smarter to wear in the winter, and Sargent had tailored it for him which meant that it was tighter than usual, the wool warm but unforgiving. When he tried to lift his arms, he couldn’t quite reach the back of his neck.

“Ack,” he said, helplessly, flailing a bit.

Petrov snorted. “Come here, let me,” he said, stepping closer. “You’re going to have to learn to be helped into these if Richie has any say in the matter. Or tell him you prefer to dress yourself. He will insist on a close cut.” He ran his thumbs along the neckline of the coat, slowly popping Shane’s somewhat elaborate collar.

This street had always been notorious for wind tunnels and the wind picked up then, sending Petrov’s hair awry, dark strands tumbling across his face, into his eyes. It was automatic – Shane saw Petrov’s nose twitch in irritation, which made *his* nose twitch in irritation – and he reached up to push back the hair, to tuck what he could behind his ear, the kind of gesture he would have made to one of the Pike kids, to his mom maybe.

There was a blinding flash and then a scuffle from behind him.

“Holy shit,” Shane yelled as he blinked lights out of his eyes, no idea what had happened except fear-adrenaline had shot through his body as the sense of *danger* overwhelmed him. He spun in the direction of the noise, some instinct driving him to start to chase but Petrov grabbed him by the elbow.

“Stay,” commanded Petrov. He was on his phone immediately, barking French down the phone, “*Angie, Shane Hollander and I just got papped outside of the restaurant.*”

He was still blinking little lights from his vision. “Is that what that was?” He was often photographed but normally in more formal, expected settings than this and certainly less professionally.

“Yes. He was obviously waiting for us. *Fuck*. Where the hell is— oh, there he is.”

Shane turned in the direction of the scuffle he'd heard. There was someone in the distance, literally running down the middle of the street, and a second someone – Rene – chasing after him. "Is that him? Did he run off?"

Petrov was still on the phone. "Yes, because I have a tendency to punch them."

"I'm not surprised." Even Shane's hands tingled with the urge to *do* something. He wanted to run after him, too.

"Where the *fuck* is Alex? *Yes, Angie, it will look fucking compromising,*" he spat in furious French, making Shane wince.

Alex passed through the doors of the restaurant, a smile on their face that dropped as soon as they saw Shane and Petrov's expressions. "What? What's happened?"

"We got photographed," Shane explained as Petrov paced off. Angie had apparently passed Petrov off to someone else, someone who might use their contacts to field any sales of *fucking compromising* photos of Shane and the owner of his team outside a restaurant late at night.

"Okay?" Alex did not immediately understand the significance of this. "As long as you weren't making out, that's not a problem."

Shane chewed on his bottom lip. "We weren't," he said slowly, visualizing what the photographer might have captured and... yeah, that wasn't going to look good.

The very faintest of anxious flutters crossed Alex's face. "But?"

Shane said nothing but his face probably said everything

"*Merde,*" said Alex, closing their eyes.

Shane jolted as the implications hit him, on a more personal level. "Fuck," he said, "I need to make a call."

*

Given the time, Ilya did not call him back until the morning and he was clearly half asleep, hitting dial as soon as he saw Shane's missed calls. "What is it, *dorogoy*?" he asked, his voice rough and cozy sounding. God. To be called *sweetheart* in that voice, in bed, was a dream. Shane wished for the power of transportation, *so badly*.

In the daylight, with half a dozen messages from Petrov confirming that they were in the process of securing the photographs, Shane was feeling a little ridiculous. "Ah. Nothing. Nothing."

"Mmm?" Ilya rolled over, the bed sheet rustling around him. "So, the call at midnight was not important. You were maybe drunk? *Tsk.*"

“No. Look.” Shane sighed. They had promised each other honesty, the very first of their boyfriend negotiations. And the second, ‘no one else’. That’s right, he, Shane Hollander, had locked Ilya Rozanov down into boring monogamy. He might put it on his gravestone. “A photographer took a picture of me and Petrov outside the restaurant last night. Though it wasn’t anything it might have looked like something and I wanted to warn you just in case it appeared on social media.”

Ilya exhaled. “Okie,” he said.

“Okay? No freak out?”

“No, no freak out.”

This was faintly anticlimactic. *Good* but anticlimactic.

And then, in a low, slightly dangerous tone, “What might it have looked like?”

That was more like it.

Little fluttery nerves manifested low down in Shane’s stomach. “He was fixing my coat collar, so he was standing close to me. And I—” Shane paused as he remembered the slightly more compromising part. Was it *absolutely* necessary to mention this part? He winced. “I kind of touched his hair.”

Shane heard Ilya exhale slowly.

“That sounds really bad,” Shane acknowledged. It hadn’t felt sexual. If anything, it had felt kind of... fond.

“It does, yes.” Ilya made a very Russian noise of displeasure. “I would prefer you didn’t touch other boys, Shane.”

It would be pedantic to point out that Petrov was very much a man – and probably would not help. “That is a reasonable request,” Shane agreed. “I’m sorry. It was in his face and I hate that feeling so I just kind of moved it and I really didn’t mean anything by it. Don’t get mad.”

“I am not... mad.” It didn’t sound as though Ilya was 100% sure of that. “But I think, perhaps, I would like it if you told him you have a boyfriend now.”

The hairs on Shane’s arms rose with the wave of excited goosebumps. *Boyfriend*. “Yeah. Okay.” Just got to work out how to do that. Somehow.

“Okay?” Ilya sounded surprised that Shane had capitulated.

“Yeah, okay, I’ll do it, that makes sense.” Shane sat down, feeling as if the crisis had momentarily passed. “I found out over dinner that he had his suspicions about us. Apparently, he saw us go off to a bathroom together after the awards. I’m guessing that time after I met him for that breakfast meeting.”

“Ah. That time.”

Ilya was right to sound smug. That had been insanely hot. Emphasis on the insane. Also, the hot.

Shaking off the urge to dwell, Shane continued, “I didn’t really confirm or deny it. I just said it would be dangerous to speculate. Is that okay? I was kind of on the spot. I thought I was convincing but I’m not good at knowing that sort of thing.”

“Is fine, Shane. He of all people isn’t going to put me, or his star captain, in danger.”

“No. Probably not.” Shane sighed. “Ilya... do you think we’re obvious?”

“I don’t know.” Ilya thought about it. “Sometimes, I *feel* obvious.”

Shane smiled. “Me, too.”

They fell into a kind of schmoopy silence. Shane could feel that he was blushing but it was in a nice way, as if the blush was just an external representation of how Ilya made him feel. God. He was glad no one knew his inside thoughts. They were embarrassingly mushy.

“How many more days, Shane?” Ilya asked quietly, though he definitely already knew the answer.

“Sixteen,” Shane said promptly.

“Boo. So long.”

“I know.”

*

Shane: *Hi*

Shane: *Thanks for taking care of the photograph*

Petrov: *We’re still working on it. He’s playing hardball.*

Shane: *Fuck. Okay.*

Shane: *My boyfriend is not thrilled.*

There was no response for a few minutes and then,

Petrov: *Subtle, Shane* 😏

Petrov: *So. Circle of trust. Are you why he’s playing better?*

Shane: *I have no idea what you’re talking about.*

*

Ilya wasn't going out as much as he used to. That wasn't to say he *wasn't* going out at all – he still had a significantly more lively social life than Shane did, given he and Svetlana seemed to meet for dinner every week and Ilya went for drinks with Connors and a slowly growing pool of Raiders who had been recently reminded that Ilya Rozanov was still a generational talent and their fucking captain.

But outside of this, they had quickly fallen into the habit of calling every night, as well as messaging constantly during the day. It was like having one long conversation, neither of them starting or finishing it, and sometimes – okay, very regularly – it was punctuated with sex.

It was barely two minutes after they'd both come and cleaned up that Ilya said, entirely blasé, "Marly spoke to me today."

Shane *hated* Marlow. "Oh?" he asked, trying to sound casual and, you know, not loathing. He rolled onto his back and relocated his phone in the sheets. He really needed to get one of those tripod things so he didn't keep losing Ilya when things got heated.

He lifted his phone above his head to see his boyfriend properly. "What did he say?"

Ilya did the same, except he propped Shane up on his nightstand and lay on his side, his cheek pillowed on one hand. "Wanted to know if I watched the Philly game."

"Okay." They had both watched it, lying on their couches on a video call. Naked. "What did you say?"

"I said I had and that I thought the team is being held together by Sinclair, who is mediocre at best, and that their second and third lines are nobodies."

"Sounds unusually polite." Particularly given the expletive-driven rant Shane was exposed to – and wholly participated in – on Saturday night.

Ilya smiled. "I maybe expressed it differently."

"I'm maybe sure you did."

"Anyway. Marly agreed." Ilya rubbed his nose. "Then I went to shower."

"So it was a good interaction."

"It was."

Shane was... hesitant to be relieved. Marlow had broken Ilya's heart, and he didn't want it to happen again, even on a significantly smaller scale. At the same time, he desperately, *desperately* wanted the Raiders room to be better. If there was a chance of reconciliation, Shane wanted it for Ilya.

"I am going to message him. See if he wants to come over Saturday after practice." Ilya tugged at his necklace, placing the cross between his teeth.

Shane nodded. They had discussed this plan to work on the team while Ilya decided what he wanted to do long-term. “Maybe with Connors? Or the rookies?”

Ilya sighed. “No, I thought he would talk more if others weren’t there. Be more honest.”

“Honest about what?” Shane couldn’t fundamentally get what Marlow had to be pissed at. He’d known Ilya since he was a Rookie. They had been *best* friends. So what if Ilya also liked men sometimes? It didn’t change him as a person. This situation was fucked.

“Why he’s mad. I was thinking about what you said about Hayden. He was mad.”

“Yeah, he was,” Shane said slowly. “He was mad I hadn’t told him. Hurt, actually. Like I didn’t trust him.” It wasn’t a memory Shane particularly liked to think about, having a painful, whispered fight in the Pikes kitchen while Jackie and her friend giggled in the dining room. In their years of friendship, Hayden had never felt he had cause to be *mad* at Shane on a personal level and Shane didn’t really like that kind of emotional confrontation. Which sort of explained the years of in-between with Ilya, as well.

Hayden was not going to be thrilled about Ilya. Which was a thought Shane had frequently and... pushed away. To think about another time.

“Maybe Marly is mad, too.”

“Maybe.” Shane’s stomach squirmed with upset. Upset *for* Ilya. “If he says no...”

“If he says ‘no’ he says ‘no’, Hollander.” Ilya shrugged. “It is what it is.”

He chewed his bottom lip for a bit. “So do you think you’ll stay? In the team?”

“I don’t know, Shane,” Ilya sighed, as if Shane asking this question was an unbearable weight. “Is too hard to think about it. Why don’t you put your glasses on, for me instead?”

*

That weekend, the Metros flew to Toronto for the pleasure of Dallas Kent and his henchman Troy Barratt’s company. That was to say, it was *not* a pleasure – and Shane *rarely* fought but the active hostility coupled with his worry about Ilya’s conversation with Marlow had him spending some quality time in the penalty box.

They won but Shane barely noticed, stripping off his gloves in the locker room so he could read his messages before he was dragged back to do press.

Lily: *It was okay. We played COD. Felt like old times*

Not a lot of detail there. But that sounded good, he guessed. He rubbed his chest as if he could ease the residual tension.

Jane: *Did you talk?*

Lily: *Not really*

Jane: *Wasn't that the point?*

Lily: *I'm not going to force him to talk about his feelings*

Lily: *That would be super gay* 🤪

Shane rolled his eyes and typed back, *Not funny.*

Lily: 🙄

Lily: *Caught game highlights. How is your hand?*

Jane: *Sore.*

Lily: *Did not know you knew how to fight*

Jane: *Fuck you*

Lily: *It was hot*

After an ugly game like that, Wiebe instigated a mandatory team dinner in the hotel but it was a somber occasion, the team reflecting on the comments that had flown across the ice. Kent had walked a fine line right up until he'd suggested that Johannes might be passed around the locker room like chattel, which was the point when Shane had dropped his gloves.

He glanced down the table to where Johannes and the other rookies from this season and last were peering over Johannes' phone, chattering about something.

"He's fine," Comeau murmured under his breath.

"Are you sure?" They were just kids. Fucking kids. He remembered being an anxiety-riddled nineteen-year-old. Admittedly not much had changed except now he was the captain. "Maybe he's just putting a good game face on."

Comeau grunted and sawed at the steak that he had drowned in pepper sauce. "He's *fine*. His captain defended him today. He'll probably jerk off about it later."

Shane nearly gagged. "What?"

"Joking."

"Not one of your best, Gil."

"Sorry." Comeau shrugged, shoving a mouthful of meat into his face. "I'm trying."

"I know you are," Shane said, with emphasis. The fact that he'd even tried to be consoling about this spoke volumes. Even if he was fucking tasteless about it.

They both had their cell phones on the table, side by side because they were all squeezed in together and it was a weird coincidence – or the signal in this hotel was so spotty – that their

messages arrived in a wave.

Lily, said Shane's phone

Elaine 🍑, said Comeau's.

"Hey, is Lily a *guy*?" Comeau asked, loudly, like he'd just had an exciting epiphany. His grey eyes lit up. "He is, isn't he? Goddamnit, all this time?"

Shane grabbed his phone as various heads swiveled toward them with curiosity. "I'm going to bed."

*

Shane found himself back in Alex's office one morning at 8.30am, at their request. This time the empty packet of cookies on the single chair had been replaced with a very sticky baklava box, still half full of the sweet treats.

"Oh, I put that over there so I'd stop eating them," they explained when Shane dubiously lifted this item up. "Mishka got them for me from Istanbul as an apology. Do you want some? Please take them with you," they said beseechingly. "Save me from myself."

"I'm sure the guys would eat them," he acknowledged, somewhat regretfully. It was literally pure sugar and fat.

"Take them. Be my hero."

With no other option, Shane sat back down, holding the box. The smell of honey and nuts tickled his nose. *You have Snickers at home*, he reminded himself, swallowing the sudden mouthful of spit. Why hadn't he been born a person without a sweet tooth? Why?

"So." Alex spun their screen to face him. "Just so you know," they said, "after this meeting I will be deleting this information. From both this computer and my mind."

Weird start, but okay. "Sure. What's this meeting about?"

"A hypothetical scenario." They smiled. It was maybe a little frightening. Then they hit a key on the keyboard and the screen filled with information. "This is an analysis of every game you've ever played since you were a rookie. Your average goals per game, average assists, your points, your faceoff wins." Shane blinked at the line charts and the numbers, not really taking it in because they clicked again, and another screen came up. This time Alex used their pen to tap to where they wanted his attention. "I actually mapped it out on a yearly basis to see how you improved, with more ice time, obviously. To be thorough. You were already elite as a rookie, statistically speaking, but, wow, Shane. We should be paying you even more."

"I'm paid pretty well," Shane said, perplexed. He knew some of this information. Not in line graph format but, like, in his head. Plenty of analysts knew it too. He wasn't precisely sure why—

Alex continued, “Then I broke this data down into the games where you play everyone *but* for the Raiders and compared it with the games where you *only* play the Raiders.”

Two charts now appeared side by side.

His breath caught. Oh fuck. Maybe he hadn’t sidestepped the Ilya conversation as he’d hoped.

Alex smiled, all toothy. Still a little frightening. “Funny story, Shane, there is a difference. You play *better*.”

“Oh,” he breathed out, trying to negotiate his heart back down from where it had climbed into his throat. “Well. I guess that would make sense. We’re rivals. Competitive.”

“Yes, absolutely, *rivals*,” Alex said, with vociferous glee. “So, obviously I had to do Rozanov’s stats next.”

“Obviously. Ha ha.”

They clicked on. This time Ilya’s headshot was in the corner of the screen, the dead-eyed one from the Raiders’ website that made him look like a serial killer. Shane narrowed his eyes, wishing he’d paid more attention to the details of his stats. He was currently ahead of Rozanov in points this season, thanks to Ilya’s lackluster performance in the last few games, but he was making a concerted effort to catch up. Like really running for it.

“And, guess what, Rozanov *also* plays better when it’s against you. Isn’t data wonderful,” Alex sighed, stroking their screen with their pen.

Shane adjusted the baklava box in his hand and immediately regretted it as it only made the sensation of his fingers sticking to cardboard more obvious. He wanted to wash his hands, like, yesterday. “Great, yeah.” In other circumstances, he did love data, actually, but this data was making him nervous. “Why are we looking at this?”

He was so cool.

“I just thought you might be interested, Shane,” Alex said brightly. “As a purely hypothetical scenario. There is no precedent for public romantic relationships between players in rival teams. The MLH doesn’t request that this information is declared. Your coaches don’t need to know. Our HR doesn’t contractually need to know, even with our shiny new paperwork. But, if tomorrow you decide to go public, in this hypothetical scenario, questions *would* be asked. About whether you have been colluding—”

“We haven’t!”

“— or throwing games for each other.”

“I would *rather die*. Hypothetically,” he added quickly.

“Great! Which is what this wonderful data tells us.” They tapped the screen again. “So, we can be sure that should there be an investigation, there is a robust argument that if anything, a

romantic relationship between you two—”

“I think you left out ‘hypothetical’,” he said through gritted teeth, wondering if he could put his head between his legs in a natural and totally normal way.

“—a *hypothetical* romantic relationship between you two has only enhanced your generational talents.”

Shane sat back in his chair, breathing through his mouth. “You think there would be an investigation?” He hadn’t thought about this angle before. He had thought about the fans thinking that they had betrayed them. He’d thought about his teammates being fucking furious with him for secretly sleeping with the enemy. He’d thought about that *a lot*.

“I have no doubt about it.” Alex paused. “Hypothetically.”

Then Shane watched as they closed the file and dragged it to the little trash can and then right-clicked and pressed ‘empty trash’. “We never had this conversation.”

“Okay.”

*

“Is it that time again?” Wiebe looked at his watch, which was obviously a bit he had been waiting to use.

Rolling his eyes at his coach had once been a punishable offense but Shane now did it with alacrity. And closed the door to his office. Or was about to and paused to ask, “Do you have time for me?” He did have *some* manners left.

“Pull up a pew.”

Shane sat. And tried to form a cohesive starting point. He’d high-tailed his way out of Alex’s office with just the flashing warning light going off in his head that led him directly to Wiebe’s door. Well, via the players’ lounge, where he had deposited the baklava and washed his hands. He hadn’t really got much further in his thinking than that.

“Shane?”

“Yeah. Just—” He gestured to his head which was full of rattling half-thoughts. “Putting some things together.”

“I would like to be out of here by six.” Wiebe said then, actually looking at his watch properly now. “Emily left work on time today and I promised her I would be home to appreciate her cooking dinner.”

Shane jumped up, immediately ready to absolutely delay this conversation further, maybe by a week? A month? Forever? “Oh, we could do this—”

“Sit,” Wiebe commanded.

He sat. Sighed. “Remember a while ago we talked about— the thing. I had. With another player. That I shouldn’t have told you about.”

“Ilya Rozanov, Captain of our Sworn Rivals, the Boston Raiders?” Wiebe reached across his desk to pick up his stress ball which he began to squeeze, a little boggle-eyed. “Haunts my dreams, Shane.”

Not a great start. He wasn’t *entirely* certain Wiebe was joking, either. “Er. Yeah.”

Wiebe, very visibly bracing himself, carefully asked, “Did you... reunite?”

“Yeah. We did.” He couldn’t help the small, wistful smile. “Big time.”

His coach closed his eyes for a long moment. “Okay. Okay. Guess that explains his rediscovery of his God-given talents.”

“I want to be clear that... regardless of our personal relationship, Rozanov and I have always maintained our competitiveness on the ice.”

“I doubt anyone would dispute that.”

“That’s not what Alex said.”

“Alex knows?” Wiebe asked strangely, like it was a question but also an answer at the same time.

“Hypothetically. There was data...” Shane waved a hand. Not important right now. “They said that there’s no contractual obligation for me to tell anyone.”

“No,” Wiebe agreed with a wince. “But what’s the plan here? You keep this a secret until, what, you retire?”

“We haven’t really discussed that part yet.” The actually *being together* had been the most important part.

Wiebe’s eyebrows rocketed up. “What? Ever?”

“It’s— until recently it’s not really been like that. It was just, you know.” He had to wave a hand again. To encompass the *sex* of it all. The copious, frequently filthy, really hot sex he was having with the captain of their Sworn Rivals, the Boston Raiders.

“So it’s not serious?”

“Well, we’re exclusive now.” That made it serious, right? They were *boyfriends*. It was a whole label people used when they were committed to someone.

Wiebe absorbed this with the kind of faux deadpan seriousness that suggested he was trying not to laugh. “Wow. Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander. Your biography is going to be a bestseller.”

Shane hadn't even *considered* that. Of course there was going to be a biography! And Ilya was bound to be more than a chapter. Would there even be two biographies? A *joint* biography? Jesus. "Let's not mention that to my mom."

"She knows?"

Shane violently shook his head. "No! No, she doesn't know about us."

Wiebe squinted at him for a long moment, moving the stress ball from one hand to the other. Eventually he stilled and very carefully put the stress ball down. "Shane, can I be blunt?"

"You weren't before?" he asked nervously.

"Fair. The first thing I say as... a friend. I hope. I know you are close to your parents. You respect their opinion. They know you're gay. So why the hell haven't you told them?"

Shane grimaced.

"The second thing I say as your coach. This will come out." Wiebe stabbed his desk with his index finger. All levity was gone. "Someone will see you. Someone will take a photograph. Someone will overhear you. If you're lucky it'll be a friend who can be convinced to be understanding. If you're unlucky it will be on the front page of *La Presse*. And the headline will be 'Shane Hollander, MLH golden boy, Caught In illicit Affair with Russian Captain'. Never mind contractually, you will be outed and vilified. Rozanov's citizenship will be at risk. So, I ask again, what's the plan?"

"We're... we're looking at Ilya's immigration status," Shane said weakly, chastened. Ilya had just had his EB-1A petition approved and his lawyer said it would probably take up to eight months to get a Green Card, could be sooner. No need to marry Svetlana, which was a relief on many levels, even if Shane still considered *his* marriage to Ilya as a back-up.

That was of course if Ilya decided to stay in the US and didn't try the early trade route to a Canadian team. Even then, *just in case*, Shane was working on the paperwork in the background and had bought a Polaroid so they could start taking photos of each other to prove that they were in a relationship. Photos were probably better than just the years of hotel room numbers and sexting via iMessage.

"That is a good start," Wiebe said firmly. "Does Petrov know? About you?"

Shane shook his head in a way that sort of turned into a head nod. "He thinks he saw something. I haven't confirmed it."

"Okay. Well, don't."

"No?"

"No," said Wiebe. He sat forward over his desk, eyes as somber as Shane had ever seen them. "This isn't about contracts. This isn't about making the MLH a better place. I know Alex and Petrov have their own plans and you seem to be very neatly becoming their figurehead for said plans, but I need you to protect yourself and protect Rozanov *as a priority*. This is crisis

PR one-oh-one. Which at the very least means your mom and your agent should be made aware so they can prepare for the fallout. Because there will be. This will *not end well*. Do you understand me?”

“I’m not— we’re not stupid,” Shane said, stumbling over his words. He had not been expecting this. “We’ve been careful. We’re *so* careful—”

Wiebe scowled. “What does Petrov *think* he saw?”

“He— he thought he... he saw us. He didn’t *see* us,” Shane reiterated, with slowly morphing horror. “But he saw enough to guess.”

His coach jabbed his finger against his desk again. “Precisely.”

“Fuck,” Shane said, leaning forward to rest his head in his hands because he was feeling light-headed. “Fuck.”

“Shane, you get what I’m saying here. You understand me?”

“Yessir. I understand.”

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Shane had seen Ilya in full charm offensive at various awards, able to turn on that manly, back-slapping shit that was so popular with male stakeholders, then code switch to something more sinuous with their wives. It was both impressive and appalling at the same time.

Chapter Notes

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

The first time he'd tried to talk to Ilya about it, it went wrong, which was only partially Shane's fault. He'd decided to do it over the phone – regular phone, no video – because the signal in Ilya's hotel was shit, and it was after the Raiders had just lost to Buffalo in overtime and Ilya was very tired.

“You are breaking up with me?” came an outraged voice down the phone line.

“What?” Shane pulled at his hair. “How did you get that from what I just said?”

“Because you just said—” Ilya cut-out, “— so what exactly else am I supposed to think?”

“I didn't hear that,” Shane said, frustrated, “but that's not what I said at all.”

“*What?*”

“Fuck. Can you move to a window or stand on a chair?”

“I cannot— hear you?”

Shane yelled at the phone, “GET BETTER SIGNAL!”

The phone cut out entirely, the line going dead.

Shane collapsed face-first on his couch. He'd driven home in an absolute state of freefall. Twice he'd dialed his parents, only to hang up before the call even went through. Thanks to a few years of Rozanov-related panic spirals, he'd been forced to train himself out of calling home at the slightest provocation and he wasn't about to start that behavior up again. When he spoke to his parents – Shane winced at the inevitability of this thought – he would do so calmly. With, like, a plan.

Just like he did everything else.

Except, possibly, this.

His phone lit up, somehow annoyed. He squirmed onto his side as he answered, “Hello?”

“Fucking shithole hotel with fucking shit signal and shit food.”

Shane relaxed a little; Ilya’s voice, whilst furious, was now clear as a bell. “Yeah, that Hyatt sucks.”

Ilya made an odd, puffing noise. “I am outside,” he said on an exhale.

Shane narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “Are you smoking?”

“Yes. If you are breaking up with me, I am going to fucking smoke, Hollander.”

“I’m not breaking up with you!”

“You’d better not be,” he said threateningly.

Why, *why*, was it on the tip of Shane’s tongue to challenge that threat with one of his own? Like, *I can break up with you if I want*. Why? He didn’t want to do that. What was *wrong with him*? “I’m not,” Shane grumbled, annoyed at himself for a competitive streak that overpowered sense. “You didn’t hear me right.”

“Then tell me right.”

He gritted his teeth at being – unfairly – at the receiving end of Ilya’s most irritable tone. “We need to make a plan for if we get outed and the media attacks us and I think we should start by talking to Farah. Which is what I said before only you seemed to interpret that as me breaking up with you.”

“Because that’s not what you said,” Ilya replied, peeved. “You said, if we get outed we will be ripped apart so we need to get ahead of that.”

“How did you get break up from that?”

“You said *ripped apart*!”

Shane squinted at his TV. He mostly left Sportsnet on during the day when he was at home, on mute, but he’d seen the highlights of this game several times now. “I meant— by the media. Not, like, forcibly separated. I wasn’t suggesting we separate *in advance*. Jesus, did you get hit on the head?”

There was another puffing noise. “Okay. It was hard to hear and I maybe mistranslated,” Ilya breathed out, voice more even. “You were stressed. It was making me stressed. My English is less good when I’m stressed.”

Shane had noticed that, actually. The English part, not the part where apparently they’d developed stress empathy with each other. “Sorry if I freaked you out.”

“Fucking *yes*, Hollander.”

He did a bit of deep breathing, listening to Ilya smoke and, just, exist on the other end of the phone. “Wiebe implied that Petrov and Alex are kind of using me.” Shane found this as hard to say as it was to think about. “At least, that’s what I think he implied.”

“Mmm.”

“You agree?”

“I think you have become very important to their plans, yes. Even more than before.”

Shane pressed a hand to his sternum, where an uncomfortable feeling swirled around, like butterflies but sick, wounded ones. “That’s not nice.”

“I don’t think— it’s not— not with bad intentions,” Ilya said carefully, feeling out the words. “They are lucky and know it, that’s all. That you are you. Smart and handsome and like dick.”

Shane rolled his eyes. “Thanks.”

“Good on camera. Good with words,” Ilya continued, warming to his theme. “You will do more for their cause than they will. They are... white and rich and have privilege.”

Shane made a face, not sure that this didn’t apply to him as well. Whilst not *entirely* white, he had little real connection to his Japanese heritage and never tried to pretend otherwise, though people seemed to like pretending for him. He’d been to Japan once, when he was a little boy, and there was a photo of him standing with his now dead grandparents in front of one of those blossom trees. He didn’t remember the trip, just as he didn’t really remember them. And his parents were very comfortable. His mom had owned – and sold – her PR agency to a big corporation when he was a teenager and his dad was a senior civil servant. And he was, of course, a millionaire now. “I’m pretty rich.”

“Not rich like them. They are, hmm, *burzhuy*, we would say. Ah, fat cat.” He grunted. “I looked Petrov’s family up. *Monarkhist*. Of course. Left Russia during the revolution. Escaped clutching their jewels, ran to hide with their rich European cousins.”

“You sound kind of pissed off.” They didn’t particularly talk about politics – Canadian, US or Russian – but Shane had always got the impression that Ilya disagreed with Putin’s policies.

“Bah. No, not really. Is just the way you speak of such things. Safe.” Ilya blew out a final breath of smoke; he heard him grind it up on some kind of stony surface. “We tell Farah, yes? About us?”

“Yes.”

“I like this. Romantic.”

“Sure. Telling our agent about the relationship that might end our careers. Romantic.”

“Such a downer, Shane,” Ilya teased.

This teasing which, from Ilya, *was* romantic, did little to assuage Shane’s nerves. “It’s just a shame, is all,” he muttered resentfully. “We can’t just be together. It has to be all this... mess.”

“I know, *dorogoy*.”

He wanted to talk about some of the other things Wiebe said. About *plans*. Plans that weren’t prepared press releases and immigration. They had only been *together* together for a few weeks. A couple of months. They hadn’t even— he’d not told Ilya he loved him yet, though Shane did. If this had been any other relationship, not even necessarily a straight one, would they have started to talk about moving in together? About marriage? Kids? He was pretty sure Hayden and Jackie had done that on their second date.

Instead, the only thing they could do was talk about when their schedules would allow them to next see each other.

“Three more days,” Ilya said then, really reinforcing the problem.

“Three more days,” Shane repeated, holding back the heavy sigh. “I’ll schedule the call with Farah.”

*

Obviously, his mom had Opinions about Farah signing Ilya Rozanov, so Shane had been forced to head her off the Betrayal Path fairly early on by telling her that it was him who had recommended it.

“But— but why?” she had asked him, bafflement in her tone.

Shane had been rifling through his boring selection of nutritious meals. Did he want chicken with rice? Chicken with quinoa? Chicken with spelt? Oh, there was a salmon at the back with couscous. That would do. “It’s not unusual for players to share an agent.”

“If they are Wasserman, maybe, or CAA, but Farah is basically a one-woman band. We chose her specifically because she would be dedicated to you. Because she understood your particular needs because of her own personal experience.”

This was true. When they had been looking for an agent, his mom had gone to all the big agencies and been distinctly unimpressed with their offering – despite quite a few of them striking up informal relationships with Shane from the time he was twelve. She’d actually found Farah through a friend of his dad’s, who had played with him at college, and it had been a risk signing with her because by no means had she the clout of some of Shane’s peers’ agents.

“Okay, maybe, but it’s understandable that Farah might want to grow her business now that she’s more established,” Shane had never got the impression she wanted this, but, hey ho,

“and Rozanov wants to get more personable treatment than he was getting with his former agent.”

“And he told you this.” His mom’s doubt was palpable. “Ilya Rozanov.”

“Yeah. At All Stars, ah, last year,” Shane lied. “We are able to have a reasonable conversation, Mom.”

“I’m sure you are. You’re a professional,” she said, the suggestion being that Ilya wasn’t.

“He’s looking to get permanent residency. He doesn’t want to go back to Russia.”

“Oh. Well. That would require a new agent,” his mom agreed begrudgingly, knowing full well that Russia would fight tooth and nail to keep their top players as citizens. “But *your* agent, Shane?”

“I didn’t have a problem with it,” he had promised her. “I trust Farah to have my best interests at heart.”

Of course, now, a few weeks after Ilya had signed with Farah, and after Wiebe had read him the riot act, Shane had scheduled the call with Farah whilst Ilya was with him. Not that she’d known that. The call had been with Shane, at his request, and when she’d logged on to see them both side by side at the table, had done a double blink.

“Hi... Shane. Ilya. Did I— know that this was going to be a joint call?” she asked, as if they had joint calls all the time.

“No. Surprise!” said Ilya, beaming. Under the table, he had his hand on Shane’s knee which was both for their mutual reassurance but also for Shane to stop bouncing his leg and jiggling the table.

“This is unorthodox,” she said, her full mouth quirking to the side.

“All will become clear shortly,” Ilya said, really hamming up the mystery in a way that had Shane rolling his eyes.

Shane thought it was really saying something that, in the short while they had known each other, Farah had obviously warmed to Ilya because she smiled properly, her brown eyes lighting up. “Okay. I’m all ears.”

Ilya squeezed Shane’s knee. “You want I go first?” He squinted and corrected himself, “You want *me* to go first?”

Shane shook his head. She had been his agent longer. “It’s all good. Farah, I wanted to share some personal news about myself. I’m, um, gay.”

Her mouth rolled into an ‘o’ but before she could say anything Ilya leaned forward and chipped in, “And I’m bisexual.”

Clearly, with these two meagre pieces of information, and the fact that they were leaning against each other like books on a shelf, Farah then put two and two together.

Nevertheless, Shane felt it needed absolute clarity. “And we’re together,” he murmured and all the hairs on his body lifted as goosebumps ran down the back of his spine and along his arms.

It was the first time he’d said it. The first time he had told anyone properly.

It was fucking amazing. In the most terrifying way possible.

“Oh. Wow.” Farah took a moment to gather herself. “That’s... wonderful news,” she said carefully. “If you don’t mind me asking, how long has this been going on?”

They glanced at each other. “Ah, a few... years?” Ilya suggested, posing this more as a question for Shane to corroborate rather than a confirmation.

“Yeah. A few years,” Shane agreed readily.

“So, it’s not recent. And it’s... serious?” Farah prompted.

They looked at each other again, both wearing identical, wavering smiles.

‘Serious’, Ilya mouthed to Shane, wide-eyed.

“Yeah,” said Shane, bashful, “it’s serious.”

*

It was Saturday morning and Shane had been sitting in his car outside his parents’ house for about thirty minutes.

He had not told his parents he was coming.

He had not told Ilya.

He wasn’t sure why. Maybe it was because, even halfway here, he had been reconsidering this approach and he didn’t want to get Ilya’s hopes up. Not that Ilya had been pressuring Shane to tell his parents – almost the opposite. He had no plans to tell his dad (“Little point. He would forget. And he would murder me.”) or his brother (“He would blackmail me. Probably.”). But Ilya knew Shane’s relationship with his parents was different and sometimes, when they were together, he got a look in his eye anytime Shane mentioned them. Sort of... longing.

Wiebe’s voice kept coming back at him, not just his absolutely terrifying lecture about fallout but his confusion about Shane still keeping this secret from his parents.

He had been trying not to think about why he hadn’t told his parents. It was probably the same reason he hadn’t told Hayden. Hadn’t told J.J.

It was obvious, though, wasn't it? He didn't need to scratch too hard at that one. He was afraid. He was a coward.

For some reason, *this* secret was bigger than him being gay. Gay was— incidental. Gay was almost *inactive*. Ilya Rozanov was active. The active symbol of Shane's gayness. It moved Shane from a theoretical construct to an entirely practical and practicing gay person.

A gay person who was *with* Ilya Rozanov. Not just any other man. Ilya. Rozanov.

The guy Shane had been compared to all his professional hockey career, the flip side to Shane's wholesome coin. The guy who had been the main feature of his mom's more colorful rants. The guy Shane had bitched about at team meetings with Hayden and the others, who he'd put down and performatively belittled, even when he was simultaneously messaging him to meet up, knowing full well he didn't mean it.

It was like he had been two different Shanes since he and Rozanov had first hooked up. There was the Shane everyone knew and expected – the generational hockey talent, the role model for Asian kids, the captain and teammate and good son. And then there was the other Shane who did unthinkable, secret things, like dirty sex with a rival in anonymous hotels and lied to his loved ones.

Good Shane and Bad Shane.

But there had never been two Shanes. Just the one Shane who wanted to deny a part of himself. The part of himself that preferred men and sex with men and Ilya most of all. Wanting Ilya didn't make Shane *bad*.

Ilya wasn't bad, either. He was a generational hockey talent whose skills rivalled Shane's, though he executed those skills differently. And *he* shouldn't be a secret. And certainly not from the people who loved Shane the most.

With unearthly timing, Shane's cell phone vibrated with a message from Lily.

Lily: *Serious*

Even in extremis, it made him smile. Since that call with Farah, they'd taken to sending this word to each other, once, sometimes even twice a day.

Serious, Shane wrote back and, after much deliberation, he added the little red heart emoji and pressed 'send'.

Then he opened his car door and climbed out.

*

"Shane," his dad said, looking up from his newspaper as Shane let himself into the house with his set of house keys, "were we expecting you?"

"Shane?" his mom called from upstairs. "Is that you?"

“It is,” David called back, as if Shane couldn’t answer for himself. “Did we know he was coming?”

Yuna bounded down the stairs in her weekend clothes of ratty, bleach-stained jeans and an old McGill sweatshirt of his dad’s. She was wearing her reading glasses. “We didn’t know you were coming, did we, sweetheart?” She squeezed his arm in greeting. “What are you doing here? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I have something to tell you guys. Maybe we should sit down.”

Like they had been activated, his dad stood up, newspaper tossed to one side, and his mom immediately shoved her glasses on top of her head the exact way she always told him not to because it would ruin the arms. “Should we— sit in the kitchen?”

David was already on the move. “I think this looks like a kitchen conversation.”

Moments later, they were all sat around the table, a collection of nervous Hollanders.

Shane licked his suddenly dry lips. He’d basically worn J.J.’s ChapStick down to a nubbin by this point. “So, I would like you to know that I have been seeing someone. A man,” he added quickly, just in case they were wondering if he was about to reverse the gay thing.

Yuna breathed out. He could tell from her body language that she’d just grabbed his dad’s thigh under the table. “Oh, that’s wonderful, Shane.”

“Hold that thought.” Shane drew in a breath. Oxygen was important. “The person I have been seeing is probably going to shock you. But... he is very important to me. Has been very important to me. And so while it *will* be a shock, please know that it’s— I’m happy. We are happy. Together.”

His mom and dad exchanged glances.

“Then we’ll be happy,” his dad said. His mom nodded vigorously though she certainly looked a little worried now.

“Cool. It’s Ilya Rozanov.”

“What the fuck,” said his mom.

*

“Ilya Rozanov, as in captain of the Boston Raiders, Ilya Rozanov.”

“That’s the one!” Shane said, dizzily, almost on a high now. He had said it. The words had left his mouth. He was free of the very last secret. He couldn’t tell if this was a good kind of high or a bad kind. His mouth tasted a bit sour and yet he couldn’t stop smiling.

“Sweetheart, if you could just unclench... a little,” his dad whispered to Yuna, attempting to dislodge her hand from his leg.

Yuna released his dad, almost pushing herself off of him. “You and Ilya Rozanov. Are— how? When? *How?* How long?” she managed.

To his parents, Shane needed to be more truthful than he had been to Wiebe. “It’s been going on for a while. But we didn’t really make it serious until recently.”

“How long is a while?”

“Since— the, ah, CCM shoot.”

“*What?*” His mom’s mouth dropped open.

His dad did the math. “Before your rookie year?”

“You’ve been *with* Ilya Rozanov since *before your rookie year?*”

“Not *with him*, with him. But we’ve been—” Wow. What was the parent-friendly way of saying ‘hooking up’? He wasn’t even sure his parents knew he had sex. It wasn’t like it was appropriate dinner conversation. In fact they’d always entirely avoided the subject of Shane’s dating prospects which, come to think of it, was probably a work of enormous delicacy on his parents’ behalf. “We’ve been—”

“Lovers?” Yuna Hollander suggested, looking pretty damn horrified.

“No, Mom, *gross*.” He groaned and decided it was unfortunately accurate. “But yes, yes, that.”

“Before your rookie year,” his dad repeated before getting up and pulling down a bottle of red from the wine rack, giving the label a thoughtful look.

“Dad,” Shane protested, because apparently he was driving his parents to *drink*, “it’s barely even midday.”

“You’re right. A white wine would be more appropriate,” David muttered, thoughtfully putting the bottle back and opening the fridge.

“I’ll take a glass,” Yuna said faintly, pinching the bridge of her nose.

*

The wine had been poured. Shane even had some because, what the hell, it was an Occasion.

“Look,” Shane was keen to move on to what really mattered, which was The Plan, “Farah knows.”

“Farah. Farah! Shane, you little— *this* is why?” his mom hissed, plonking her wineglass down a little too hard.

“Yes. We needed to set some things in motion. He came out to his team—”

“Jesus, to the Raiders?”

“Yes, it did not go well.”

Yuna gasped, really running the full gamut of human emotions during this conversation. “Oh, the poor boy.”

That was more like it. “Yeah. They’re—coming around to it.” Or maybe they were just all ignoring the elephant in the room. Ilya was loose on the details. All he cared about was that they were winning hockey games again and he was catching up to Shane on points. And that Marly sometimes came over to play Call of Duty.

“It’s... more it’s a problem because he’s Russian and things are getting less and less LGBTQI+ friendly over there and they certainly don’t have all those letters. Maybe he could be hurt, if he went back, if this was made public. So he’s applied for a Green Card, which he should probably have done before—” Shane took a deep breath, not really thinking this was the time and the place to launch into Ilya’s ability to bury his head in the sand, “—and Farah is looking at his Trade options, and he’s deciding if that’s something he wants to do. I mean, we’re pretty sure no one in the Raiders are going to talk. Though, it doesn’t help he’s not exactly going out every night and being photographed with girls anymore—”

Yuna’s dark eyebrows rose straight up. “Which he has been doing pretty consistently for *years*, Shane.”

“Yeah, well, we weren’t in a monogamous relationship until a couple of months ago,” he said, equally sternly back. “I’ve suggested maybe that he could still go out and, I don’t know, make it look like he might be doing stuff but he didn’t like that idea.”

That was an under-exaggeration. Ilya had been very offended.

His mom’s mouth pursed. “Nor should he.”

“Maybe, okay.” Discussing that sort of thing with his parents, his mom, was probably not going to get him far. Or about as far as it had got him with Ilya. “So, what we’re trying to do first, is put things in place so that if we *do* get accidentally outed, there’s a plan, a plan that doesn’t involve him being deported and us being benched or whatever.”

“No, no.” Yuna jabbed the table with her finger. “The first thing you’re going to do is introduce us to your boyfriend.”

“I think their plan is also pretty crucial, sweetheart,” David added in a mild voice.

“No. Yes. But also no. I want to meet him. Properly. ASAP,” she said, jabbing her finger with every letter of the acronym.

“Sure. Yes. But, Mom, he’s— he lives in Boston.”

His mom rolled her eyes. “Oh, no, what an insurmountable distance. However, will we manage. You will find a weekend, and he will come— you will both come and stay.” Yuna grabbed his dad’s arm urgently. “Oh, David, we need to swap out Shane’s bed for a king.”

“Check.” His dad got up to write this on the To Do list on the fridge. Shane couldn’t see what he was writing but it was probably definitely not *Buy new bed for Shane to have sex in* because that would be insane.

“I’ll speak to Ilya about when he can come.”

Yuna dragged her glasses down from her head and reached for her phone. “Why don’t we cross reference your game schedules now, hmm? Get a few options on the table. David, get the calendar.”

*

“Hi, it’s me,” Shane whispered from the downstairs cloakroom, pulling at the short hairs at the back of his neck.

“Hello me,” Ilya drawled, amused. “Why are we whispering?”

“So, I’m at my parents, and I told them about us, and they’re cool about it and everything now but you’re free next Sunday, right? You haven’t got a game on Monday? I checked but maybe you have plans. They want to meet you. A lot.” He was running out of air. Practically squeaking. “Like, because you’re my boyfriend and we’re together so please say yes Dad’s already ordered a new bed?”

“*Hollander!*”

“I’m sorry!” he yelped, then lowered his voice because he was *hiding in the downstairs cloakroom*. “I didn’t know Mom would be so insistent.”

“You told your parents? Your mama wants to meet me?”

“Yes. Like, yesterday.”

Ilya made a funny noise. Sort of... a nervous giggle? “I see. Yes. That is...”

Terrified that Ilya was about to say *no*, Shane prompted him. “What? Finish your sentence.”

“I have never met parents before.”

“*What?*”

“Is new for me.”

“Okay.” Well, it was new for Shane, too, to introduce a boyfriend to his parents. He wasn’t actually sure if he’d ever introduced a girlfriend. Jessica had kind of been his friend before they’d become boyfriend-girlfriend. Come to think of it, he didn’t really remember how they had become boyfriend-girlfriend. Had he kissed her? Had she kissed him?

Ilya sniffed. “They will love me, of course.”

Shane rolled his eyes. “You are such an asshole.”

“What? You don’t think they will love me?” The confidence dropped from his voice abruptly, like Ilya Rozanov had never heard of confidence before, like confidence had yet to be invented.

“No, no, I’m sure you’ll charm them.”

“Like I charmed you.”

Oh, okay, the confidence was back. What a trip.

“Well, let’s hope not exactly like that, huh, dude?”

“What have I said about that word.”

*

Ilya had *not* been helpful on the subject of how Shane would break the news to his friends. His preferred suggestion had been for Shane to invite them all to his apartment and then, at the crucial moment, Ilya himself would jump out of a closet (“Get it? I was *in a closet!* Like you!”) and reveal himself as Shane’s boyfriend (“Surprise, fuckers!”). He had laughed *long* and hard about this idea, wheezing down the phone about how it would be sure to send Hayden to an early grave.

Shane had not found this remotely funny.

“Be serious. I need to... ease them into the idea.”

“Yes, because I am a piece of shit and they hate me, mmm?”

“No. Because you are the captain of our rival team and, *yes*, you have been shitty about me for the entirety of our careers.”

His boyfriend gasped. “I have never.”

“You have more than once pretended to the media that you didn’t know who I was.”

“Heh.”

“Once, you mistook me for a goalie.”

“Heh-heh.”

“And another time you—”

“Okay, Hollander, you make your point. I am an asshole, *fine*. You are no boy scout either.”

“I think you’ll find—”

“Enough.” Ilya sniffed, knowing full well that in the dance of their rivalry, Shane had never let his professionalism slip in public. In private that was another matter; he would happily talk shit to Ilya’s face. And he had to Hayden and J.J.

Hence the problem.

“You know, the smart thing for us to have done would have been to downplay the rivalry. Rather than the exact opposite,” he mused, kicking his past self for falling into the MLH’s obvious money-making trap.

“Was good for our careers, no?”

Yes. It had been. More media coverage. More tickets sold. A crowd baying for a confrontation. “Oh, now you’re talking all sensible.”

They sat in silence, breathing together three-hundred miles apart and dwelling on the years in their shared past. It would make one hell of a biography, it really would. Maybe he *should* mention it to his mom.

“We should have come out as friends,” Ilya murmured. “At least then we could be seen together.”

“We could still do that,” Shane said slowly, an inkling of an idea tweaking his prefrontal cortex, “couldn’t we?”

*

“Don’t worry, I didn’t invite a friend,” Jackie said drily when she opened the door to greet Shane.

“Ha, ha,” he said, leaning forward to kiss her cheek, smelled her usual lightly floral perfume. He held out the bottle in his slightly sweaty palm. “I brought wine.”

Jackie accepted this gracefully, looking at the label as if she knew anything at all about wine. As if any of them did. “Lovely, thank you. Do you plan to drink any?”

“God, no.”

He took off his shoes in the hall and kicked them in the boot cupboard, accepting the violent greeting from Jade as she threw herself at him, very nearly taking him out. “Hey, kiddo, how are you?”

“Uncle Shane,” she gasped, dramatically, “I don’t wanna go to bed. I want to stay up with you.”

He brushed the top of her head fondly. “I don’t know, we’re going to talk about the news all night.”

According to Hayden, Jade had formed an *intense* dislike of ‘the news’. They were all mystified as to *how* she had formed this dislike as Jackie exclusively watched murder mysteries set in British villages and Hayden only watched the sports channels. Not that he was about to accuse her of this, but Shane had his suspicions about their new nanny, Bridget, who was studying for her PhD and once asked him about his thoughts on the political situation in the Middle East.

Suffice to say, Shane had no thoughts, and that was the last time Bridget had really spoken to him.

Jade groaned and swooned against the newel post at the base of the stairs. “Not the *news*,” she cried, tossing her head back.

Wow, Shane mouthed to himself.

“We’re thinking of signing her up for theater school,” Jackie told Shane, utterly seriously, if not slightly proud.

“I can totally picture that.” Hayden did have a flair for amateur dramatics. Maybe she got it from him.

Bridget descended the stairs, then. “There you are,” she said sternly. She gave Shane slight Mary Poppins vibes, a little bit scary and all-knowing, though she was younger than Shane. “Sorry about that, Mrs. Pike. She escaped me.”

“No worries, Bridge. Say goodnight to Uncle Shane, Jade.”

“Night, Uncle Shane. Sorry about *the news*,” Jade whispered, mouthing the words like they were cursed.

Shane and Jackie headed into the kitchen to join the others, Jackie wrapping her arm around his. “What is it about *the news* that she finds so dreadful?”

“The dreary outfits, mostly.”

“Oh, fair.”

Shane greeted Hayden and J.J. with the usual manly hugs and slaps on the backs. He accepted a ginger ale, poured into a glass with ice and topped with a slice of lime and a few sprigs of mint, which was how he liked to take it now. “Something smells good.”

Jackie answered, as she hopped up onto one of the island stools. “It’s Hay’s *Marry Me Chicken*.” This was the one dish that Hayden knew how to cook; his mother had taught it to him.

“Don’t worry, yours doesn’t have any cream,” Hayden said as if Shane was about to ask, which he wasn’t. On the off chance the Pikes had entirely forgotten Shane’s dietary restrictions, he would have just said nothing and scraped off as much sauce as possible.

“Mine does though, right?” J.J. checked anxiously, giving Shane the very slightest accusatory look.

“Hell yes,” said Hayden.

This was good, Shane decided, looking around at his three closest friends. They were relaxed. They were laughing. He could do this.

*

“No,” said Hayden, shaking his head.

“Ah. Yes?”

“No. There’s no way.”

“There’s very much a way.” Multiple ways, actually. *Not helpful, brain.*

J.J., similarly stumped, leaned forward. “*This is not a joke?*” he asked Shane in French, as if his English had entirely left him.

“No. Not a joke. I understand why you would think that though.” Shane tried a smile and he knew without a mirror that it was unfortunate. “It’s... really wild.”

Jackie seemed to be recovering faster than everybody else. Though she did lean forward to grab the wine and top up her own glass. “How... long?”

“We’ve been official for nearly three months.” Actually, it had been on Shane’s mind to look up the exact date. That was important right? To know the date of when you officially got together with someone. For *anniversaries*.

“Oh, okay. So not very long.”

That sounded as if Jackie was mentally downplaying it. Which Shane didn’t want.

“Unofficially a bit longer than that.”

Jackie’s green eyes widened just a little. “How much longer?”

“Um. A few years. We, ah, sort of... connected,” *good word, Shane*, “the summer before our rookie season.”

J.J. leaned back in his chair, forcing it onto its back legs as he made a very *French* sounding noise of distress. “*Ostie de crise.*”

“You’ve been sleeping with Ilya Rozanov,” Jackie practically silent-mouthed his name, “since before your rookie season?”

“Yes,” Shane said, deciding they didn’t need the technicalities. There had been very little sleeping. He glanced over at Hayden, worriedly. Pale-faced, stricken, he appeared to be still processing.

Jackie had done the math. “Since you were *nineteen.*”

He cleared his throat. People got hung up on this point a lot. “Maybe I would like some wine actually?”

J.J. rubbed his cheek. “*Ilya Rozanov... is gay.*”

“He’s bisexual, actually. Likes, um, girls as well as guys.”

“Well, we knew he liked girls...” Jackie said faintly. She took a large sip of wine.

“A lot of girls,” J.J. added with heavy emphasis, as if the math wasn’t mathing.

Shane narrowed his eyes. “Yes. I’m aware. It is obviously easier, with girls. Publicly. Even I found that.”

“I’d like a whiskey,” Hayden said, standing up abruptly, his chair scraping the floor. “Fuck!”

“Swear jar,” they all muttered.

*

“So you’ve known you’ve been gay for longer than you said you did.” J.J. was now massaging his temples.

Shane shook his head, half laughing at himself which he could do now because in retrospect he had been fucking oblivious, full that River in Egypt joke. “No, no, oh, no. Back then I was kind of hoping I hadn’t found the right girl yet. Like. I was fully in denial. And Ilya—” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hayden twitch, “—Ilya was like some kind of, I don’t know, exciting risk thing.”

“But it’s not,” Jackie said very gently, as if she was checking in with him.

“No, no, it’s real. We’re together.” Shane smiled confidently. “My parents know about him. They’re going to meet him next weekend.”

“How did Yuna take *that*?” she wanted to know, eyes widened as if the prospect of Yuna Hollander accepting a Raider as her son’s boyfriend was too hard to believe.

She wasn’t wrong.

“She was pretty shocked. But she actually got to grips with it really fast, to give her credit.”

Unlike Hayden, who had knocked back two whiskeys and was now on his third, staring into his glass like it would give him answers. Obviously, Hayden had an entire summer to get to grips with Shane being gay. Perhaps the processing of Ilya might take just as long. At least he would have Jackie and J.J. to talk about it now instead of resentfully stewing in his own secret.

J.J. at least was able to string the occasional sentence together, though he kept slapping a hand against his mouth with renewed shock. “But Rozanov— you *hate* him.”

“No. I think— oh professionally, yeah. Total asshole. But talented. I think we can all admit that.” Shane couldn’t help the vague proud smile, smiles which were *not* reciprocated by his friends and teammates. “I don’t hate him. I like him very much. Um. I. Well. You know.”

He wasn’t about to declare himself at the table. Not before he’d even told Ilya.

J.J. got it, though, and mouthed, “Wow.” And took a large sip of his drink.

Jackie stood up abruptly, chair scraping across the floor and rounded the table. “I’m happy for you,” she said, bending down to hug him, her long ponytail draping around Shane’s neck and tickling him. Ick. “I’m really happy for you.”

Not for the first time, Shane was grateful that Hayden and Jackie had crossed paths in that club. For Cupid’s arrow or whatever it was that meant his friendship circle now included her. He closed his eyes, briefly. “Thanks, Jackie. That means a lot.” He patted her arm, which she correctly took as the sign to release him and returned to her seat. As subtly as possible, Shane scratched where her hair had brushed his skin.

Hayden groaned. “This makes *no sense*.”

“I don’t know, man,” J.J. said slowly, “it kind of does. Shane *really* likes hockey. And Rozanov is... probably second best to him in the whole league.”

Both Hayden and Jackie made considering, thoughtful noises, as if this rationale was maybe the *only* possible explanation.

“I mean, it’s a bit more than that,” Shane attempted and three pairs of very different eyes turned to him, obviously prepared to hear a better answer.

Shane parted his mouth, ready to launch into all the other reasons he liked – more than liked – Ilya Rozanov. And then, a rare win for Shane, he decided maybe this would be good enough for now. That none of them were in the right place for Shane’s soliloquy on Ilya’s glory. “Sure. Hockey is definitely a big part of it.”

*

Petrov: *Hi. Caught some of the game on Monday. A hattrick! I would expect nothing less.*

Petrov: *Has the Commissioner’s office been in touch with you?*

Shane: *No? Should they? Why? Is this about the photo.*

Petrov: *They might. If you receive anything let me know. Do not confirm any meetings without speaking to me or Christine.*

Petrov: *And no, photo-gate is still ongoing. Sorry.*

Shane: *Should I be worried?*

Petrov: *Not about Crowell. Which I realize is meaningless as you’ll worry anyway.*

Shane: *Correct!!!*

Petrov: *Ha. Good luck with tomorrow’s game.*

Shane: *It’s on Friday.*

Petrov: *It's already tomorrow where I am.*

Shane: *Ah, yes, Captain of Industry.*

Petrov: *you kill me, Shane.*

*

“What if they hate me?”

This was approximately the hundredth time Ilya had said this.

“They will not hate you,” Shane said, also for the hundredth time. He was reaching the end of his tether on this matter. Nothing he said seemed to soothe Ilya’s crisis of confidence.

He, meanwhile, had been in near-constant contact with his parents about Ilya over the last week. Daily asks from his dad about the foods Ilya liked. Links to recipes. Asking if there were any Russian dishes Ilya missed from home (yeah, because that was a topic Ilya would just *love* Shane to bring up). Whether he liked wine or preferred beer. His mom had spent her week apparently working some kind of reverse brainwashing on herself. She had been sending Shane links to some of Ilya’s best plays, saying some frankly *eerie* complimentary things about him. She had then created a terrifying itinerary for the day that broke down their time together into hour-long segments entitled things like ‘Getting to know one another’ and ‘Puzzle hour’ and ‘Coffee and cake and culture’, which she claimed to have put together so they didn’t just resort to talking about hockey.

This collective mania had meant that for once in his life, Shane – who was pretty fucking nervous – was comparatively the most relaxed person here.

Shane took Ilya’s hand and squeezed it, summoning a smile. “We don’t have to do this.” They absolutely did have to do this. He was just saying this to sound boyfriend-ly. “If you really don’t want to—”

Ilya pulled a face at him, as if Shane was talking shit. Which he was. “Fuck you, we drove two hours on our weekend off to do this. I have bought excellent vodka. I have worn a nice shirt.”

Shane glanced at the shirt which was light gray and had little metallic buttons. Apparently, it was Tom Ford. It was very nice. It was slightly distracting, actually, as he had rolled the sleeves up his arms so that the fold cut through the bulge of his bicep and who knew that Shane would find this particularly appealing? Not Shane. His teeth tingled. He wanted to *bite*.

“Okay. So we should maybe go in?”

Ilya returned Shane’s hand-squeeze. Maybe ten times stronger. “What if they don’t like me?” he whispered, again.

“They will love you.”

“You don’t know that.”

Shane smiled for real this time. He was actually pretty confident about this one. “I do.”

“How?”

“Because I love you so how could they not?” he said breezily, because he meant it, he felt it, and therefore he said it, and it was just out there now. Love.

“Oh Shanya,” Ilya sighed, face going all floppy.

“Holy shit,” Shane said, appalled at himself, “I cannot believe I did that now.”

“Neither can I. It could not have been last night? When we were alone?” Spluttering, Ilya let go of him to gesture frantically to Shane’s parent’s house. “Now I have to go in there with a hard-on! Shane! I probably can’t even fuck you tonight!”

Shane thumped his head against the wheel.

“I love you also,” Ilya said furiously, opening the car door. “We will be talking about this later, Hollander.”

At least he had distracted Ilya with something else.

*

Shane had seen Ilya in full charm offensive at various awards, able to turn on that manly, back-slapping shit that was so popular with male stakeholders, then code switch to something more sinuous with their wives. It was both impressive and appalling at the same time.

But watching Ilya behave himself in front of his parents was a whole other kettle of fish. This muted, dutiful Ilya was a bit freaky, if Shane was honest. He kept calling his dad ‘sir’ and his mom ‘Mrs. Hollander’, despite both of them asking him to use their first names.

When they sat down to lunch, Shane pressed their feet together. “Good?” he checked quietly in case actually he was having some kind of mental breakdown. Discovering that Ilya had unplumbed depths of deep emotion had been a steep learning curve for Shane and now he was always aware of it. Ilya liked to keep things close to his chest. And maybe needed to learn to share

Ilya nodded and then immediately jumped up to take the big bowl of salad from his mom to place it on the table.

Yuna smirked at Shane. “What a helpful young man,” she said pointedly.

“Oh my God.” Shane rolled his eyes and, knocking Ilya with his elbow, stood up to grab the bowl of pasta from the stovetop. He wasn’t about to be outmannered by Ilya in his own home.

They served themselves, Shane half listening to the innocuous family talk his mom was giving Ilya. Stuff about their relatives he'd heard before but gussied up for company. His dad drummed up a funny story about one of Shane's previous step-grandmother's, the one before Mathilde. Or the one before that, he couldn't remember, they all kind of merged into one. His grandfather had A Type.

Shane guessed he could respect that, now.

"Your family is in Moscow, still, that's right, isn't it, Ilya?" his mom asked.

"Mom," Shane said warningly. He wasn't an idiot. He had *expressly* told his parents that they weren't to interrogate Ilya about his family.

Ilya tapped Shane's foot with his own. "Yes. My father and my brother. My brother and his wife have just had a little girl."

Ilya's ready response got Shane a 'see?' look from his mom, as if Shane had warned her for no reason.

He glared at her, mentally chanting *no more*.

She ignored him. "You're an uncle! That must be fun."

"Ah, yes. I've not met her yet. Will be nice to spoil a little girl. I will buy very extravagant birthday presents. Poofy dresses," Ilya said, twirling his fork in his spaghetti and looking down at this process very intently. "This pasta is very good, Mr. Hollander."

"It's David, Ilya, please. And it's actually a great recipe from *The New Yorker*, believe it or not. I could make you a copy."

Shane could believe it. His dad was an avid *New Yorker* reader. The recipe – which was one of those half articles, half recipe things where the author waxed lyrical about some Italian *nonna* they'd met on vacation – was printed out and stuck to the fridge with a tomato-shaped magnet. He had taken a smaller portion of pasta, just enough for a few good mouthfuls, and had been watching Ilya Hoover up his massive bowlful with half-admiration, half-disgust.

"I do not cook much," Ilya said, with every suggestion that he regretted this. He reached for the parmesan for the second time and sprinkled a large tablespoon over what remained of his meal. Then he nudged the bowl to Shane who, after a moment's debate, decided to add a third of a tablespoon to the remaining pasta on his plate.

"You boys don't have much time for that sort of thing," Shane's mom said, tracking the movements of the parmesan. "Hockey keeps you busy."

But Shane was faintly intrigued by this expression of a sentiment that sounded genuine to his ears. "You like to cook?"

"I used to, yes." Ilya lifted and dropped a shoulder. "But it became difficult, the amount we have to eat and being away so much. Shane can cook very well," Ilya prompted, laying this

flattering but utterly overexaggerated compliment at his parents' feet as if it was wholly to do with them.

Shane could count on one hand the number of meals he had cooked Ilya and most of them were egg-based. Hard to fuck up eggs.

However, this transparent attempt to suck-up got the expected response. Both of his parents beamed at both of them like Shane had done a really good trick and Ilya maybe an even better one for noticing.

Wow. And to think Ilya had been nervous when he had this parent-charming-skillset in him all along.

"We did try to teach him the basics before he moved out. You were so young." His mother's eyes went a little glossy and she blinked fast. "He wanted to live on his own straight away."

No shit. Having been billeted with a truly intrusive family in Kingston while he was in Juniors, Shane had never wanted to live with anyone ever again. Even if he'd had a pretty shitty apartment for his rookie years, an apartment he could never have brought Ilya Rozanov back to, the peace and quiet had been entirely worth it.

"Me, too," Ilya agreed, nodding and taking a sip of his water. "I moved out as soon as I got drafted. Bought my first apartment in Moscow with my signing bonus."

His mom's politely curious face was maintained as she chewed and swallowed a mouthful of spaghetti. "You went back to Moscow? After the draft?"

"Ah, yes, I went back to play for CSKA."

This was all information on Ilya's Wikipedia page. Shane knew his mom knew this, so it was weird she was asking him about it. Unless it wasn't weird and this was actually how you were supposed to ask people questions? God knew Shane had never asked Ilya any of this.

Hell. He didn't even know what Ilya's favorite color was.

This would be problematic but Shane was pretty certain Ilya didn't know his.

*

Later, as they were preparing for bed, Shane remembered this and asked Ilya if he knew Shane's favorite color.

"It's blue," Ilya said promptly, looking up from his cell phone.

Shane froze his scrabbling around in his bag looking for his glasses case which he *remembered* packing but could not find. "How the hell do you know that?"

Ilya's eyes raked Shane from the top of his (light blue) t-shirt to his (dark-blue plaid) pajama pants. And said nothing.

“I don’t know yours,” he muttered, guiltily, turning back to his task and just tipping the whole thing over onto the rug. There wasn’t much left in it, just his wallet, a couple of protein bars, his keys and an old mouthguard that he’d forgotten was in here.

“It’s orange.”

“Orange? Are you serious?”

“Yes.” Ilya shrugged, pushing his lips out carelessly. “Is a happy color.”

“You don’t wear orange.” He didn’t think. He obviously mostly saw Ilya in athleisure and most of his going out clothes were black.

The corner of Ilya’s mouth tipped up in amusement. “You don’t only have to wear your favorite color, Shane. What are you doing on the floor?”

Shane sighed and began to tuck the few items back into his bag. He really should toss that mouthguard. “Looking for my glasses.”

“You left them in the bathroom.”

“Goddamn.”

The lights were out but Shane had grown up in this house so he could feel his way to the bathroom down the hallway that had essentially been his own private bathroom his entire childhood. Sure enough, his glasses were in their case, next to his toiletries and Ilya’s, and Shane had a funny moment, looking at all their things all muddled together. That was *his* travel sized bottle of shampoo next to *Ilya’s* curl cream.

He grabbed his case and hurried back and had the exact same funny moment, seeing Ilya in his bed, in his childhood bedroom.

Shane closed the door behind him and tossed the glasses on the chest of drawers. He decided he wasn’t interested in reading before bed. “I love you,” he said, relieved he could say it when he felt it now.

Ilya’s smile was wide and unreservedly happy. “I love you, too.” He beckoned Shane closer and Shane, stupid smile on his face, crawled on top of Ilya, straddling his hips. Ilya’s hands went straight to his ass, thumbs rubbing. “I can’t believe you told me that in a car.”

“It just came out. Sorry it wasn’t more romantic.”

“No, no, it was perfect. Very you. I loved it.”

“Yeah?” He leaned forward for a kiss. It was a very sweet kiss. Their noses pressed together, he asked, “Can you say it in Russian, please?”

“*Ya tebya lyublyu.*”

Halfway to kissing him, again, as this was definitely a *must kiss now* moment, Shane jerked back. “Wait. Say that again.”

“*Ya tebya lyublyu*,” Ilya said more slowly, enunciating carefully, blue eyes very soft.

“I feel like— I feel like I’ve heard that before.”

“Probably, yes, I say it all the time in bed,” Ilya laughed gleefully, smoothing his hands up Shane’s back to pull him closer for a hungrier kiss.

“What?” he demanded, in between kissing back. *What?*

“Shane, was impossible not to.” He took hold of the back of Shane’s head, tilting him to get a better angle at his mouth, licking him, nipping at his bottom lip. “You are so beautiful. It’s impossible.”

Shane’s heart was going a mile a minute. He got his hands under Ilya’s T-shirt, rucking it up so he could look at his abs and touch them, run his nails up around his nipples. “How long? How long have you been saying it?”

“I don’t know. Months, Shane. Maybe even years,” he whispered, pressing kisses down his neck.

Shane rolled his hips, trying to get a better friction going. “Years,” he repeated faintly, no longer really absorbing anything now his hard-on could cut glass.

Ilya pressed against his lower back, pushing them closer, grinding up against him. Shane moaned helplessly. Ilya’s shoulders shook with laughter. “You cannot be quiet.”

Shane wasn’t going to deny it. He collapsed against Ilya and sniffed his neck. “This room literally shares a wall with my parents.”

“Maybe your parents like to go for long morning walks?”

He shook his head. Morning sex was out too. “My dad brings my mom coffee in bed.”

Ilya groaned. Loudly. It wasn’t sexual-sounding but his parents wouldn’t know that so he shushed him. “Shane,” Ilya stage-whispered urgently against his neck, his hand sliding beneath the elastic waistband of Shane’s pajamas, “I need to fuck you or I will die right here.”

Shane needed that, too. It had been a very intense day. A very intense, *important* day. And he wanted to be fucked down at the end of it. He needed that release.

“Basement,” he said.

*

The basement of his parents’ house had been kitted out as a make-shift gym for Shane when he was a teenager. The walls were soundproofed and the floor was squishy. Most of the

weights had gone with him to Montreal but the treadmill and bike remained.

Shane closed, and locked, the door. The spotlights were too bright, so the only ambient light came from the streetlights shining in from the row of hopper windows. It was, oddly, quite romantic lighting, shading Ilya in gold. “Can’t believe we’re doing this.”

Ilya turned to him, having assessed the basement with a nod. “It is not weirdest place we have ever had sex.”

“It’s not?”

“Bathroom in Vegas.”

“You didn’t fuck me in a bathroom in Vegas.”

“I would have if the door locked.”

“Oh, you would not.”

“We can test this theory next year.” Rozanov laid the towel they’d brought with them on the floor and tossed down the bottle of lube and the two – really quite enthusiastic – condom packets. He yanked off his T-shirt. “Take off your clothes.”

“You take off my clothes,” Shane returned stupidly which wasn’t what he’d meant to say. He’d meant to say *you take off your clothes* (admittedly not much better) but had got distracted by Ilya’s abs, which happened to him a lot.

“Oh-ho,” Ilya said, delighted, reaching for Shane and pulling off his T-shirt. He ran his knuckles down Shane’s chest and kissed him. “Here’s what we’re going to do.”

“Um-hum?” Shane asked, going from maybe a four in horny – the basement was unnerving, okay? – to a nine at the merest suggestion of instruction.

“You are going to lie down on your back all pretty and get yourself ready for me...” Ilya hooked his thumbs in Shane’s pants, tugging them down over his ass.

Hot, Shane thought, going a bit foggy.

“And whilst you’re doing that, I’m going to kiss you from the top of your head to your toes.”

Shane shivered. Sweet was also sexy.

*

It didn’t happen like that. They got carried away kissing for ages, rolling around on the floor of the gym he’d once sweated out his teenage angst, rubbing their dicks together and wrinkling up the towel which Shane required for hygiene reasons.

Eventually, they got a grip. Ilya positioned himself at Shane’s feet, kissed his toes – which had Shane giggling – and Shane managed precisely one finger in himself, before Ilya got

distracted watching, his mouth pressed to the side of Shane's knee. He'd then taken over, insisting he could do it better. More giggling. There was small fight over the lube and Shane was briefly on top before he was flipped over again, entirely willingly, onto his elbows and knees. His dick hung thick and heavy between his legs.

Ilya reached for the condom, hand blindly slapping the floor before he found it, too caught up in sucking biting kisses on Shane's ass.

He tore the wrapper open with his teeth and knelt between Shane's thighs, the palm of his hand stroking down the length of Shane's spine to his hair. Shane shivered with anticipation. The thought of that dick breaching him was... it was almost too much. Not enough.

"Hey, we could— we don't have to use that maybe," Shane blurted out.

Ilya jolted and then went very still behind him. Deadly silent, his fingers mid-tug in Shane's hair.

"I mean, we can, if you want," he continued, uncertainly, glad he wasn't facing Ilya for this weirdly embarrassing conversation. "It was just a thought. Forget it."

"Stop," Ilya said in that commanding voice he sometimes used. He pulled at Shane's hair, tugging his head back.

Shane had to take hold of the base of his dick and squeeze, wobbling a bit. "Okay," he whispered quietly, thinking unsexy thoughts, like drinking airplane coffee and touching hotel room carpet.

After a moment, Ilya let go of Shane and continued to unwrap the condom. He made a disgruntled noise. "I am not fucking you raw the first time on the floor in your parents' house," he muttered, "what the fuck, Shane." He flicked open the cup of the lube and Shane felt the cool liquid drizzle onto his hole, heard the sound of Ilya slicking himself up.

Then Ilya's dick was pressing inside him, one smooth glide all the way and Shane's eyes rolled to the back of his head as he arched into the pressure and pleasure. "Ugh," Shane said, eloquently, before a slightly more impressive, "I love this. I love *you*."

"Fuck, I love you, too." Ilya's thumbs dug into Shane's hips. He began to move with deep, long thrusts, dick dragging along Shane's prostate in the perfect fucking rhythm.

So caught up in the sensation, Shane didn't initially hear that Ilya was speaking in Russian again. "What are you saying?" he gasped, turning his head so his cheek was pressed to the floor, over the wrinkled edge of the towel. "Ugh. *Harder*, Ilya. Please."

Ilya shook his head, "*Nyet*," and pressed a kiss to Shane's back, keeping up the same deep, prolonged tempo.

Agony. Delicious, excruciating, oh God— "Please, Rozanov, *please. Harder.*" Shane pushed backwards.

“Such a polite boy,” Ilya whispered, curling himself around Shane so he could nuzzle his cheek, the corner of his mouth. His hips pulled back and drove into Shane with a powerful, deep thrust.

Shane yelped. Ilya did it again. And again. And again. “Oh, fuck yes, yes, like that, yes.”

Ilya was getting close, the planes of his face all hard with tension, jaw taut. “Touch yourself,” he bit out.

Shane didn’t have to be told twice. He fumbled beneath himself and took hold of his dick and jerked. *Ah*, man. It was so fucking good. So *fucking* good. The building heat hit its peak and Shane passed that exquisite point of no return. “Gonna come,” he warned. “Gonnacome, gonnacome, gonna— ah, fuck, Ilya, fuck, fuck!” He knew he was shouting. Jets of his come shot up his chest as the orgasm ripped through his body, wave after wave of convulsions from his dick, his ass, his back arching into it.

Behind him Ilya’s rhythm collapsed into jerky stuttering, a sure sign of his own imminent climax. “Fuck, Hollander, you are so good, so beautiful, *fuck*,” he gasped, arms trembling as he gripped Shane. He froze, shaking, his dick so deep inside Shane he could almost taste him.

Then there was nothing but the sound of their panting breaths.

“I cannot believe you did that to me,” Ilya muttered eventually, as they slowly folded to the floor and Ilya did that trick where he pulled them onto their sides so they were spooning, his dick still inside Shane and his arm under Shane’s head.

“What? The basement?” Shane had entered that full-body-relaxation state where everything felt syrupy-fantastic. “Was good idea.”

“The condom thing. I nearly— ugh.” Ilya mouthed at Shane’s neck, used a bit of tooth. “You are such a tease.”

He knew his smile was dreamy. “Mmm, love you.”

Ilya huffed. His mouth formed a recognizable but sloppy kiss shape against Shane’s skin. “*Ya tebya lyublyu*.”

Shane reached behind him, fairly haphazardly, and managed to stroke Ilya’s head. It wasn’t so uncomfortable on the floor. Maybe they could just sleep here? Ilya was like a furnace; he wouldn’t get cold.

“I said, before, that I’m moving my flight tomorrow,” Ilya announced into Shane’s half-wonderings, carefully pulling out of Shane. When Shane winced at the loss, the strange sensation, Ilya’s lips brushed his shoulder in apology and Shane turned his head so he could chase his mouth for a kiss. Ilya loomed over him. “Then,” he continued in a low whisper, “I can fuck you raw in your bed.” His fingers found Shane’s puffy hole, gently stroked the sensitive rim. He smiled, wicked. “And watch my come leak out of you.”

Shane's dick twitched with interest. "Oh. *Oh*." His brain went fuzzy. "Next time I think you should say that in English."

Chapter End Notes

Think this one was quite a cosy chapter, no? Really pulled my foot off the angst. BUT FOR HOW LONG?

Kidding. Kidding. It's all good.

Thank you as ever for the comments and the sharing across the platforms. I'm so glad this story is resonating with you - I've really enjoyed writing it.

I am on Threads, Tumblr, etc. but not active due to the sheer terrifying scale of the fandom!!!

ALSO. Forgot to add - but thank you to those of you who have, very delicately, pointed out errors/typos etc. Really appreciate it and the way a lot of you have gone about it (like, politely). Thank you so much.

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

“Okay. So maybe your other, less hot boyfriend can come for dinner.”

Chapter Notes

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

“That man is messaging you,” Ilya said. He had Shane’s phone because he was in the process of scrolling through Shane’s Spotify, reading songs out loud like it was a horror story, given it was mostly music his parents listened to when he was a kid and nothing from this decade. *And sometimes not even this Century, Shane, who the fuck are the Crash Test Dummies?*

“Which man?”

“What do you mean *which man*?”

“I can’t tell if you’re being serious or not.” Shane glanced over at him twice but his face gave him no clues. “But I have male friends and male co-workers, so I don’t know which man you are referring to.”

He could take a *wild* guess, though.

“The Russian one.”

Shane rolled his eyes. “The French one? Remember? Escaped Russia with their jewels?”

“Of course you would remember that,” Ilya scoffed.

“*Are* you being serious?”

“A little. Not much.” Ilya looked reluctantly amused at himself which eased some of the tension Shane had developed. “Can I read it?”

Confident that Petrov had sent nothing Ilya might find challenging, Shane nodded. “You can, yes.”

Clearly pleased, he tapped open the Messages. “He says... he says the Commissioner wants to see you.” His brow furrowed with concern. “What is this about, Shane? Oh, he is typing something else.”

“Shit,” said Shane. He had managed to not think about this. He turned down the music so he could concentrate better.

“He says his mole— he has a mole?” Ilya let out a little mocking guffaw. “His mole has heard that the Commissioner is not happy about rumors he’s hearing about the Metros. He wants to make sure you are aligned to the MLH’s values and not being ‘poisoned’ by other messages. Then he has put a flirty laughing face.”

“What values would those be? *Fuck*.” Shane glanced at the odometer and eased his foot off the gas.

“He is typing more. Chatty. Oh, he wants to meet to discuss. He—” Ilya stopped.

“What?”

“He wants to know if you are free for dinner tonight to discuss.”

Oh, *superb* timing, Petrov. “Well, I’m not because you’re here.”

“You have dinner often? Maybe he comes over to yours? You go to his fancy place? Put on nice new clothes?”

“We do not.” Shane shook his head. Though Ilya was putting on a very jokey tone, he knew there was an underlying truth to this. “Message him back for me? Say that my boyfriend is with me tonight and I can’t meet. We can find some time tomorrow if he is in the office.”

Ilya duly typed and Shane bit his bottom lip, holding back the desperate desire to ask if Ilya was sticking to the script *exactly* and not adding any... flourishes.

“You want me to read it back to you?” Ilya asked, all knowing and sharply polite.

“No. I’m confident that you wouldn’t fuck around with my career out of petty jealousy.”

There was a small pause. Ilya made a minor edit in the message. “Typo,” he explained. “Okay. I have sent.”

They both exhaled with relief, though probably for different reasons. Shane waggled his hand across the center console and Ilya took it, the crisis momentarily over.

Then Shane’s phone pinged. He reflexively squeezed Ilya’s hand.

Ilya tapped in Shane’s passcode one-handed. “He says he would love to meet your boyfriend. And there is a flirty winky face.”

Shane laughed, hysterically. “Imagine.”

Another ping. “He says he has a thirty-minute break over lunch tomorrow. Maybe you could meet then. I am not enjoying arranging your dates, Shane,” Ilya said snippily.

“Feel free to put the phone down, then, and I will reply to him later.”

Ilya did, throwing the phone into the center console and letting go of Shane’s hand so he could play with his own phone in a totally-casual, really-unbothered way.

They continued on in silence for a bit, Shane focusing on the busy highway, filled with cars with other people heading back to Montreal after a weekend away. Shane often did this journey but he'd always done it alone before and, Petrov's intervention aside, it had been nice to have the company.

He wondered what the Commissioner wanted. And what Petrov wanted to talk about. He had practice tomorrow morning and he was meeting Ali straight after. He didn't know what time Petrov took lunch. Oh, God, he'd have to see Marlene.

He couldn't believe he had taken his *boyfriend* to meet his parents. It was like a dream.

"You know, it might help if you two *did* meet," Shane mused out loud when the thought occurred to him. "We could get this whole thing out of the way. I'm pretty sure he won't be surprised it's you."

Ilya sniffed. "He is an old man. He probably just wants to watch us fuck."

The back of Shane's neck got weirdly hot. "Christ. Well, A, I hope not, ew—" *was it 'ew', Shane, was it?* "—and, B, he's not that old."

"Older than Scott Hunter."

"Who is old for a hockey player." He really wasn't that old, either. Shane hoped he would still be playing when he was Hunter's age, though admittedly with a little more consistency. "Not for, like, *life*."

"So, what, you want me to write back and invite him over?"

"Is that a terrible idea?" He glanced over, briefly, trying to read Ilya's face. "I'd like you to meet him. I like him."

"Oh, I *know*, Shane."

"*Not* like that."

"You think he's hot."

"I think a lot of men are hot. I'm allowed to think men are hot." He was pretty sure that was allowed. And to *say* it out loud even. Right? If he had no intention of doing anything about it? Maybe he needed to clarify this. "But I do *not* think anyone is as hot as you are and I do not want to fuck anyone else and I only love *you*."

Ilya sat with this for a moment and when he spoke his voice was strangely stripped of all emotion, "You have never told me that before."

Bemused, Shane looked at him again. "Which part?"

Ilya shrugged. "That you think I'm hot."

Shane's immediate response was to laugh, because it was ridiculous. "Hey, I *definitely*—"

Wait. Had he? *Had he?* Had the words – *Hey, Ilya, love of my fucking life, you are god-tier-level of attractive to me* – ever actually left his mouth?

They really need to stop having their most significant conversations in cars, what the hell.

He glanced over at his boyfriend again, looking, you know, extremely hot in the passenger seat in a dark grey hoodie and jeans. The hoodie was up and he was wearing a baseball hat under it and a pair of sunglasses in case anyone glancing out of their car window recognized him through the tinted windows but still. The sharp planes of his jaw. The delicate arches of his pink mouth. The breadth of his shoulders. Fuck. So hot. “You know how good looking you are.” He would literally see it in the mirror every day. He *had* to know.

Right?

Ilya made a disbelieving face and looked away from Shane. “Do I?”

“Come on! You’re so hot! Like there have been times when you have actually *melted my brain*. It’s like looking into the sun.”

To say Ilya had perked up would be an underestimation. Shane got the really high wattage smile that made something in his stomach swoop. “Thank you. This is nice.”

“I should tell you more often,” Shane admitted, kind of kicking himself actually. This was probably boyfriend one-oh-one stuff. Ilya told him he was pretty all the time – which had taken some getting used to – and in bed it was always ‘beautiful’. He also suspected some of the Russian was highly flattering and not pure filth. God. He was maybe a *really* shit boyfriend. “I think it *a lot*.”

“You do?” Ilya said hopefully. Crushingly.

He *was* a shitty boyfriend.

“A lot, a lot.”

“Okay. So maybe your other, less hot boyfriend can come for dinner.”

Oh, Jesus.

*

Shane brought Rene up from the service entrance, nerves thrumming low in his belly. “My, ah, boyfriend is sitting at the kitchen island. He’s expecting you.” Weird to get a thrill about saying ‘my boyfriend’ out loud to someone’s bodyguard, weird to *know* someone with a bodyguard, but there you go.

Rene – not a talkative man by any means – nodded and proceeded to do a sweep of Shane’s apartment, moving from room to room like a fucking ghost.

“He has a gun, you think?” Ilya whispered as Shane slunk into the kitchen area nervously in case Rene found a serial killer under the guest bed or something.

They had ordered in take-out as there wasn't a chance in hell he was going to actually *cook* for Petrov, *with* Ilya, that was far too much pressure, but Ilya had insisted that everything had to be plated up into warmed serving dishes, which was what he was doing. It did look better than serving up everything in the containers they had come in, which had been Shane's initial intention.

Ilya, Shane was learning, was surprisingly domestic. He had high standards of cleanliness and was very particular about presentation. This was a very attractive feature that Shane had been happy to learn and would probably jerk off to later in the way that sometimes really weird things about Ilya got him horny.

"I guess?" Shane didn't really like the idea of a gun in his apartment, so he didn't want to think about it. Instead, he sidled up to Ilya and said, in a low voice in case Rene had the hearing of a bat, "Have I mentioned that you look very hot in this shirt?"

It was the grey shirt again, once more rolled very precisely up over Ilya's biceps. He'd also, and this had given Shane some considerable Thoughts, worn the Rolex he'd bought him. Which he hadn't worn for Shane's parents, which meant he'd packed it— for what? Just in case? Just in case he got to wear it in front of Petrov?

Shane was having to really hold back on the desire to buy more stuff for Ilya to wear.

Ilya grinned. "You are very cute." He leaned over to kiss him which was when Rene returned and Shane was very cool about being caught kissing in front of his boss's bodyguard.

"I'll bring Petrov up," he said to them as Shane stood frozen, like a deer in headlights.

"Sounds good," Ilya told him. He had his hand on Shane's ass because of course he did.

Rene left.

"Jesus," Shane whispered, leaning against Ilya heavily.

Unconcerned, if not smug, Ilya patted Shane's ass. "Let's put this on the table."

*

For some reason, Shane blushed absolutely fiery red as he introduced Ilya to Petrov. Honestly, it was a whole different ball game to introducing him to his parents. Maybe it was the sight of them, Ilya and Petrov, standing face to face for the first time with searching looks on their faces as they sized each other up. Maybe it was the knowing *homosexual* crinkly eyes that Petrov gave Shane. Maybe it was the distinct possibility that Ilya might propose to arm wrestle or something. Whatever it was, Shane found himself pausing in front of the open refrigerator and taking a moment to appreciate the cool air while he got drinks.

The conversation was initially very bland. Shane took Petrov on a tour of the apartment, Ilya trailing insouciantly behind them with his hands in his pockets. They fell into an easy back-and-forth about architecture. Shane pointed out features of the apartment he'd specifically requested. Petrov, it turned out, was renovating a house in London which he was finding

challenging – it was an old property with many ‘quirks’. He’d actually just come back from London that morning. Shane mentioned being in London the previous summer for the tennis. Both Petrov and Ilya indicated they had seen the photos of Shane at Wimbledon which led to a brief, maybe awkward moment of silence before Shane suggested they sit down to eat.

The food was a helpful conversational topic. Yes, the chicken *was* very good. Would anyone like more kale salad? Speaking of tennis, Ilya had apparently played tennis as a child. Shane hadn’t known that. It had been one of the options at his sports-forward school in Moscow. He’d liked it but he’d preferred being on skates. Shane had not played tennis, though he was pretty good at baseball.

All safe topics. Very polite. Just fine.

Then, obviously, Petrov got nosey. And posed the question apparently everyone and their dog wanted to know.

Petrov rested an elbow on the table and propped his head up on his hand. His eyes were very blue. Darker than Ilya’s. “So. How long have you two been together?”

Thankfully *because* this was a question that was always asked, they had discussed how to answer it. They had practiced this together, Ilya smirking the whole time, and now Shane had some reassuringly rehearsed lines.

“We’ve been getting pretty serious for a couple of years,” Shane said, as Ilya’s hand crept onto his thigh under the table. He tensed, momentarily, before forcing his spine to relax.

Petrov’s eyebrows went up. “What does that mean?”

“It means we thought it was too complicated and now we don’t care about complicated,” Ilya said, almost challengingly, as if Petrov might possibly say anything about that.

“Well, we do care,” Shane corrected, gently. He didn’t want Petrov to think they were going to be careless.

“Yes, but we are going to find a way,” Ilya insisted, his eyebrows climbing his forehead.

Shane couldn’t help the big smile because Ilya’s declarations were about the most romantic things on earth. “Yeah. That’s right.” Ilya smiled back just as big. Maybe bigger.

“It *is* complicated.” Petrov helped himself to more of the kale salad. It really was very good. It had this pomegranate dressing on it that Shane thought he might try to find a recipe for. Maybe he and Ilya could make it. “It would be one thing if you were just players. But you’re not. This rivalry is almost bigger than both of you.”

Shane unhappily pushed some kale around his plate. “We were talking about this. What it would have been like if the media hadn’t decided we were these big competitors. If the MLH hadn’t fed into it. We hadn’t even met each other yet and they’d already decided that was the story. And then we played up to it.”

“In public,” Ilya corrected, clearly deciding this evening that he was going to take on the role of pedant.

Bravely, Shane linked his hand with Ilya’s, threading his fingers between his. He squeezed. Their sides were now entirely pressed up against each other. They hadn’t even done this in front of his parents. Admittedly they’d then fucked in the basement but that was neither here nor there.

“So how do you make this work?” He nodded to the both of them.

“We see each other when our schedules allow. Talk on the phone a lot.” Shane shrugged, as if that was all easy and fine. Because it was, comparatively, better than where they had been a few months before. Which was still neither easy nor fine. “It’s no different than a long-distance relationship, not really.”

Petrov turned his intense blue eyes on Ilya. “And your team – do they know about you?”

Abruptly, Shane decided he’d had enough of answering Petrov’s questions, not now they were trampling on things that hurt Ilya, Ilya who could still count on one hand the number of *good* conversations he’d had with his teammates since he’d come out.

Besides, they were palpably crossing the boundary of sharing confidential team information. He squeezed Ilya’s hand again and said, “Can we talk about what Crowell wants, now?”

He *did* want to talk about this, after all.

“Ah. Yes. I’m sorry.” Petrov dabbed his mouth with the linen napkins his mom had got him three Christmases ago that he had never used. “From what I gather, rumors have reached him that the Metros are challenging the status quo and he’s become very concerned that one of his star players is becoming my mouthpiece and not his.”

Ilya grunted. “Too late for that, no?”

“Not at all.” Petrov frowned. “I hope, Shane, you feel like you have your own voice?” he asked in an entirely formal way, almost anxiously.

“I do.” Shane nudged Ilya with his knee. Ilya stabbed at his chicken forcefully.

Petrov nodded though the frown didn’t go away. “I spoke to the comms team and had my lawyer draft some notes for you. Which, ah, doesn’t really negate the mouthpiece thing,” he said a little sheepishly, “but you can obviously see if there’s any usable in there and speak to your agent and Yuna.”

“You know Shane’s mama?” Ilya asked strangely.

“We’ve met socially.”

“Mmm,” said Ilya.

Shane held out his hand and Petrov handed him an envelope. A very expensive looking envelope. It would probably get him a whole lot of teasing from Ilya if he made a comment about that.

He would have to let go of Ilya to open the envelope and he suddenly didn't want to. He didn't want to read the notes. Or think about what it means, that he had Crowell's attention now, and not in a good way. Had he already been thinking negatively about Shane when he'd won the Cup? He'd shook his hand. His smile had always been kind of smarmy but had it been annoyed?

"It's a good sign, Shane. Crowell is worried that if you criticize the organization, it'll carry weight."

"I *haven't* criticized the organization. I'm not sure I'm going to, either. Not publicly."

"He doesn't know that. There may an opportunity here to think about how you can use that. Or not," he added hurriedly, perhaps seeing Shane's expression and – accurately – translating it. He raised a hand. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to. Truly."

Gently, Shane laid the envelope down on the table. He had been fine about going behind the scenes. He had become fine about building connections between the teams. And rookies coming out to rookies *in private*. That was all on his level. That fucking role model shit again. Almost an extension of being captain.

But this— this was bigger than that. This was the Commissioner of the MLH. And he was pissed with Shane. And Shane was supposed to *use* that? Use what? How? *Should* he? Did he have some kind of responsibility here? Fuck.

Cold sweat crawling down the back of his neck, Shane decided he needed a moment to himself. He stood, his chest tight. "Just—bathroom," he said. He didn't need to explain more than that.

He hurried away.

*

Shane gave himself two minutes, setting the little timer on his watch and sitting on the closed toilet seat. Then he gave himself two minutes more when those first two minutes didn't quite kick-in the way that they needed to, the way that had his heart-rate lowering. In the distance he could hear the murmuring of Ilya and Petrov, so it wasn't as if they were sitting in awkward silence. They were both too socially adept for that, not like him.

He couldn't help but think if their roles were reversed how much *better* at this Ilya would be than him.

When he was certain he wasn't about to embarrass himself, Shane washed his hands and splashed some water on his face and gave himself a stern look in the mirror. He was Shane fucking Hollander. But this weekend had been a lot. It was no wonder he was feeling a little overwhelmed.

Shane returned, a smile pasted on his face, to catch the tail end of a quick back and forth of Russian, which stopped as Shane re-entered the room. Both men turned to look at Shane with nearly identical polite smiles, which didn't tell Shane whether their conversation had been positive or negative – but at least no one was bleeding.

He sat back down next to Ilya, whose hand immediately returned to his thigh, and thought to ask a question he'd often wondered, something he assumed would be innocuous, "Does Petrov speak Russian with a different accent to you?"

"Yes," said Ilya shortly. And rudely. Surprised – stupidly surprised – Shane tensed. Ilya was competitive. It was one of his most attractive features. *Of course* he was going to be competitive about who was the most Russian in the room. He really should have seen that coming.

Petrov made a dissatisfied noise. "Negligible."

"What? Like you could tell?" Ilya then rattled something off in Russian again and Petrov responded, eyes narrowed. They both got a bit pink and Shane decided maybe there had been some tension.

"I'm sorry I asked," Shane said hurriedly, searching around for a safer topic of conversation. He laid his hand over Ilya's, who promptly turned his over so they could link fingers. "Are you sticking around or will you be travelling again soon?"

Petrov was watching Shane closely. "Japan on Tuesday."

"Oh, wow, cool," said Shane, not really meaning it, it was just something people said. "Tokyo, I guess?"

"Yes. Have you been?"

Shane squinted, trying to summon the memory yet again and failing. "Ye-es," he said slowly, "once, when I was little. To visit my grandparents."

"I have seen this photo," Ilya announced in a strange, almost blunt way. "On your parents' mantlepiece."

Shane smiled. Ilya had been *very* interested in all the photos around his parents' house, particularly the ones of him as a little kid. His dad had offered to get him copies which had made both of them blush and then laugh awkwardly.

Ilya let go of Shane as he stood and began to gather empty plates. To Petrov, he said, "We have dessert. You want?"

"Oh, actually I think—"

"Ah!" Ilya shook his head sharply, interrupting Petrov amid what was surely a polite decline. "If you eat dessert, Shane will maybe eat dessert."

Shane spluttered. “Hey! I’m right here!” Sure, he might be right, but that was neither here nor there.

Petrov double blinked and then his eyes crinkled as he looked between them. “Oh, is it treat day?”

Shane bit his lip. He’d kind of blown his ‘treats’ at his parents and he’d only managed a light work-out when they got back. It had been too distracting, seeing Ilya in the mirrors as he worked out, and soon enough he’d found himself bent over a bench, Ilya producing a packet of lube and a condom from his shorts like a sexy magic trick. Watching Ilya’s refection, *their* reflections, as Ilya pushed slowly inside Shane was a memory he felt he would take to the grave.

“Treat day?” Ilya asked, sounding kind of hostile, and snapping Shane out of his daydream.

“Our team nutritionist mandates it,” Petrov explained. “Snickers, right?”

“Yeah,” Shane said, looking up at Ilya who was still holding the dirty plates. It was possible he had never mentioned this incredibly boring minutiae of his life. “It’s why I have that drawer of Snickers in the freezer.” That he sometimes ate. On FaceTime.

Ilya frowned down at him. Despite this expression it was, oddly, very fond. Maybe because of the height difference. He touched a finger to Shane’s jaw, very lightly. “You will have a little Tiramisu tonight?”

Slowly, Shane nodded, kind of trapped by the look in Ilya’s eyes. “Just a little.”

“Okay. Good.” He was gifted with a big smile. “Gimme plate.”

The kitchen area and the dining table in Shane’s apartment wasn’t really far enough apart for private conversation but whilst Ilya plated up dessert, Petrov raised his eyebrows at Shane as if to say ‘well’?

“You really weren’t surprised,” Shane said because he didn’t know what ‘well’ meant in this context.

Petrov shook his head. His eyes drifted behind Shane, watching Ilya work in the kitchen.

“No.”

“Because you saw us. Before.”

“Yes.”

“And we looked like—”

Petrov’s eyebrows went up. “You had been fucking in the bathrooms, yes.”

Ilya snorted. Silverware clinked as he pulled open a drawer. “Accurate.”

Shane's blush could probably be seen from space. "We weren't fucking," he managed in a very small voice, the word 'fucking' said in front of an actual adult... agony. He couldn't look at Petrov.

"Also, Rozanov had been staring furiously at us for most of the meeting." Petrov seemed to be enjoying himself. "He was the one who was messaging you, right? You were anxious about it."

Ilya stopped what he was doing behind Shane. "You have weirdly good memory."

"It was very memorable."

"So, we *were* really obvious," Shane said worriedly, chewing his lip. Wiebe was right. They were apparently one lingering look away from being outed.

"I think— well. I don't know. For one I have a very suspicious mind. For another your rivalry is so well known, it made observing you off the ice a fascinating exercise. You seemed to be hyper-aware of one another. To me, at least."

They *were*. Or at least Shane was. Even now, he wanted to turn around and see what Ilya was doing. To just *look* at Ilya, being all domestic in Shane's home.

Ilya returned to the table then, assuaging that feeling. He had three bowls of Tiramisu. He had given Shane and Petrov similar portions, half the size of his own. Ilya sat and Shane, shamelessly, scootched his way up until he was pressed against Ilya's side. "We're going to have to be more careful," he muttered.

Ilya pressed a hand to Shane's back and rubbed. "We will be."

Petrov sighed. "I'm sorry. I think it would be wise. As much as we are making progress with the organization, the reaction to *your* relationship would make some waves. And it would not be safe for you," he said to Ilya.

Shane picked up his spoon and scooped up a tiny amount of his dessert. "He's going to get a Green Card." As if this was going to solve all their problems.

"A good start."

*

Overall, Shane thought dinner had gone reasonably well, despite the sometimes awkward conversational topics. The purpose of the meeting hadn't really been about Crowell, though it was great that this was something else Shane had to think about. The purpose had been about forcing Ilya to meet Petrov, to see that there was nothing there.

He wasn't so lacking in emotional intelligence that he didn't recognize that there had been *some* tension between Ilya and Petrov but there hadn't been an all-out argument and Ilya hadn't done anything that might jeopardize his career. Not that he really thought he would. Like a 0.1% chance. If he'd had one too many beers. Maybe.

“What did you talk about whilst I was in the bathroom?” Shane tried to sound bright and upbeat and not, you know, interrogatory.

Ilya shrugged. “Nothing, really. Can I borrow this for tomorrow?” He held up one of Shane’s favorite hoodies. He had vaguely been thinking of giving it to Sargent and asking him to replicate it but he suspected he might be glared to death for asking.

Ilya was packing, in so much as he usually packed which was mostly throwing things into his suitcase haphazardly. Moving his flight meant that he had to get the 6 a.m. tomorrow morning to be back in time for practice. Even then it was going to be close. Shane had already set an alarm.

“Of course. So, you weren’t arguing?”

“No.”

The way he said that wasn’t particularly convincing and some of Shane’s doubt must have showed on his face because Ilya’s eyebrows rose, semi-threateningly. “We didn’t argue, Shane. We talked about, pffft,” he gestured, vaguely, “nothing things.”

“Okay, okay. That’s good. Was he what you expected?”

Ilya rubbed his nose with his thumb, which was one of his more glaring tells. “Pretty much.”

Shane could see he wasn’t going to get anywhere with this conversation as Ilya was displaying all the cues of bottling himself up. Pushing him wouldn’t help. Reminding him that they had said they would be honest with each other wouldn’t help either – he didn’t want to spend their remaining time together arguing.

He wondered if Petrov would be more forthcoming. It was important to Shane that they liked each other, or if they didn’t like each other then there was at least respect there.

Maybe he had been hoping for too much.

Ilya closed his suitcase, leaving a pile of Shane’s clothes on top for tomorrow morning. He stood up in just his boxer briefs and Shane sighed. He was so beautiful. Every part of him – yes, the obvious things like the sculpted and defined muscles – but also the dark golden hairs on his legs and thighs, the fluff of his pubic hair, and the moles dotted around like Shane’s very own personal puzzle. Hell, Shane even loved the scars on his knees and the fading bruises, some of which he was pretty sure he’d given him.

Yeah, he really liked that.

Ilya prowled towards the bed and grabbed a handful of Shane’s hair, tipping his head back. “We have plans tonight, Hollander, hmm?”

Shane swallowed. “We do.” He’d been basically half hard since Petrov had left, almost an hour ago. He had showered and cleaned himself *extra* thoroughly, this time leaving the door of the bathroom open so Ilya could potter in and out. He didn’t mind it so much now, Ilya seeing him do personal things.

“First,” Ilya whispered, leaning down to kiss Shane’s neck, once, twice, three times, “we are...” Kiss, kiss, “going to...” Kiss, kiss, “... put a sexy towel down.”

Shane spluttered, jerking out of that that dazed, liquid state that Ilya seemed to always pull him into. “Oh my God.”

“Yes. You will prefer this, I think.” Ilya strode into the bathroom and returned with one of the extra-large bath sheets Shane preferred. Grinning, he stripped the duvet from the bed and tossed it onto the chair in the corner. It slumped to the floor with a slovenly rustle. “Ignore it.”

“Could have at least rolled it...”

“Ignore it!”

The sexy towel was laid across the mattress and Ilya beckoned Shane close enough for a kiss before he was tossed – giggling – down onto the bed.

Ilya crawled over him. He was grinning. Luminous. “I am very excited. Maybe too excited.”

Shane glanced down at the very prominent erection bobbing between them. “I can see that.”

“May need to take the edge off.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes.” Ilya leaned down and kissed Shane quickly, too briefly, his lips still curved into a smile and Shane lifted his head to chase the mouth he sometimes dreamed about.

They kissed for a long while, bodies moving with increasing urgency against one another until it started to feel like they would come just from friction. Inspired, Shane rolled them over and straddled Ilya’s hips, taking both their dicks into his hand. The lube was on the bedside table, one of those bigger bottles with the pump handle. He squirted a goodly amount into his hand and began to ruthlessly jerk them off together.

Propped up on his elbows, Ilya watched him, their dicks in his hand, then him again. His mouth was slightly open as he panted. “You are so hot.”

“Right back at you,” Shane said, which wasn’t romantic but it was better than his usual silent meditation on Ilya’s appeal. Was there anything hotter than Ilya Rozanov, naked, aroused, and in Shane’s hands? No, there fucking wasn’t.

Jerking off together was always a bit of a competition. Not that he would ever say this but Ilya had *slightly* more stamina than he did – which, really, often benefited Shane the most so why would he complain? Shane could feel his orgasm boiling up. He gasped, pre-emptively, and Ilya groaned in anticipation. “That’s it, Hollander. Come on, want you to come.”

Well Shane was nothing if not obedient. He felt the first hot splash on his hand, and then he was shaking, coming in full force, his come mixing with the lube and beneath him Ilya groaned again, his hips twitching as he came and it was *so* wet and *so* good.

He folded, his head pressed to Ilya's chest, his hand still wrapped around their softened dicks.

Ilya's hand roughly carded through his hair. "You good?"

Shane made an inarticulate sound and flopped dramatically off Ilya to the side. Ilya laughed weakly. "That is a yes, hmm?"

"Yes," said Shane, holding his sticky hand aloft.

Ilya slapped his thigh. "We shower."

They made out in the shower and Shane wondered if they always would, if they shared a shower this way. Was this what his future also held? Groceries and shower kisses and watching Ilya floss? God. He wanted that so badly his brain went a little fuzzy.

He pulled back on that thought as he remembered his ongoing behavioral modification to tell Ilya that he was hot. In his own way. "I love that you have really high standards of personal hygiene."

Ilya laughed with kiss-reddened lips, the slumberous lustful gaze brightening with surprise. "What the fuck, Shane?"

"It's just— I just love it." He was giddy. That was what this feeling was. "Some guys are gross." A lot of guys. A lot of guys he shared a locker room with and coaches and planes and sometimes rooms. Ugh.

"Thank you." Laughing, still, Ilya kissed the corner of Shane's mouth. "I am glad you like this about me. That is good to know."

He towed Shane from the shower, still grinning, and they toweled each other off.

When they were dry enough and Ilya had done that vaguely mesmerizing scrunching thing with his curls, Ilya twined his arms about Shane and pinned him against the bathroom counter. "What else do you like about me?"

"Love," Shane corrected, automatically, pressing eagerly up against the slightly clammy naked length of his boyfriend. He pinged one wet curl of hair, already clumped together in that perfect swirl. Fascinating. "Lots of things. That you like cooking. Apparently. How stupid you are with dogs. And good with kids. And polite to my parents. And funny." Wow, it was like fireworks, going off in his head. *Pow!* – good with kids. *Pow!* – fucking hilarious. "And smart and sexy and— mph."

Ilya practically bent him over the counter with enthusiasm. The back of Shane's head butted against the mirror as Ilya licked into Shane's mouth. He shifted his thigh so he could wrap his leg around Ilya's, really give his burgeoning erection something to rub against.

Things were really getting pretty progressed before Ilya pulled back, no longer smiling, flushed with arousal and eyes blown dark with lust. "We are getting off track," he announced, licking his lips.

Shane – who was, conservatively, seconds from coming now, his dick leaking against Ilya’s magnificent abs – had no idea what he was talking about.

Ilya spun them away from the counter, pushed Shane towards the rumpled bed. “On your knees, Hollander.”

Oh yeah. *That*.

Shane shivered with anticipation and arranged himself on the bed, on that stupid towel, clutching a pillow to his face pre-emptively. He knew, without question, he would want something in his mouth.

Ilya knelt between Shane’s legs, used his hands to part Shane’s thighs just a little bit more. Gently, he adjusted the curvature of Shane’s spine, warm palm pressing to his lower back. “You are so perfect like this,” he murmured, almost too quiet to be directed to Shane, more like he was talking to himself. He kissed one ass cheek, then the other, then used his thumbs to pull Shane apart.

The long, wet drag of his strong tongue had Shane moaning out loud, his dick jumping beneath him. “Oh, fuck, Ilya.”

“I love that you are loud,” Ilya said, right before a blob of spit hit his asshole and the tongue returned, teasing the rim, tracing the wrinkled edges with little licks interspersed with long laps. As Shane began to relax, Ilya’s tongue eased its way in, wriggling around, in and out.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” Shane bit down on the pillow. He was drooling, unable to control himself, every part of him zeroed in on the sensation Ilya was creating with his tongue and the corresponding tension building in his dick.

Ilya pulled out suddenly. He slapped Shane’s thigh. “Roll over. I want to see your face.”

Shane dropped a rolled, possibly too enthusiastically because he narrowly missed kicking Ilya in the face. It was the sort of thing they might have laughed about in other circumstances, but Ilya looked exactly how he looked sometimes on the ice, like he was watching a play unfold in his mind, utterly serious.

Following Ilya’s guiding hands, Shane wriggled around and hooked his legs over Ilya’s shoulders, a motion that was accompanied by a potent flash of memory. “Feels like—”

Ilya reached for the lube, coating his fingers, nodding. “—the first time, yes.”

The first time. When neither of them knew what the years ahead would hold. That there would be more ‘first times’. And seconds and thirds. And they had no idea they had met the love of their lives. One finger slid inside Shane easily, joined moments later by a second. “Kiss me,” he demanded breathlessly, beckoning Ilya down. He had kissed Shane so sweetly that first time. Been so gentle, this Greek God of a man. Ilya Rozanov, who could have anyone, and yet inexplicably wanted Shane.

Ilya obeyed easily, folding Shane's legs further. They kissed, wet, sloppy. There was nothing sweet about it. It was ravenous. All consuming. Ilya curled his fingers inside him and Shane thrust his hips up with a gasp. "Fuck, stop, I'll come too quick," he moaned against Ilya mouth as Ilya stroked the very best part of his body *oh my God*.

Ilya nodded and pulled his fingers back before adding a third to stretch him further. "I am not going to last long," he said shakily, their noses squished together.

Shane barked out a noise that might have been a laugh but was half moan, too. "Me either, *fuck*, Ilya, I want you inside me, I'm ready. Ready, ready, ready."

With gratifying speed, Ilya leaned back, pulling his fingers from inside Shane. His slicked up his dick, his mouth open and, eyes down, rubbed the tip against Shane wanting hole.

"Fuck, I wish you could see this," Ilya groaned as he began to push inside. "So hot, Shane."

If Shane was going to be truthful about it, it didn't feel that much different to him. Not really. The glorious stretch was the same. The heat. The fullness that only Ilya could give him. But what made it different, what made it *hotter*, was that it was really doing it for Ilya, he could tell that for certain, because he looked like he was about to come and he was barely inside Shane. That vein on his temple was throbbing away and he was clenching his jaw. "Fuck, Shane," he breathed through his teeth, like he was having a religious moment.

"Don't you dare come," Shane threatened, reaching down to grab his dick pre-emptively. He gave himself a stroke. *Holy shit*.

Ilya thrust forward, bottoming out and froze. "Do not move!"

Shane spluttered. "That bad, huh?"

"Fucking, *fuck*, Shane," he said, genuinely looking on the verge of a panic attack. Ilya squeezed his eyes shut and took a moment.

It was not often in the bedroom that Shane felt truly powerful, the one who was in absolute control. For all of their sexual relationship, it had been Ilya who held the cards, who told him how and when and what. These moments, when Shane held on to an infinitesimal lead in coherence were few and far between.

He clenched his ass, experimentally, and had the exquisite pleasure of watching a full-body shudder ripple through Ilya. "Wanna come in me, Rozanov?" he whispered, giving his own dick another jerk. He was leaking so much he didn't need any lube.

"*Da*. Gonna fill you up," Ilya muttered, opening his lust-drunk eyes. He drew back and thrust, this time specifically aiming for a good swipe across Shane's prostate.

Shane's vision whited out, briefly. Okay, so the control was gone. That was fine. Ilya did it again, muttered something unintelligible as Shane whined. He started to jerk himself off more aggressively, chasing his orgasm as Ilya set up a pounding, deep rhythm, sweat pouring down

his face as he leaned over Shane, chanting, “Come, come, come now, Shane, come for me, let me see you.”

Shane's orgasm hit, vision going again as his whole body seized, clenching around Ilya, and he yelled out, “Ilya! Fuck!” A rope of his own come hit him on the chin, across his chest, just everywhere, and then Ilya was yelling too, Russian this time, as he came inside Shane for the first time, practically vibrating on top of him.

When Shane came back to himself it was to find Ilya had collapsed on top of him, his sweaty face pressed into his neck. Shane's legs were still over Ilya's shoulders. He wiggled his toes, experimentally, just to check he still had bloodflow. They responded. He should send his yoga teacher flowers.

“Holy shit,” said Shane, a floppy hand touching the back of Ilya's head.

Ilya, struck dumb, made a noise.

“You okay?”

“*Nyet*. Dead, Hollander.” He swallowed, loudly.

“Well, RIP, I guess.” He couldn't tell if Ilya's hair was wet still or just very sweaty. They'd have to shower again. God, what time was it? “Can you move? I'm kind of squashed here.”

Ilya grunted again, tilting his head to kiss Shane's neck. He eased himself up on shaking arms and helped Shane untangle his legs. Then, very carefully, an expression of exquisite sensitivity on his face, Ilya pulled himself from inside Shane.

Okay. Now *that* was different. He was much wetter down there than usual.

Sitting back so he could look, Ilya's fingers pressed around Shane's hole, dipping inside with a sort of weirdly sexy squelch that would otherwise be utterly disgusting. “Fuuuuck,” Ilya breathed, lifting Shane's thigh so he could get a better viewing angle.

Ilya's fascination with Shane's ass would never cease to amaze Shane. He smiled a bit, kind of shy. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Ilya nodded, wide-eyed with it, totally transfixed.

Shane wasn't about to complain about it. It was nice, being petted down there so gently, Ilya's finger tracing the evidence of their... well, it was probably *lovemaking* now or something, not that he would ever say that out loud.

He wrinkled his nose. The sensation of Ilya's come was... getting less hot by the minute. He clenched and unclenched and felt it trickle down his crack. Oh, gross.

Ilya kissed Shane's knee, a smacking, affectionate kiss. “You are so predictable. Come, we can wash.”

The alarm jerked them both out of deep sleep, Shane's head smashing into Ilya's chin. "*Blyat!*" Ilya yelled, recoiling.

"Sorry, sorry," Shane said, reaching up blindly to rub at him and mostly getting his ear. He didn't know what it was about sleeping with Ilya; he always seemed to wake up tangled up with him.

At least they were very awake now. Groaning, Ilya staggered to the bathroom, calling out to him, "Go back to sleep."

Yawning hugely, Shane swiveled out of bed himself. He winced as he stood; he was pretty sore. "No, no, I'll make you breakfast to take with you."

There was no response, just the whir of Ilya's toothbrush.

Shane pulled on a pair of sweats and in the kitchen blended up a simple smoothie, something he knew Ilya would like. Chocolate protein powder, frozen banana and peanut butter powder and almond milk. It was a combination Shane would never allow himself but he did have a tiny sip, just a taste test. He added a drizzle of honey. It was fucking good.

Ilya and his weekend bag made an appearance. Rubbing the palm of his hand into one eye, he blindly tossed the bag down the hall, sliding along the floorboards. It was not quiet.

"Guess my downstairs neighbors are awake now," Shane commented mildly.

Ilya was unrepentant. "You should get a house." He took the smoothie suspiciously. "Is there kale in this?"

"There should be. But no."

Ilya took a small sip. Then a bigger one. The grumpy expression on his face eased into a soppy pout. "This is nice. You made me a nice breakfast." Shane got a chocolaty minty kiss. "Thank you."

Shane touched the sleep line on his cheek. "You're not a morning person."

"This is not morning." Ilya gestured to his left, where the drapes were closed against the night. He sighed and started tapping away at his phone, calling a car. "At least there is no traffic," he muttered.

Guiltily, Shane chewed his bottom lip. "Maybe we shouldn't have done this."

"What?" Ilya's tone was sharp, his eyes sharper. He shoved his phone in his pocket.

"Not the— not the sex." Because Ilya's fuck-drunk face over him as he entered him bare was the stuff of dreams. "I mean the super early start."

"Was worth it, no? Was definitely worth it for me." Another minty-chocolatey kiss, a lingering one. "Besides," he said, and Shane predicted his next comment would be irritating, "you would have had that man over for dinner. To your home. Alone."

Shane shook his head. "I wouldn't have," Shane said patiently. "If I'd met him, we would have gone out somewhere."

"That is not better, Shane."

He didn't know *why*. He didn't know what to say. "I don't really know what to say. I would have told you. I would probably have called you after to tell you what we talked about." He was struck by a sudden, unpleasant inspiration. "Don't you trust me?"

"I do. I do trust you," Ilya said, eyes suddenly wide with earnestness, with apology, as if he, too, had never considered that his own jealousy might be rooted in the concern that Shane might not be able to keep his dick in his pants. He squeezed Shane's hand. "I'm sorry. I am just teasing you, *malysh*."

"Hmm," Shane said grumpily, not hugely assuaged by this. "It really doesn't sound like you are. Do you think I'd cheat on you?"

"No, no, I don't. You would never. I know this. I'm sorry." He kissed Shane once more, pressing him up against the kitchen counter and putting his smoothie to one side. "Forgive me?"

"Is there something I could be doing? To make you feel less... weird about this?" Shane asked, not prepared to address the *forgive me* part yet.

Ilya's blue eyes held Shane's for a long moment, blinking slowly. "I don't know. I don't think... maybe it isn't to do with what you do? If that makes sense?"

"Not really."

"I think you do all the right things." Ilya sighed and pressed their foreheads together. "This is a me thing. Maybe. It's new for me, too. If it was not him... maybe it would be others. I am selfish. I want you all to myself."

"You're not selfish," Shane said faintly. "I just want—I want to make sure you know I would never. You know. Do that. Cheat." How could he? He was so consumed by Ilya; he just didn't think of other guys like that.

"I know." Ilya hands cupped Shane's jaw. "Same for me. I would never."

Something eased in Shane's chest. Not like he'd been worried about that. Not exactly. It had been one of the very first things they had agreed. But they were apart more than they were together. And Ilya's past was significantly more sexually active than he was now. He knew from some of the conversations he was more tuned into now - thanks, Peetie - that committed gay couples could sometimes be a little more... flexible about sex outside of the relationship. It wasn't 'cheating' if both parties were aware. But Shane was very much *not* on board with that. Aware or otherwise.

"Shane," Ilya sighed, seeming to read Shane like a book. He kissed him again, softly. "Only you, now. Forever."

“Yeah?”

“Forever and ever.” They kissed again, grasping tongues and wandering hands and Shane only thought very briefly about the fact that he hadn’t brushed his teeth yet. Ilya pulled back with a sigh and licked his lips. “My car is probably here. Will you walk me down?”

Shane’s breath caught in his throat as he nodded, the dreadful knowledge that this interlude was coming to an end sending his spirits sinking. “Is it weird that I miss you already?”

“No. Not weird,” Ilya said sadly. “I miss you already, too.”

Chapter End Notes

Not entirely happy with this chapter. But I think I'm late to update so here it is anyway.

Truly don't have it in me to write the other POVs but there is SO much going on in Ilya's and Petrov's heads and it is so hard to convey through just Shane's POV hahaha.

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

“You want me to insult you in French?”

Chapter Notes

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

Very occasionally, Shane had a scheduled lunch with Wiebe. In that they both brought their pre-prepared meals into work and nuked them in the player lounge microwave and took them back to his office to eat. From this Shane had learned that Wiebe ate a lot of sweet potatoes.

They talked generally about the team for a bit, then drifted with the kind of comfortable casualness Shane had never had with Theriault to Wiebe’s personal life, his wife’s latest hostile takeover, and then naturally turned to Shane’s personal life. Because he had one now and Wiebe knew about it.

“How’s Rozanov?”

Shane had been expecting this. He hadn’t brought Ilya up since the last time they’d spoken, when Wiebe had put the fear of God in him. It had felt over the last couple of weeks as if Wiebe was giving him particularly loaded looks from time to time. That might all be in his head though. A lot of things were.

“Good.” Shane said nothing else for a moment, formulating the best way to respond. A way that sounded mature, adult, put-together, a whole host of things that Shane did not feel in any way shape or form about his relationship. But fake it ‘til you make it, right? “We’ve put some plans in place, like you suggested.”

Wiebe nodded and speared a piece of chicken. “Good.”

“And he’s met my parents. Also.” Shane cleared his throat, aware that this piece of news might not meet with Wiebe’s approval. “I know you cautioned me against this, but we had dinner with Petrov.”

His coach paused to take a sip of water. “So he knows.”

Desperately, Shane tried to read a tone in that statement but came up short. He rubbed a slightly damp palm on his thigh. “Yeah. I mean. He kind of already knew. He was just being, I don’t know. Discreet.”

Wiebe ate another piece of chicken. “And how did it go?”

“It was fine. I mean, I wanted him to meet Ilya, really, because Ilya is very *not cool* about Petrov.”

“In what way?” Wiebe said in a way that suggested he very much knew exactly what way.

“In a paranoid way.”

Wiebe winced sympathetically. “Yeah. I get that.”

Shane sat up straight. Now, *this* was what he was talking about. “You get why he might be?”

“Mmm.” A very vague hint of a smile pushed up the corners of Wiebe’s mouth. “I think I can take a guess. If my secret partner was constantly around an attractive, driven, wealthy colleague who was overtly and publicly friendly with them... I might also have some concerns.”

Shane exhaled. “Yeah.” It wasn’t as if Shane didn’t see that. On paper that made sense. It was just... Ilya was Ilya. And Shane was so gone on him that it was hard to see the bigger picture.

“I guess the question is whether or not his concerns are unfounded.”

A forkful of pearl barley balanced precariously in front of Shane’s mouth for a moment. “Oh my God. Yes. Totally— they’re unfounded. And I’ve reiterated that.” He blushed and quickly swallowed the mouthful.

“Then it’s about trust.”

“Yeah.” Fuck. “Yeah. We talked about that. He says he does trust me. And I believe he does. I mean, I think it’s more the circumstances, the secrecy, that bothers him? Gets him in his head.”

At least he hoped so. He’d been putting a lot of thought into it because he thought about Ilya a lot. Thought about the things that made Ilya tick. Or, in this case, *cross*. Ilya was endlessly fascinating to Shane. Only there was no playbook for Ilya; Shane was having to write his own.

Wiebe chewed a mouthful of his own meal silently for a moment. “Okay.”

Was that a *judgy* okay? Or just an ‘okay’ okay?

Shane tried to form his anxiety into words. “Do you really think it’s bad, if Petrov knows about us?”

“I think... no, I don’t think it’s bad. I think Petrov wants his mission to succeed.” He thought about it. “Realistically, I think it would probably be *more* helpful if his star captain wasn’t in a complicated relationship with another player. The noise would surely be more detrimental than positive, if you both came out as a couple. You being gay, fine.” Wiebe waved his fork around. “I can see that spinning well. But you and Rozanov? No.”

“But you think I shouldn’t have told him?”

“I think the fewer people that know the better. Particularly if you’re not planning on coming out any time soon as a couple.” He raised his dark eyebrows at Shane, who shook his head.

“Not until Ilya has some form of permanent residency. And not, like, immediately.” There was still Ilya’s dad to consider. The Russia of it all.

And whether or not Ilya was planning on staying in Boston. One of the thoughts he hadn’t voiced, naturally, was that if Ilya stayed with the Raiders – Montreal’s historically biggest competitor – the ‘noise’ about their relationship would probably be overwhelmingly negative. Almost any other team would be better.

But one day. Right? It didn’t need to be super public or anything. But maybe he’d like to walk down a street and not worry if their hands accidentally touched.

“The Raiders are performing better,” was Wiebe’s next comment.

Shane eased out a breath. “Yeah. They are. Now. He, ah. Came out to them. Before.”

Wiebe’s fork drooped in his hand. “You’re shitting me.”

“It was before we got back together.” Shane shook his head. He still couldn’t really believe it. “Caused a bit of a stir.”

“How bad?”

Shane was warmed by Wiebe’s genuine concern. “Well, it was nothing like here.” Because there was *nowhere* like here. The Metros were a unicorn of a team. “His— Marlow and he have been on the outs. They’ve reconciled since. Kind of.” Could it be a reconciliation when neither of them had acknowledged there had been an issue? Who knew? Ilya apparently wasn’t going to poke that bear, that was for certain. “So, it’s been getting better. I think his team needed time to process. Not that anyone’s talking about it.”

“Sounds shit.”

“He’s been pretty miserable.”

“I can imagine.” Wiebe ate another piece of chicken, with a cube of sweet potato. “Brave of him.”

“It was, yes.” Shane found a bittersweet smile. It had been brave.

Insane, though. That fucking Green Card couldn’t come soon enough.

*

After that emotionally draining experience, Shane stumbled across Alex in the corridor which felt a bit strange and out of context as they were usually in a meeting room upstairs, with some kind of presentation involved. “What are you doing down here?” he asked, a little suspicious.

They were wearing a bright yellow shirt today and a pair of royal blue slacks. With the hair, it was—it was a lot.

“Down here?” Alex blinked at him and gestured around at the white walls and stringently clean speckled vinyl flooring. “You say that like this is the bowels of hell.”

“You can *smell* the locker room from here, Alex.” Not like upstairs where the fancy suites were. Upstairs smelled good. Marlene probably had some kind of expensive potpourri or something. Or those sticks in oil that his mom used. *Diffusers*. That’s what that was. He once got her a bunch of Diptyque ones for Christmas, which Jackie said were the best.

Alex tilted their head up slightly and wrinkled their nose. “Is that what that smell is?”

“Oh yeah.” There was no worse smell on earth. If there was anything that Shane could say was bad about hockey, it would be that smell. And, sure, the pervasive homophobia and racism and weird uber-masculine culture that encouraged violence and cheating on your wives. But *apart* from that, the smell.

“I am here to give this to IT.” They held up the laptop they were carrying. “I poured Gatorade on it.”

“Which flavor?”

“Fruit punch.”

“Really,” Shane said, surprised – and revolted – by this lapse in taste.

“Why? What’s wrong with Fruit Punch?”

“It’s no Lemon Lime, is what it is.”

“Jesus, you and Mishka need to get your taste buds checked. Fruit Punch is *far* superior.” Alex jerked their head in the direction of IT’s offices. “Walk with me? I’ve got some news.”

Shane followed obediently, hands in his pockets. He rarely went to IT anyway as he didn’t have any Metros tech stuff. The only reason he knew where they were was because the Metros often issued cell phones to some of the international players, and he’d spent a good few weeks early on in Virtanen’s career with him translating issues with his cell phone. In that it didn’t call internationally, which had been the whole fucking point. The kid had been near tears. He apparently called his mom twice a day.

Not that there was anything wrong with that.

“Do you know the owners of the Centaurs?”

“The, ah, Edwards, right?” The three siblings took over when their father died. From what Shane remembered, they were actually all half-siblings, but harmonious ones. There was a twenty-year gap between the oldest and youngest.

“Yes.”

“I don’t know much about them.” Shane had the vaguest sense that the middle one was pretty good-looking but this was not a detail he needed to share with Alex. Or anyone.

“They reached out to me, a few months ago, very interested in what we’ve been putting together. Inspired, in fact, by you speaking to the team. Their captain apparently brought it to the management’s attention.”

Shane smiled. He knew Boodram was a decent guy. “Really?”

“We’ve been having regular meetings to establish a kind of... let’s call it a Code of Conduct. Rolling out the DEI training, some of the new HR processes. Essentially setting a higher standard of behavior and holding ourselves accountable. We’re going to lobby hard for this to be something we put into place across all of the Canadian franchises of the MLH and AHL and approach some of the more friendly US teams, as well.” Alex paused at the junction, looking around blankly. “Is it left here or straight on?”

“Neither. Right.”

“God. I always get turned around down here. Everything looks the same.”

Shane struggled to imagine *how* this Code of Conduct would be rolled out across the teams. Maybe Vancouver. But Toronto? Dallas Kent had *not* improved. If anything, he seemed to be doubling down on being an absolute shit stain. He was constantly fighting, spending a lot of quality time in the penalty box. There were also some other unsavory rumors circulating about him in his personal life.

“What do you think?”

“Um. It sounds great,” he said, tentatively.

“It *is* great, Shane.” Alex inhaled deeply and exhaled, which was okay because they were far enough away from the locker-rooms for this to be a safe choice. “We’re getting somewhere.”

Shane hoped so. “It would be helpful if Ottawa was less shit, though.” A better news story.

Alex grunted. “That’s what Mishka said. Hey, do you want to be there?”

“Where?”

“We’ll do a little announcement. Probably in the New Year. Take some photos with the GMs. Post on social media, that sort of thing.” Their eyes were hopeful. There *was* a resemblance between Alex and Petrov. He was sure of it and couldn’t believe he hadn’t noticed it before.

Shane didn’t like to say *no* to people and the hopeful Petrov-esque eyes were enough to almost make him cave. But he felt that same sickening lurch he had felt when Wiebe had alluded to his usefulness for Petrov’s cause. His face, the face of Canadian MLH DEI. Forever and ever, amen.

“Ah. No. Thanks,” he said, firmly.

Alex looked at him for a long moment. “You sure?” they asked. “It would create better engagement on socials.”

He could feel himself wavering. That prickling urge to *be good*. To do what was asked of him.

But he stuck firm. “I’m sure,” Shane said, not sounding sure at all, really certain he had disappointed them and *hating* it. “Um. Sorry. Maybe next time?”

“Okay,” Alex said easily, patting him on the arm and giving him a small smile. “Thought I’d ask, though come to think of it, if you’d been there, we’d have had to include Boodram and it would really look like one of those shitty DEI posters then.” They pulled a face and changed the subject. “Hey, I heard Crowell wants to interrogate you. Has he tried yet?”

“No,” said Shane, his heart sinking still further, this time with the inevitability of a confrontation he seemingly couldn’t avoid. “Not yet. Should I— should I reach out to him, do you think?”

“Jesus, no. Maybe he’ll forget about you.”

“You think?” Shane asked hopefully.

“Erm. No. Probably not.” Alex grimaced and switched their laptop to their other arm. “Sorry. Try not to... worry,” they said, looking doubtful that Shane was capable of this. Which showed a remarkable understanding of him as a person.

*

“What about Ottawa?”

“Weak at center,” Ilya said automatically, “also in defense. Zero chemistry on their front line. The less said about the losing streak, the better. And coach is waste of space.”

This was not going well. “I mean, as a possible trade,” he said, which was not a strong follow-up given Ilya had just listed everything that was wrong with them. “They have the cap space.”

For a moment, Ilya’s face was not in view of the camera and when it was, he looked less than impressed. “Shane. The team is, at best, mediocre.”

Shane agreed. But he had been *determined* to bring this up. To raise the fucking important question about the location of Ilya’s next team. It had been weighing on him and enough was enough. “Hey, Boodram is solid. And a good guy. And Hayes is an excellent goalie – and also a really decent person, actually.” There had been a time in Shane’s life where a hockey player’s personality had been of little interest to him beyond their desire for teamwork or to do what Shane told them to. A beautiful, simpler time. “And Boston was doing pretty badly before you were drafted and you turned that around, right?”

That and Boston had replaced two of their coaches, their goalie, brought in Marly as Ilya’s winger and expensively brought in a veteran defenseman who knew how to, you know,

defend. But that was not important to this narrative.

Ilya said nothing. Probably because he was thinking the same thing as Shane.

Shane blurted out, “And it’s— pretty close. To Montreal. Like, a two-hour drive.”

“I know how far Ottawa is from Montreal, Shane,” Ilya said quietly. “I have thought about it.”

“Oh.” Now he was embarrassed. Of *course*, Ilya didn’t want to go to a shitty team just because of its proximity to Shane. “Yeah. Sure.”

Ilya took pity on him. “It’s on my list.”

“Oh.”

“Ottawa, New York, New Jersey, Buffalo, Philadelphia.” Shane’s heart fluttered. All were in reasonable flying, or driving, distance from Montreal. “—and... Montreal.”

“Montreal?”

Ilya made a noise and touched his nose. “I know. Is unlikely. But a Canadian citizenship may be better than an American one, long term. The US is... not very good for Russians.”

Shane wasn’t sure exactly what he thought about Montreal. How would it work – them playing on the same team together? Would Ilya want to play center? He *could* play wing but it wasn’t Shane’s strength. Would he be happy without the ‘C’? Maybe he was a better captain than Shane. God. What if the team liked him better?

Wait. He was getting way, *way* ahead of himself. There wasn’t cap space. And there wouldn’t be in the next two years unless something really drastic happened.

“I didn’t know you had a list now.”

Fuck. If only Toronto wasn’t full of homophobic and sexist fucks like Kent and Barratt. That would double the Canadian team possibilities.

“Farah says we are not supposed to be talking about this,” Ilya said sternly.

“Oh. Yeah...” Shane blew out a breath. He’d also had a very similar conversation with his mom. “Yeah, you’re right. It’s just... I didn’t want to assume...”

“What, that I’d be fine with moving across the country from you?” Ilya threw up a hand. “Shane.”

“It’s *your* career, Ilya,” he said defensively.

Ilya rolled his eyes. “So *you* would be fine with it, hmm?”

“No, of course not. It’s hard enough *now*.”

“Then obviously Ottawa is on my list,” Ilya admitted, overtly annoyed at Shane for not knowing they hadn’t been on the same page. For not being, you know, psychic.

This – absolutely breathtaking – discovery was sadly interrupted by Ilya’s focus drifting. Shane could tell he was getting another call. “Your dad?” he guessed from the way Ilya’s face was suddenly drawn even tighter. His conversations with his dad left him strung out.

“No. My brother.”

A different kind of stress, then. “Should you take it?”

“No. He just wants more money.”

Immediately furious, Shane frowned. “Again?”

“*Da*. I am nothing more than a blank *fucking* check.” Ilya moved slightly, the phone drifting away from his face. He was lying on his couch, wearing Shane’s hoodie and for a moment Shane caught the city view from his apartment windows. Like Shane, he never closed the blinds at night.

“Is he still claiming it’s costs for your dad on top of what you already pay him?” There was, as Shane understood it, some kind of monthly stipend that he paid his brother. But there always seemed to be something else, some emergency requirement. Different, new meds. A specialist referral.

Ilya brought the phone back into focus. “Well, he’s not going to say it’s for his coke habit, is he?”

Shane had to tamp down his own irritation with this response. Talking about Ilya’s family never exactly brought out the best in Ilya. It was difficult for Shane to relate but he *wanted* to know. He wanted to understand. He wanted, in some way, to be helpful.

“Does your accountant know?” Shane asked.

“Oh my God, Shane, stop talking.”

*

Shane kind of wanted to talk to his dad about it but telling him about this would mean revealing that Ilya’s family was not in the best place and that would not be putting Ilya in a good light. And he wanted his parents to think Ilya was perfect which was unrealistic, because he wasn’t, he was just perfect for Shane and also if anyone was going to tell his parents about his family in any detail it should be Ilya, not Shane.

“Do you have much to do with Russia?” Shane asked, having spent the last ten minutes watching Petrov do battle with some kind of form on his laptop. Their meeting, if it could be called that, had realistically wrapped up a few minutes ago but Shane was in no hurry to get home. Ilya had a game tonight and wouldn’t be available for a call until much later.

“I don’t visit, if that’s what you’re asking. But I still have family in Piter— ah, St. Petersburg.” Shane’s mouth curved at the sudden lilt of a Russian accent. It was funny – Petrov *rarely* sounded Russian at all and had next to no French accent. Maybe that was what happened at an International school – you came out literally accent-less. “And my father goes back every now and again, much to my mother’s distress.”

“Oh?”

“He’s occasionally quite outspoken. Which is,” Petrov exhaled slowly, “risky, getting riskier, though he assures her he is a model citizen when he’s *in* Russia. Okay. I think I’ve done it. Jesus. The UX on this is appalling.”

“Oh? Are you doing the survey about the bathrooms? Every time I clicked one of the boxes it would select another one.” It had made his eye twitch.

“Yes. Infuriating. I’ll have to speak to HR.”

“I’ve already written to them. But,” Shane laughed, “maybe coming from the owner it might hold more weight.”

Petrov crinkled at him in shared amusement. “I certainly hope so. Why are you asking about Russia?”

Shane wrinkled his nose. “I was wondering if you might know about— how it works. With money. Ilya is sending money to his brother, to pay for his father’s care, but he’s pretty sure it’s being misappropriated.”

Petrov pulled a face. “Is it a lot of money?”

“He’s not said explicitly. But I suspect it is.”

“Unfortunate. Well, there are certainly better ways to manage that. You share an agent now, yes?”

“Yeah.”

“He should ask her to look into it with an estate planner. Ideally, an international estate planning attorney.” Shane got out his phone to write this down in his notes app. He knew he’d asked the right person. “Perhaps a professional trustee could be appointed, someone not associated with his brother— he’s police as well, isn’t he?”

“Ah—” Shane went blank. Ilya had never mentioned exactly what his brother did. He’d kind of thought he was *just* looking after his dad; he didn’t know if he was also still working. “I don’t know.”

“He is,” Petrov said with assurance and maybe Shane was reading this wrong but there was a little disapproval there, as if Shane should know this detail about Ilya’s family. He was probably right. “Which makes it trickier. Not impossible. Actually.” Petrov snorted. “Maybe my father could be of use.”

“Would he know someone?”

“Yes, quite possibly. We have something similar set up for my uncle. What’s wrong with his father?”

“Dementia.”

“Ah. That’s difficult.”

“Yeah. They didn’t have the best of relationships and— it’s confusing for him, now. He doesn’t like to talk about it.”

“He has my sympathy. Family can be very complicated.”

That was said with a great deal of weight. He reflected on the casual nuggets of personal information Petrov had dropped during this conversation. “Your parents, though, they’re still together?”

So many of his friends’ parents weren’t. Hayden’s parents were divorced. J.J.’s mom was on her third marriage. And Ilya’s parents’ relationship was so bad Ilya couldn’t even string a sentence together on the matter. He had a horrible, horrible feeling that Ilya’s dad had been abusive. If not physically than psychologically.

Tough thing to bring up in casual conversation, really. Fuck.

“Ah. Kind of. Not divorced. Just— they don’t live together, always.” Petrov gave Shane a somewhat nervous glance, as if he was concerned about how Shane would react. “My mother currently lives with her not-age-appropriate lover.”

Lover, Shane thought, mentally shuddering. “Wow. That’s— ah— interesting?”

“You get used to it.” Petrov shrugged in a tense way. “I mostly lived with my grandfather, growing up, so it didn’t bother me.”

Shane didn’t need to be a master of body language to have an inkling that this was probably not the case. “Is that the grandfather who might also be Alex’s grandfather?”

“Ah. Yes.” Petrov crinkled. “Family can be complicated,” he repeated.

*

Shane: *Hi Farah, has Ilya ever spoken to you about his finances?*

Farah: *Hi Shane, I’m not in a position to discuss one client with another client*

Shane: *Oh yeah, good point. Forget I asked!*

*

Ilya met Shane’s tentative suggestions with an icy silence.

“Have I... overstepped?” Shane asked nervously. Ilya could be *so* expressive sometimes and other times it was like he was wearing a mask. The mask was very much down now, even though he was staring through the phone screen directly into Shane’s eyes.

“You discussed my finances with Petrov,” he said finally.

Oh fuck.

He felt the blood drain from his face. “Oh my God. I did,” Shane breathed, immediately seeing the error of his ways. *Immediately*. Like with the kind of blinding clarity that made him wonder why the fuck he had done it in the first place. “Oh my God. I’m so sorry. I’m just — I’m so used to asking his opinion on things, him and Wiebe, and— that’s no excuse.”

“No,” said Ilya, shortly.

He swallowed the dry-ass rocks in his throat. “Are you really mad?”

“Yes, I am really mad, Shane,” Ilya said coldly.

Shane guessed now was not a good time to talk about Christmas, which had also been on his list before he’d torpedoed his relationship. “Do you— what do you want to do now?” he whispered, not quite sure where to go from here. Were they going to fight now? Shout at each other? He felt like he *should* be shouted at but Ilya’s silence was throwing him.

“I think—” Ilya narrowed his eyes, as if he was looking straight through Shane. “I need to go.”

“Oh.” Shane felt his bottom lip tremble. “Okay.” He pressed his lips together.

“Good night, Shane.” Ilya lifted his finger, ready to press the ‘hang up’ button, but waited for a moment, expectantly.

“Night, Ilya,” Shane said. “I’m sorry.”

Ilya nodded crisply, almost militarily, and hung up.

“Great,” said Shane shakily into the loud silence. “Excellent play, Hollander. Really— really well done.”

*

They spoke only via text message for the next few days which was at least something, even if Ilya’s responses were about as dry as tinder. Eventually, after Shane had apologized for about the thousandth time, Ilya agreed to a call while he was waiting for his flight to Texas.

Shane took this call from his kitchen island, where he seemed to always end up when he was dealing with stressful situations.

“Hello,” Ilya said when he answered.

“Hi. How are you?” Shane was unable to keep the anxiety from his voice.

“I’m okay. How are you?”

“I’m okay.”

“That’s good.”

Shane tipped his head back and looked at the light fixture above him. This was going to be like pulling teeth, wasn’t it? He just didn’t know what to *say*. He’d apologized endlessly.

But Ilya stepped in. “I have spoken to Farah. She has set up a meeting with an attorney and a financial adviser.”

Shane jerked upright. “Okay! That’s great.”

“I’m not saying you did a good thing.”

“Got it.”

“I do not want you to talk to Petrov,” he spat the name, “about me ever again.”

It was on the tip of Shane’s tongue to agree, just to end this argument, to accept his punishment for what he had done so they could go back to normal. But that little voice in his head raised its hand because he suspected this might be a promise he would fail at. And... it would just delay the inevitable. Which was facing the Petrov Problem.

He pressed his palms against his eyeballs, as if this might help him be more articulate. “Ilya, he’s my friend. I respect his opinion. I think— a blanket ban on talking about you at all might be difficult for me. But I can totally agree that talking about your family and your finances was a step too far. I’m sorry. I won’t do that again.”

Ilya was silent for a moment. Clearly uncomfortable. “I don’t like it.”

“I know. And I do understand it. But— he gives really good advice. And he’s really very supportive of us.”

The snort was dismissive and rude. “You *know* he wants to fuck you.”

“Hey, I don’t know that.”

“I do know that. It is very obvious. And I think you know it, too.” Ilya started to speak quickly, all choppy, his voice lowered to a whisper. “If you were not his employee, he would have bent you over the nearest surface at the first opportunity. And you would have folded.”

“Woah, hey, that’s enough,” Shane snapped, insulted at this suggestion he was somehow easy in, what, this imaginary scenario where Shane wasn’t with Ilya while Petrov was bending him over his desk or something? It didn’t even make sense. “Fuck you.”

Look at that. Now they were both angry.

Shane couldn't think of a single thing to say to move them forward.

"I have to go," Ilya said, sniffing. "We're boarding."

"Okay. Don't, you know, ghost me again," Shane added, helplessly and *unhelpfully* bitchy.

Ilya made a small, aggravated noise. "I *won't*, Shane." Then he hung up.

*

Fighting with Ilya put Shane in a shitty mood, which he in turn inflicted on his team in their next few practices, insisting on perfection and probably investing far more energy into their scrimmages than it really required. Even Wiebe – who liked a spontaneous bag skate or two because every coach had a little bit of a masochistic streak – pulled him back to suggest he might ease off on his overt criticism of the team. "Think the rookies are gonna cry, that's all."

"Yeah, okay, whatever. I'm going to stay out a bit longer."

"Everything okay?"

"Fine."

Wiebe patted him on the shoulder. "Door's open if you need to chat."

"Not sure I'm allowed to," Shane muttered bitterly, skating away.

The thing was – Shane knew this was a stupid fight. That was what was so frustrating about it. He'd done something well-intentioned but badly executed. And in some senses Ilya was right to be angry about it. *But* interwoven into this was Ilya's ridiculous jealousy over Petrov that *didn't seem to go away* and the way that made Shane feel like Ilya *didn't* trust him and— and kind of infantilized? Maybe? Like Ilya saw Shane's lack of experience with men, which wasn't all that lacking anymore, at least compared to a few years ago, put him at a disadvantage. Like he was some baby gay or something who would be seduced at any given moment.

It was fucking insulting.

In the locker room, not feeling remotely cooled down by the additional laps thanks to his spiraling thoughts, Shane sent a bitchy message to Ilya, which now appeared to be his default mode. *What about Coach? Can I talk to Coach about you? He's married so probably doesn't want to fuck me. Do I get your permission now?*

Ilya immediately started typing back. *Or you could talk to your actual friends*

Jane: *oh so it would be fine for me to talk to Hayden about you?*

Jane: *that's allowed?*

It also wasn't going to happen. Talking to Hayden or J.J. about Ilya being a fucking dickhead wasn't exactly going to endear him to them. They already thought Shane was crazy for being

with him.

Meanwhile Ilya was probably bitching to Svetlana about him right now. In Russian.

The typing bubbles started up again, a prelude to a string of angry messages.

Lily: *Why do you need to talk to people about me?*

Lily: *Tell them I'm bad with money?*

Lily: *That I can't look after my papa?*

Lily: *That my brother is a lying piece of shit?*

Alone, in the locker room, sweaty compression shirt still on, Shane gasped. His fingers flew across the keyboard. Okay, so maybe this was about more than Petrov.

Jane: *That's not it at all!!!!*

Jane: *I was worried about you.*

Jane: *because I love you, you asshole*

Ilya spent a long time typing and Shane's blood boiled, anticipating something truly shitty, maybe something heart-breaking, but what came back was, *I love you too, asshole*

Lily: *but I am still mad about this*

Jane: *Me too.*

Mad as he was – and he was mad, he was *seething* – those three words did act like some kind of spell. No sooner had he sent them, and read them in return, than some of the stress leaked from his body.

Lily: *Facetime tonight?*

Lily: *please*

Jane: *Yes. 8pm?*

Lily: *okay*

Jane: *thank you*

*

It was immediately better seeing each other's drawn, unhappy faces. They both began with wide-eyed apologies.

“Again, I am very sorry for talking to Petrov about your family and financial arrangements. I really overstepped the line, and I won't do it again.”

Ilya nodded very seriously. “I am sorry I tried to tell you who you could talk to. That’s not fair. I am—” He really struggled, mouth twisting around, “I am *glad* you have people to talk to who you can trust. Even if it’s him.”

Shane had been thinking about this now that Ilya had let him in on what really bothered him about the conversation. “Would you have felt the same way if I’d talked to my dad? Or my mom?”

“Yes,” Ilya said immediately, though he seemed surprised by his answer. “Though— maybe not in the same way? Still not good. But different. I want them to think well of me.”

Which was, in a nutshell, why Shane had been hesitant to talk to them about this. So at least they were aligned on that front. Only he’d then walked straight into Petrov’s office without that consideration. Which was some kind of weird double standard.

“Okay. And that’s because... you think it looks bad?” he asked, seeking absolute clarity. “That you’re sending all this money home to your family?”

Ilya pursed his lips and thumbed his nose. “Not bad. Irresponsible.”

“But it’s literally the opposite,” Shane protested, baffled. Ilya certainly wasn’t the first international player to support his family, nor would he be the last. And, knowing Ilya as he did now, he had no doubt he was being exceptionally generous. And probably had been for his whole career. *That* was the problem. *More, more, more*, he had said about his brother, once. Shane *also* wouldn’t have known what to do if his family were constantly asking him for money and maybe not for good reasons.

“I send money because I can’t be there, Shane.”

“And you feel bad about that. Even though no one is grateful. Or kind. And you are probably earning more money here to support them than you would over there.”

“Yes.” Eyes bulging, Ilya muttered something in Russian.

Shane narrowed his own eyes. “It sounds like you’re being rude about me in another language.”

“I wasn’t being rude. I wouldn’t do that.”

“I think you’re lying.”

“Oh, has your app got to the chapter on chirping, then?”

No. He was still practicing basic greetings. Russian was *hard*. “So you were being rude.”

“No, I said—” Ilya sighed. “I said you were a stubborn donkey.”

Objectively that wasn’t really funny, but the bar was currently pretty low, so Shane’s mouth twitched. “Well, that’s not *nice*, is it?” he managed.

Ilya's mouth also twitched. "I meant it with love."

Shane wished for maybe the thousandth time they were having this conversation face to face and not over Facetime. He wanted to kiss him. But also slightly throttle him. It was two weeks until the Christmas break, which they *still* hadn't talked about and if his mom asked him *one more time* if Ilya would be joining them, he was going to lose his mind.

"Maybe there's a French expression you could use on me."

"You want me to insult you in French?" Immediately, *immediately*, Shane knew what he would say, though he chirped in French about as much as he chirped in English. And all of it vaguely wholesome. "*Tête de cochon*."

Ilya's face wobbled, like he was momentarily caught between laughter and tears. He settled for a lopsided smile. "That sounds nice."

"I called you pigheaded."

"Ah." The smile became less lopsided and then it melted away. Ilya's eyes lowered. "I am—I am used to being a private person," Ilya said, choosing his words carefully. "I do not talk about my business. Not even with Sveta."

"No?"

"No," said Ilya thoughtfully. "Not as much as you might think."

Shane was relieved. He privately admitted he had worried about this. He had imagined that Ilya was having cozy chats with Svetlana on the regular, talking in Russian, with in-jokes that Shane would never understand. That she would have all the insights into Ilya's life, past and present, the way Shane didn't. Couldn't.

Maybe there might be parallels here, about how Ilya felt about Petrov, and how Shane felt about Svetlana. Jesus. He really hated being self-aware.

"I like talking about you," Shane explained. "I couldn't at all before and it's so much better now that people know. I wish I could talk about you with more people. I want people to know the good things about you. And I want someone else to talk to when things are hard and I don't know what to do. When I want to help you with your problems, too."

Someone like Petrov. With the best will in the world, J.J. and Hayden were *not* the kinds of friends who would offer sensible advice about Shane's relationship with Ilya. There was too much baggage. At least Petrov, and Wiebe, could look beyond that – and see that Shane wanted to make it work with Ilya. That this was an adult relationship, not a passing fancy somehow linked to Shane's lust for hockey. And they had experience, more experience than a bunch of twenty-something-year-olds who had big money but very little sense.

"Is it too hard?" Ilya whispered, plainly horrified by Shane's use of the word.

"No. It's not too hard. Not remotely. I think it's normal? I mean. Long-distance relationships are hard. That's what everyone says." What the hell did Shane know about 'normal'?

Everything he knew about relationships he had observed from his parents, who were pretty much perfect and hadn't been separated from each other for more than two nights Shane's entire life. "Couples argue. And I did something that hurt you. I'm not expecting you to just be fine with it. I was *wrong*. But you—you have a tendency to stop talking to me. And I find that difficult to handle. How can I help us if you won't talk to me?"

Ilya groaned. "I know. I'm sorry, Shane. It is a terrible thing. I get so—" He waved at his head, long fingers swirling around as if to indicate the frenetic nature of his thoughts. "So much happening and I can't talk right. And I don't want to say things I don't mean. Better I say nothing, I think?"

"I'm not sure about that. I'm not sure it's better but I understand if you can't find the right things to say." Shane put a pin in that; something to talk about when they weren't so wound up. "I didn't know you felt so guilty about not being there. I guess... I knew some stuff but I didn't know you felt it so badly. I should have worked that out. I'm sure I'd feel the same way and my relationship with my parents isn't so complicated." He rubbed his face. "I—I just wanted to, I don't know, help, in some way. Protect you. I know that's ridiculous. You can look after yourself. But I don't like that your brother calls you up and yells at you and demands money and gives nothing in return. You don't deserve that. You deserve so much better from them. I basically wish you never had to speak to him, or go back there, ever again."

"Me, either."

So don't, Shane thought, knowing it wasn't that simple. Nothing about this situation was simple and Shane couldn't *make* it simple. All he could do was be sympathetic. That was his only job. "I'm sorry. It's shit."

Ilya nodded slowly. His eyes were suspiciously shiny. "I have money," he said quietly. "They do not. And they are... my family. My blood. It is—that is what it is."

"Okay. Okay." Shane drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Well. Hopefully this attorney can find a solution for you for at least the financial aspects."

"Was good idea, Shane. Thank you. And him," Ilya said begrudgingly.

Shane reached out to touch the screen, in lieu of being able to physically touch Ilya. "Can you—I've been wanting to ask. Do you want to come to Ottawa with me? For Christmas?"

And now Ilya nodded semi-frantically, his heart in his eyes. His fingers touched the screen, too. "Yes. Please. I want this very much."

*

He had dinner at Hayden's and Jackie's that Friday after practice. He arrived early enough that the kids were still awake – keyed up by the imminent arrival of Christmas. Shane was introduced to the Elf on the Shelf, a weirdly long-legged doll who was dangled before him excitedly.

“So he... watches you,” he surmised, looking down at Jade and Ruby and then up at Jackie with concern. *What the fuck?* he mouthed to her but she just rolled her eyes and grabbed the oven mitts to get something from the oven.

“He tells Santa if we’ve been good,” Ruby said eagerly, totally fine, apparently, with having some kind of spy living in their house reporting on their every move.

“But he’s *very* naughty,” Jade told Shane, delighted. He was then treated to a play-by-play of the Elf’s actions. Apparently, while they were asleep, he carried out pranks in the night. Spilling flour everywhere. Saran-wrapping the toilet seat. Leaving them semi-threatening notes. He was shown some photos of the devastation on the twins’ iPad. Both girls cackled with delight, their fingers leaving fingerprints on the screen.

“This all sounds really counter-intuitive,” was Shane’s view. Shouldn’t the Elf be setting standards of *good* behavior? Who cleaned up after this little monster?

“What does counter-intuitive mean?” Ruby asked, saying the word slowly.

“Um. Good question. It means the opposite of how something should be.”

Ruby looked none the wiser from this explanation but Shane was saved from further effort by Jade grabbing the elf from her sister. “He’s sleeping in our room tonight,” she announced, running off with him. Ruby screeched and followed bare feet slap, slap, slapping on the wooden floors. Shane heard Hayden make some kind of protesting noise as they stampeded past him.

“It was Leanne’s idea,” Jackie said through her teeth. Leanne was Hayden’s mom. An otherwise totally normal woman, from what Shane had gathered the handful of times he had met her. “Apparently, they’re all the rage. All the kids have them at school.”

“It’s super creepy—hey, buddy!” Shane bent down to pick Arthur up as he ran into the kitchen ahead of his dad. “Oh, wow, have you grown?” He heaved him into the air and held him over his head. Arthur smiled gummily down at him, dark hair falling around his face.

“He wanted to say goodnight,” Hayden said. He had Arthur’s safety blanket tossed over one shoulder and some kind of sticker stuck to his forehead. It was the nanny’s night off.

“Night, Uncle Shane,” Arthur whispered shyly.

Shane gave him a squeeze. “Night, Arthur.”

“Need a hand, babe?” Jackie asked Hayden in an oddly sweet, high-pitched way, as she did something with the potatoes in the oven dish.

“No, no, I’ve got it.” Hayden’s voice was somehow tense, his smile tight. “Where’s the fu—the *damned* elf.” Hayden looked around the kitchen, almost as if he was afraid.

“The girls have him. We need him back,” she said with heavy emphasis. “He’s got some work to do in the laundry room.”

“Yeah, yeah, I *know*.” Again, a bit of a weird vibe there, Shane thought. “Gimme my kid.” Hayden held his arms out for Arthur. “Will be with you in a few.”

Giving his godson a smacking kiss on the forehead, Shane handed Arthur back to Hayden and the two of them trotted off, Hayden running through the story choices for that evening. He was a good dad, he really was. Just the right mixture of fun and serious. He wondered if *he’d* be a good dad. Ilya definitely would be, which was a thought that just— popped up. Alarmingly.

He could feel himself getting red in the face. Things were really bad if he was making himself blush.

“Um. Can I help?” Shane asked, having completely forgotten to offer and now needing to do something with his hands.

“Sure. Could you take the salmon out? It should be done.”

Shane did. Jackie’s salmon recipes always involved baking it in little baking paper parcels with different vegetables. She added white wine and butter to hers and Hayden’s but skipped it for Shane. Tonight it looked like they were having broccolini and asparagus. It smelled amazing. “Looks great, Jacks. Thanks.”

“Oh, jeez, your rice— it’s that pouch on the side.” She began plating up the potatoes onto hers and Hayden’s plates. They were golden and crispy and well seasoned. “Can you microwave it for a minute?”

He did so and then helped finish plating up, wrapping Hayden’s in foil as he was sure to be a few minutes longer with the kids. They sat at the table without him.

“So, how are things with you and Ilya?” Jackie asked brightly once they had settled.

“Good,” he said automatically. Then remembered it hadn’t actually been *that* good. “Actually, no, I fucked up a bit this week.”

As he explained to Jackie – editing out a fair bit of detail – her face moved into a series of sympathetic wincing, and occasionally she even let out an ‘ooof’. It was kind of great, actually. It was ingrained in him to consider Hayden first when it came to his close friendships but, while she was Hayden’s wife, Jackie was *also* his friend. He kind of forgot that. Judging from her responses to this conversation, she would have been a great person to talk to this week. She didn’t have the same issues with Ilya that Hayden did. She *also* was maybe a touch more in touch with her feelings.

Maybe he should get more female friends in general.

“Sounds like you muddled through that okay,” Jackie suggested kindly when he finished.

“It does?” he asked eagerly, looking for validation from any source. Always. “Anything I should have done better, you think? I mean. Apart from talking about my boyfriend’s personal life with someone else.”

“No,” Jackie said thoughtfully, neatly cutting a crispy potato in half. “And there’s no real *better*. You’re learning to talk to each other, Shane, about difficult things. Hayden and I used to have some rip-roaring arguments after we started dating. It happens.”

“Wow, really? He never mentioned.” Actually, the way Hayden had told it, it had been nothing but smooth sailing the entire time. Like fated. Destined. From dating to engaged to married in a few months. *We’re soulmates, Shane. I just know it.* It had been – honestly – revolting.

Secretly, Shane felt a little like he and Ilya were soulmates, now. But it sure as hell wasn’t smooth sailing. More like rough seas. Maybe like those boats in the North Sea on the verge of sinking at all times. Crushed by the waves coming at them from every angle.

“Oh, boy, yeah.” Jackie took a sip of her water, eyes twinkling. “Did he tell you he bought a house for us without talking to me first? Before we’d even talked about moving in together?”

Shane nearly choked. “What? Nooooo.”

Unfortunately, Hayden made his entry then, clapping his hands together with the triumph of a job well done. He was smiling. “Okay, sorry about that. Kids are down, but probably not for long. What did I miss?”

“Jackie was just telling me about the time you bought a house without discussing it with her.”

Hayden’s blue eyes widened with alarm, the smile dropping from his face. He spun on his heel toward the fridge. “I’m gonna get a beer.”

“Did you get the elf back?” Jackie asked, again with that weirdly sweet tone.

“*Fuck*. No,” Hayden spat, slamming the fridge door closed and hurrying back out of the kitchen.

Shane ate a piece of broccoli, eyeing Jackie’s expression as she placidly cut up her salmon. She *looked* fine, right? It was just her tone. “Everything okay?” he checked cautiously.

“Yes, yes, all good.” Jackie smiled at him. It was almost normal. “Looking forward to the last roadie before Christmas?”

“I mean, kinda. Should be some— no, really, I just unloaded on you, what’s going on?”

Jackie was quick to brush it off. She took a sip of her water. “It’s just a small thing. It’s fine, Shane. It’s really no big deal. It’ll blow over.”

“Okay. Okay,” Shane repeated, a little embarrassed to have pushed and been dismissed. Even though he’d been right, there *was* something off.

Maybe Jackie felt the same way about him, that he was Hayden’s friend first. She probably had her own friends to talk to, too.

She'd been so great, though, that he felt obliged to push a little more. "Let me know if I need to, you know, punch him or anything, though."

Jackie laughed in a surprised way. "Will do. Thanks. But we're all good. Promise. This is *not* like the time he bought a house."

And when Hayden came back, the Elf held high above his head like a trophy, Jackie's voice had returned to normal and later she looped her arm around Hayden's waist affectionately when they waved Shane off from the front porch.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not normally one to try to justify my writing in notes - but I am really trying not to make Ilya come off as a dick. I love him, deeply, and he has Big Problems going on, both real and in his head. Smashing up the emotional timeline like this has brought a lot of things forward for him, things that we would see more of in the Long Game. He is a fragile flower and Shane is making him really anxious 😭

And yes the chapter count has gone up. Pretty sure for the last time?

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Given it was coming up on nearly a year after the last time Ilya had pulled back from him, Shane was hyperaware of a repeating pattern. So when Ilya cancelled a couple of calls last minute the week before their game and his messages started to taper off, alarm bells rang.

Chapter Notes

Brace yourselves. Crammed a lot in this chapter (possibly too much). This has a high (yay Christmas!) and then... a very low (oh no), and I have updated the tags accordingly.

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

There was something about the lights from the Christmas tree and the dying embers of the fire that made Shane feel introspective. At the other end of the couch, Ilya was cuddled up in the red cashmere blanket that was brought out for Christmas each year and he had appropriated the moment he had seen it. He seemed to be thinking long thoughts, too, his eyes fixed on the fire, his phone lax in his hand.

Shane wriggled his toes, which were touching Ilya's. "Penny for them?"

This got Shane the expected raised eyebrows of Russian-to-English misunderstanding. "What is this?"

"Um. It's an idiom. I don't know where it came from. It's something to do with offering money for your thoughts."

"That is very strange."

"Yeah." Shane smiled. "You were thinking hard. So."

"I was." Ilya tossed his phone down onto the floor and puppyishly clambered in Shane's direction. His parents had gone to bed already and while they normally kept a decorous distance apart in front of them – more for Shane's benefit than theirs – now that they weren't here, there was no reason not to be all over each other.

Which Ilya demonstrated now by draping himself over Shane. "What do you think the future holds?"

“A third Cup,” Shane said promptly. Giving in to the inevitable, Shane dug his fingers into Ilya’s curls, all burnished and beautiful in the twinkling Christmas lights. He liked to separate each one into its individual whorls and waves, studying the curl pattern and all the different colors that made up Ilya’s dark blond hair. He was allowed to do this now.

Ilya snuggled into Shane’s chest. “And after that?”

“Hmm, a fourth?”

“Shane.”

Smiling, Shane twirled one curl around a finger. “I don’t know.”

“You imagine yourself retiring in Montreal?”

“Yes. Don’t— didn’t you?” His mind drifted to Wiebe’s crazy suggestion about Shane working his way up to GM after retiring from playing. And then he yanked his thoughts away from that mindfuck. He saw what Christine’s job was like – a lot of schmoozing and paperwork and not enough actual hockey. It was a heartbreaking idea, and Shane didn’t want to think about it.

Ilya shook his head. “No. Before, I always figured I’d go somewhere else. Maybe somewhere warmer. LA. Florida – they like me there. Or maybe,” he swallowed, “back to Russia.”

Shane tugged on a whorl, a little – no, a lot – surprised. “Seriously?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s where I’m from?”

This thought fairly blew Shane’s mind. “But you... don’t like it?”

“I know. It doesn’t have to make sense. I suppose I thought—” Ilya rubbed his cheek against the flannel of Shane’s shirt. “I suppose I did not imagine it properly, but I would be famous and rich, and there would be a wife, one day, and children...”

Thump, thump, went Shane’s heart, sickly. He hoped Ilya couldn’t hear it. “Ah.” Shane had imagined that, too. Or tried to.

“But now,” Ilya’s index finger traced one of Shane’s shirt buttons, “maybe there will be a husband, one day, and children...”

Thump, thump, went Shane’s heart again. “There will?” he asked in a wavering whisper.

Ilya blinked up at him, eyes round with earnest longing. “I think so, probably, yes?”

Shane nodded, unable to say the actual words. *Probably, yes*. A dream. *The Dream*, in fact. It was so extraordinary how quickly and easily this dream manifested compared to the dreams

of his childhood, with the probably-wife and probably-children. They had never felt fully formed, to Shane, which he had always put down to them being something so far in the future that it was irrelevant. There had been hockey first. Always hockey.

But in this dream, it was Ilya he woke up to every morning. It was Ilya chopping up watermelon on the weekend and carrying their kid on his shoulders. It was Ilya at *their* cottage at Christmas and birthdays and endless summer off-seasons.

He swallowed, positively star-struck by a future he suddenly craved as much – maybe, say it quietly, even *more* than – that third and fourth Stanley Cup. “How many children do you think?” he asked, aching to know the details of Ilya’s dreams so that he might adopt them. Adorn them with his own.

“Mm, two, probably. Maybe three.”

“Wow. Three.”

“Yes. Nice to have a big family, I think.”

“Yeah,” Shane repeated, his whole being swollen, trembling, with hope, “nice to have a big family.”

*

That night, in the bed his parents had purchased so that Shane could comfortably sleep with his boyfriend, Shane did very little of the actual sleeping. Ilya was out cold, pressed against Shane’s side with his arm about his hips and his breath puffing warm through Shane’s T-shirt. He was a very quiet sleeper, Ilya. Not like Hayden who muttered a lot about missing kids’ toys. Or J.J., who snored like a fucking demon. Seriously. That guy needed to have one of those sleep studies done. There was sure as fuck something wrong with him.

Turning his head slightly, Shane allowed himself to sniff Ilya’s hair. Unsurprisingly, he smelled just like Shane did – he used Shane’s seaweed shampoo, they shared a hypoallergenic shower gel and a face wash. They even had the same deodorant, and he was wearing one of Shane’s T-shirts so he *also* smelled like the laundry detergent his housekeeper stocked for him. Not that Shane had any idea of the brand.

There was something so primally satisfying about Ilya smelling like him. It was a label only Shane could identify. *This is mine*, it said. *Not yours. Mine*. And Ilya was Shane’s now. Forever.

Wriggling onto his side, Shane disrupted Ilya’s sleep – deliberately. “Hey,” he whispered. Then, when Ilya didn’t stir, he did it again, “Hey.”

Ilya’s eyelids trembled. “No, Hollander, shh,” he muttered, burying his face into his pillow. “Not Christmas yet.”

“Hey,” he stroked Ilya’s hair, “I want to talk about the future.”

“Mmmph. Now?”

“Yes.”

“Okie. Four Stanley cups.” Ilya snuggled impossibly closer. “Well done.”

“No. Yes. No,” he said again. “*Our* future. We’ve not talked about that. We’ve talked *around* it. You maybe moving teams. Maybe one closer to me. You maybe becoming a Canadian citizen. And then—” Marriage. Children.

Groaning, Ilya palmed his eye socket and rolled onto his back. “Yes. Maybes. We cannot,” he yawned, “talk about that first thing.”

“No, I know.” Shane scowled. Both Farah and Ilya continued to be utterly closed-mouthed on Ilya’s career plans. *Collusion*, they both muttered, as if Shane was going to fucking talk. As if they could be, what, subpoenaed by the league for pillow talk? He had no idea if Ilya had already spoken to Boston about waiving his NTC. He didn’t know if he was going to wait it out or try to move teams.

Like, rationally, he knew this was the right thing to do. Farah and his mom were now on them all the time to be squeaky clean. To absolutely ensure that, should their relationship be made public, there would be no evidence that they had done anything even slightly amiss, that they had acted in the best interests of their teams at all times.

So now he just had to rely on the fact that he knew Ilya wanted to be with him. That there *was* a plan, somewhere, a plan that would make Ilya happier and being together maybe easier. He just couldn’t be *in* on that plan yet.

Shane pressed on with the half-formed plan that he *could* be in on. “I think— in the meantime, we need to do stuff to prepare for that.” Whatever *that* was. “Like. We should start being friendly publicly, right? So, we can be together and then we won’t have to sneak around all the time – even if you move to fucking Florida or something – and it wouldn’t be weird if we were seen on a hike with each other or something.”

“A hike?” Ilya huffed. “Hollander, this is not sexy.”

It didn’t need saying, right now, but Shane was pretty certain that Ilya could make anything sexy. “It’s not supposed to be sexy. It’s supposed to be friendly.”

“I do not go on *hikes* with my friends.”

“Okay, okay, we can do other things,” Shane said, rolling his eyes and making a mental note to get Ilya to go on a hike with him anyway. He liked hikes. They were relaxing. He and Hayden and Jackie had gone on a few, before they’d had kids. “We could— go out clubbing. Or whatever.”

Now Ilya was *really* awake. He rolled onto his side and propped himself up on an elbow. In the near-darkness of his bedroom, Shane saw him cock his head to the side. “You would dance with me?”

Shane's face warmed. "Er. I mean, no, not in the way you're probably thinking. Also, I can't really dance. It was an example."

Ilya loomed over him, mouth very close to his. "You just haven't danced with someone you wanted to dance with."

"I guess... that is probably true, yes." Shane took a moment to close his eyes and center himself. They'd visited the basement before coming up to bed but he wasn't prepared to sneak out again just because Ilya could turn him on at the drop of a hat with visions of them writhing together on some sweaty dance floor. His mom was a very light sleeper. He could *not* face her Christmas morning with the possibility that his unplumbable thirst for Ilya Rozanov had woken her up. "Let's table dancing until you at least have your Green Card."

"And then?" Ilya's nose brushed his. He gave Shane the tiniest, tiniest kiss to the corner of his mouth. Really more of a whisper. "What is next?"

"Then— we could, I don't know, maybe date? We don't have to announce anything but maybe a few more people could know." Shane's mouth parted, just a little, and his tongue dabbed against his bottom lip in anticipation but Ilya had moved, nose dragging along Shane's cheek and down. "In our teams and stuff. We're both out now so. Maybe it'll look like it happens naturally. We just got to know one another. And one thing led to another."

That was going to be a shitshow but maybe if the Metros were exposed to Ilya socially *enough* it wouldn't be that big a deal? Maybe? God. He'd really been testing his people these last couple of years. Honestly, if the Metros accepted Shane and Ilya as a couple Petrov should get some kind of award.

Ilya hummed. His fingers slid around the waistband of Shane's pajama pants, one dipping under the elastic to touch bare skin. "Crowell will find out," he said to Shane's neck, which caused Shane to shiver. "He will not like it. Neither will the fans."

"He can't do anything about it, though." Shane swallowed and tried not to squirm. He refused to think about his dick, swelling behind the checked cotton. He refused. His parents were *next door*. "There's no rules. And the data says we actually play *better* against each other. Maybe we could publish an article or something..."

"The data?" Ilya's leg rubbed against his and then slid over his thighs as his hand disappeared down under Shane's waistband.

"Yeahhhhh," Shane breathed, mind going blank. Data? What data?

Ilya's hot hand curved gently and inexorably around Shane's erection and gave it a squeeze. "Shane?"

"Mmm?"

His tongue licked a long stripe up Shane's neck. "If I put my T-shirt in your mouth, do you think you can be quiet whilst I fuck you very slowly?"

Shane didn't even have to think about it. He nodded frantically. "Definitely."

*

Shane was last up in the morning, which was a discombobulating experience now that he intermittently shared a bed with someone else who tended to be a late sleeper. He stumbled into the hallway to the sound of murmurs downstairs – his parents' voices and the sexy rumble of Ilya's low morning voice. Ascertaining that they were all fine, he showered and dressed and hurried downstairs.

"Merry Christmas," he announced to the kitchen.

Three faces turned to him with very similar expressions of pleasure. For a brief moment, Shane was almost overwhelmed at the wave of emotion that hit him. All of his favorite people. Right here in the kitchen he grew up in, on Christmas morning.

It was unreal.

"There you are, sweetheart, you must have been so tired to sleep so late," his mom greeted him, leaning up to kiss him on the cheek. Over her shoulder, Ilya's grin was tantamount to a proud declaration of his role in ensuring Shane was 'tired'. "Merry Christmas."

Shane hugged his dad and then, what the hell, leaned down to kiss Ilya at the table. On the mouth and everything. "Merry Christmas, Ilya."

Ilya was a little startled at this overt affection, then blushing pleased. "Merry Christmas, Shane. Apparently, we have pancakes today."

"We do."

"You eat pancakes." Ilya was doubtful.

"On Christmas Day, yes." Two pancakes, his made with protein powder, a scoop of 0% Greek Yoghurt, and fruit. No syrup or bacon. It was in his meal plan. Admittedly, he then planned to go for a run on the treadmill downstairs. A long one. "And I make it. You can help."

"I am already helping." Ilya gestured, smugly, to the chopping board in front of him and the various vegetables in different stages of peeling.

Shane got that feeling again. The overwhelmed one. *Ilya*, here, helping his parents prep the family Christmas meal. Because of Ilya, they were at home for this one – his parents *thrilled* to put off the various plans with his grandparents – and so they were doing things properly. Turkey. Potatoes. Stuffing. His dad's maple-glazed, bacon-wrapped-sausages. A lot of carrots and green beans and Brussels sprouts.

This was *also* in Shane's meal plan. Except for the sausages. And the stuffing.

"So you are," Shane said faintly and, helpless, blushing red, he leaned down to kiss him again, his hand cupping Ilya's cheek.

“Aww,” said his mom and then everyone was blushing.

*

His mom made cookies; Ilya helped. Shane sat at the table watching with his cheek propped on his hand. He’d given up even pretending to read the contract his mom had presented him with in lieu of the live entertainment that was Ilya baking in an apron.

“With just the tips of your fingers, they’re the coolest part. Just rub the butter into the flour. Yes, like that.”

Shane could feel he was smiling, his cheeks stretched out to their fullest. The words were familiar, repetitions of instructions Yuna had given Shane when he was a little boy. Just like he imagined his had been, Ilya’s face was very serious, like the Christmas cookies were life or death.

“All right. I’m going to make the call,” his dad announced, marching into the kitchen with purpose and taking the landline phone off the base unit.

“You can do it,” his mom said without turning around.

“I believe in you, Dad.” Shane gave his dad an encouraging thumbs up.

Ilya cast them all a perplexed look, hands in the bowl. “What is happening?”

“Dad’s going to call my granddad.”

David breathed through his teeth as he dialed. He glanced at Shane, eyes a little wide. “You’ll talk after me.”

Shane knew his duty. He nodded seriously. “Will do.”

Standing to military attention, Shane’s dad stared out of the kitchen window, waiting for the line to connect. When it did, he jolted. “Dad. Hi, it’s David. Merry Christmas.”

Trying to act casual, his dad unbent his spine to lean on the back of a kitchen chair as Shane’s granddad talked and his dad interjected with innocuous commentary. “That’s great.... great.... Yeah, I mean, yes, sir. Glad you liked them.... Uh-huh. Yes, it seemed right up your alley.”

Ignoring this, Yuna continued to give Ilya instructions. “You now want to kind of mold it into a ball. It’s a very dry dough.”

She wiped down the kitchen counter as, frowning, Ilya duly molded the dough in the earthenware mixing bowl. “Is not really coming together.”

“It will.”

“Yes, yes, Shane’s here.” David jerked upright again. “He’d love to speak to you both.”

Shane pulled a face but held out his hand for the phone. He pressed it to his ear. “Hi, Granddad. Merry Christmas.”

“Shane!” his grandfather boomed in that way he did, kind of like he was projecting his will down the phone. “Merry Christmas. How are you enjoying the time off?”

“You know me, Granddad, I don’t really know how to relax. Looking forward to getting back to work.”

Eyes wide, David gave Shane a big thumbs up and mouthed ‘good one’. Shane was pleased. He’d pre-prepared this sentence.

His grandfather guffawed with laughter. “Just like me. A real chip off the old block.”

Shane managed a laugh. “Yes, sir.”

“Good to talk, son. Here’s your grandmother.”

The phone was passed to Mathilde, who was not, in any shape or form, Shane’s grandmother. Shane’s grandmother was on a cruise this Christmas. “Shaney.”

Shane closed his eyes at this unbearable nickname she had given him the first time they had been introduced and he had been too polite to refute. “Hi Mathilde, Merry Christmas, sorry to have missed you guys. Are you still heading to the club for lunch?”

“We are, we are. Everyone will really miss seeing you, of course.” Shane had no doubt. He was usually brought table to table by his grandfather and introduced to whomever he deemed important. *This is my grandson, Shane, star center for the Montreal Metros, you might have heard of him.* “I’m wearing the lovely little necklace your grandfather bought me for Christmas.”

Shane imagined the ‘little’ necklace was probably a couple of carats of diamonds. “Oh yeah? Sounds pretty. We haven’t opened our presents yet.”

There was an envelope from his grandfather, as there was every year. It would contain a check with explicit instructions on where Shane was to ‘invest’ said money. For some reason his grandfather entirely ignored that Shane was extremely wealthy and had his own investment portfolio. In a few months’ time Shane would have to follow up and talk about dividends or something. He usually briefed his finance guy for something to say. A fun game.

“Your grandfather I’m sure has been *very* generous this year.”

“Yes, he’s always very generous. We’re very grateful.”

Mathilde laughed, though there was nothing funny about that sentence. “Well, I should get going, Shaney. I have to get ready. Have a wonderful day. Speak soon.”

She hung up. Shane passed the phone back to his dad. “Done.”

“Wow,” said Ilya, looking over his shoulder with wide eyes as if he had never seen Shane before. “Impressive.”

“Shane knows how to handle his grandfather,” Yuna said. She sounded proud.

Shane grunted. His grandfather was like every comfortably rich old white guy he’d known. It wasn’t hard to manipulate them, to tell them what they needed to hear.

Yuna drew Ilya’s attention back to her. “Okay, now we’re going to roll out the dough.”

“But I just spent all this time putting it into a ball...”

*

They opened Christmas presents before dinner – which was a tradition Shane had instigated when he was younger, as to his mind if the presents were opened later then Christmas itself was prolonged. It had been a tradition that stuck, once they had established the Christmas lunch with his grandfather and latest trophy wife and once Shane’s Christmas day routine involved a long morning run.

“Ah, yes, delayed gratification. Your specialty,” Ilya murmured in Shane’s ear.

“That is— never mind,” he said, flushing fiery red as his mom looked over at them curiously. Jesus.

He thrust Ilya’s present to him quickly. Ilya had given Shane his present that afternoon while his parents had been out for a walk. It was not a present that Shane would have been able to open in front of his parents as it was a selection of sex toys and Shane’s brain had pretty much shut down from a combination of embarrassment and lust. In lieu of actually trying any of the sex toys, they’d exchanged hurried, enthusiastic blowjobs, ears pricked for the sounds of his parents returning home.

Shane had bought Ilya an entirely parent-appropriate cashmere throw, very similar to the one he had appropriated, though it was bright orange. This got him a very toothy grin and Ilya wrapped it around himself immediately, stroking the soft material against his cheek.

Orange did suit him, actually. But then everything did.

To Ilya’s surprise, his parents had also got him presents. A bottle of maple syrup, of course, one of the fancier brands, which was kind of a joke gift except it was really good and Ilya had a notorious sweet tooth. And—“ Oh my God,” Shane said.

“This is not their logo,” Ilya said, holding the Cens hockey shirt up against himself in confusion.

“No. It’s their old one, from when Shane was a kid. It’s mine. I thought, maybe. You could have it,” David said, squirming about as much as Shane had done the first time he’d given Ilya a remotely emotion-adjacent present.

Ilya looked like he’d been punched. “I— we do not know what— thank you,” he managed.

“Even if they’re not your team,” David explained, about as in the dark about Ilya’s plans as Shane was. “We could go see a game together maybe, one day.”

“David still goes,” Yuna explained into the pause where they were basically all having some form of emotional breakdown, for different reasons. Shane’s was because his dad had just done something so unbelievably raw that it had touched his *own* nerves. He had basically just painted a picture of a future David desperately wanted – where he and his *son-in-law* went to a hockey game together. Gah. Shane might actually melt into a puddle. “They are his team.”

“Hey, they’re mine too,” Shane said faintly, in the comfort of his family home where he could admit that sort of thing. He would always have a soft spot for the Centaurs.

His mom’s eyes slanted to him. “Hey,” she said.

He rolled his eyes. “Obviously the Metros are *first*, Mom.”

“I love it. Thank you, David,” Ilya said gently and Shane could hear the slight waver in his voice.

“Here, Mom, open mine,” Shane said, in a hurry to distract them all from what might be Ilya’s imminent tears and maybe an interrogation on Shane’s loyalties.

Shane had bought his mother expensive jewelry, in collusion with his dad who knew what his mom liked best. They exchanged glances with each other as she sprung up to try the earrings on in the mirror, *oohing* and *ahhing* with appropriate maternal gratitude. It had taken Shane a few years to break her of the habit of refusing gifts from him at Christmas, even as the financial balance tipped further and further in Shane’s direction.

She kissed him fulsomely on the forehead. “I love them. Thank you.”

Over dinner, Shane brought up the soft-launching of his and Ilya’s friendship, to see if they could brainstorm some ideas.

“Mmm,” said Yuna, fork in her mouth. “What about summer training? Some players share trainers.”

“Ilya goes home to Russia in the summer.”

“Oh, yes. Of course. The whole time?” his mom asked, innocently landing on a topic of conversation Shane wanted to bring up himself.

“Yes,” said Ilya shortly, neatly crushing Shane’s nascent little hope that maybe, *maybe*, he could eke a week or two out of their shared time off. Under the table, Ilya’s knee nudged his. “I’m sorry. I have to. Is only time I can go home. I must see my father and my niece.”

“Yeah, course,” Shane said, nodding and not at all questioning why this would take up the whole of the summer. His niece was basically a baby. And his dad was— Shane didn’t like himself for this train of thought so he shut it down. From the little Shane had observed – and the even little-er Ilya had told him – his father’s dementia had led to a rapid decline. He was now in full-time care, paid for by Ilya.

So Ilya was *right* to go home. It was his father. Shane needed to not be selfish about this.

“I’ve, ah. Got that kids training camp for some of it, anyway. And there’s another Calvin Klein shoot and— Reebok have some thing right?” Shane glanced at his mom, trying not to let the disappointment show on his face.

His mom was, as ever, delighted to talk about the opportunities she’d lined up. “Yes, they have an amazing new campaign, all about empowerment. Shane’s going to be doing a shoot with a whole lot of other diverse athletes from around the world – soccer and basketball and the UFC. It’s really very exciting.”

Ilya’s smile was polite. “Keeping him busy.”

Last year, Shane had been grateful to be so busy. He supposed – with Ilya in Russia, again – he would be grateful for different reasons.

The disappointment lingered through the rest of dinner and through the Christmas movie they’d picked that Shane only half paid attention to. It was stupid because summer was ages away and they were together, now, which was more than they’d ever had before. He tried to stay in the moment.

Ilya knew something was up because Shane was about as transparent as a sheet of glass. He sat down next to Shane on the bed as they prepared for sleep and draped his arm about him, drawing him close, kissing his temple. “I’m sorry. About summer.”

“It’s fine. I guessed you’d have plans.”

“Shane, I am expected. There are—” He sighed. “I have obligations. I do not go home all year. And maybe soon I will not be able to. There are things I need to do. I need to... say goodbye.”

Shane nodded again, guilt a weight with which he was familiar. “I know. It’s the right thing to do. I know,” he said again. He was well aware of the guilt Ilya also carried now. “It’s fine.” He would *make it* fine.

“It’s not. I will miss you.”

“Sure.”

“Sure,” Ilya repeated, disbelievingly, huffing out a laugh. He took hold of Shane’s chin, turning him to face him, forcing Shane to make eye contact. His eyebrows rose. “And you will miss me.”

“Obviously.”

“Say the words, Hollander.”

Shane stuck his bottom lip out. “Of course I will miss you. So much.”

“Good boy.” He leaned in to kiss Shane, lingeringly. He nudged Shane’s nose with his.
“Basement?”

*

They drove back to Montreal on Boxing Day. Ilya would fly out on the 27th and they wanted a day together where they could – bluntly – fuck as loudly as they wanted. The journey was largely uneventful, no messages from Franco-Russian bosses, and Ilya seemed content to listen to the podcast Shane had chosen.

They did fuck, loudly, about five minutes after they got back to Shane’s apartment, door barely closed behind them, and then laughed about it because they were so fucking stupid about each other.

“Okay,” Shane said, rolling onto his front on the floor of his hallway and stretching, “so we go for drinks after the next game.”

He couldn’t believe they were doing this.

Ilya flicked the lid back on the bottle of lube he’d pulled from his jeans pockets earlier like a magician. He tossed it toward his bag. “Yup.”

“And J.J. will take a photo and post it to his Instagram.”

It was insane.

“That is the plan.”

Shane had already read Hayden and J.J. into said ‘plan’. There had been mixed reactions. Hayden’s had involved the green vomiting emoji and J.J. had just sent a series of skull emojis which was apparently how people laughed these days. Thankfully, J.J. was at least up for being complicit in this deception by using his own Instagram as the central puzzle piece. He thought it would get him a lot of engagement, both good and bad.

“And both of us will comment something not-shitty and only mildly competitive.” They should probably brainstorm some ideas. The rivalry still needed to live on after all - just friendlier.

“Ah. I see why you are repeating this. You are worried I will—”

“—be yourself,” Shane interrupted, laughing to cover up the nerves, “yes, that’s exactly what I’m worried about.”

Ilya slapped Shane’s ass. His mouth quirked at the solid, satisfying sound it made, so he did it again, eyes on said ass, clearly now very distracted. “I will behave, Hollander. Promise. Get up now, or you’ll stick to the floor and you won’t like that. Do you think you are too sensitive to take the vibrating plug now? Maybe we wait until this evening...”

*

Usually, coming back to hockey was a relief after the disruptive ‘excess’ of the Christmas break, but this year Shane returned to work feeling— well, pretty low, actually. Like an echo of how he felt when he and Ilya had broken up, except they hadn’t broken up, they’d had several days of being in each other’s pockets and *in love* and now they were a plane journey apart.

Brutal.

He didn’t need to guess at Ilya feeling the same way. They exchanged several ‘I miss you’s over the next couple of days in and amongst their usual messages. Disappointingly, there wasn’t a chance to meet up over New Year or even Russian Christmas this year – the schedule was just too tight. But then it *was* only two weeks until their next game together, which in the grand scheme of things wasn’t *that* bad, and after that there was All Stars.

All Stars.

In Shane’s mind, this was a pretty momentous milestone memory from last year. Nearly a year since Ilya had started to pull back from him and he hadn’t realized until it was too late. He kept being reminded of it every time the subject of the weekend came up - after all, for the rest of the team it was a long weekend to look forward to. Despite months of being confidently sure of Ilya, he found himself being hyperaware of a repeating pattern, his heart jumping every time his phone got a message.

He kept reassuring himself that things were different now but then, like he’d brought this on himself through will-power alone, Ilya cancelled a couple of calls last minute with vague excuses.

And were his messages starting to get few and far between?

And monosyllabic?

The big flashing ILYA WARNING alarm in Shane’s head went off.

Beyond anxious, Shane messaged. *Everything okay?*

A reply was waiting for him as he left practice, sent three hours after Shane’s.

Lily: *All is okay*

Lily: *Love you* ❤️

Perplexed, Shane frowned down at his phone, then frowned down at it again before he showered, and after he showered, and then while he was waiting for Hayden outside. He’d picked Hayden up that morning as his car was in the shop and Jackie needed hers.

“Trouble in paradise?”

“What? Ah,” Shane blushed, wondered when he would *stop* blushing if asked about Ilya, “I don’t know? He’s been weirdly quiet the last few days.”

“You have another fight?”

Shane grunted a negative as he climbed into the driver side and tossed his phone into the cubby. “Jackie filled you in, then?”

Hayden hesitated. “Sorry, bud, that’s the way marriage works. I mean, unless you told her not to tell me?” he asked, faintly anxious, as if he was worried Jackie had misstepped.

Shane hadn’t told Jackie to keep it to herself. He wasn’t certain he was that bothered about Hayden knowing, either. It was kind of helpful that he hadn’t had to tell the story twice.

His friend misunderstood Shane’s hesitation. “Bet you tell Rozanov plenty.”

Shane opened his mouth to deny it, more of an instinctive thing than an intention to genuinely lie but then remembered the last time he had given Ilya a run-down on the – often highly private, embarrassing – contents of the Retro and Ilya had laughed so hard he was concerned he’d strained something in his cheeks. Sometimes talking to Ilya was kind of like talking to an extension of himself. He trusted Ilya implicitly. Which he guessed was a two-way street – and made his telling Petrov personal stuff about Ilya even more of a kick in the balls. Shane sighed. *Live and learn, Hollander, live and learn.* “Yeah, I do tell him a lot. I mean, obviously if you told me something you wanted me to keep private, I’d do so.”

“Ditto. And I know the same goes for Jackie.”

“Okay.” That was good to know.

Shane dropped Hayden off, declining an invitation for a non-alcoholic beer, exposure to Bridget’s judgy eye and whatever plague Arthur had apparently picked up from nursery, and drove home.

He could not shake the anxiety about Ilya. He sent him another message.

Jane: *Call?*

Lily: *Not tonight, lyubimiy*

Lily: *tomorrow maybe*

Shane flicked over to the photo he had saved to his favorites of the Raiders calendar, just to double-check what he already knew. Boston had played at home a couple of days ago and played at home again tomorrow evening. Bit weird Ilya hadn’t given Shane a reason for not being able to have a call. He usually did.

Maybe he was tired.

Probably he was tired.

Or out? With friends? With Sveta? He’d have said that, though.

Shane put his phone aside and chose his dinner, stood in front of the microwave swaying from foot to foot, watching the container spin. He took it out halfway, stirring as per the instructions, and then returned it. This time he stuck his hands in his pockets and stood resolutely still.

The microwave pinged with its successful reheating of his nutritious meal but, ignoring it, Shane spun around, grabbed his phone, and FaceTimed his boyfriend.

This was a test. A real test. And Shane felt a little sick with it, getting sicker with every unanswered ring.

Finally, just when he was afraid he was actually going to hurl – an overreaction if ever there was one – Ilya answered. In the dark. Not out with friends or curled up on a couch with Svetlana. Or (small voice) curled up with someone else.

This, if anything, was the *most* surprising outcome of Shane's nebulous fears.

"Shane?" he asked, voice muffled, a little rusty and confused sounding.

"Are you in *bed*?" Shane glanced at the clock. It wasn't even eight.

"Mmm, tired."

When Ilya said no more, and Shane had blinked at the dark screen for long enough, he asked what he had asked earlier. "Are you okay?"

Ilya breathed at him for a moment. "Just tired," he whispered in that way he did, when he tried to soothe Shane's anxieties. "Speak tomorrow."

"After your game?"

"Game?" Ilya repeated, as if he had no idea what a *game* was and what role he could possibly be playing in said *game*. "Yes, after game."

Shane squinted closer at the screen. "Are you getting sick maybe?"

"I'm just tired," Ilya said again, his voice devoid of any emotion whatsoever. Even irritation at Shane calling him when he said he couldn't take a call.

Maybe he was getting sick and didn't know it. Shane made a mental note to DoorDash him some meds, just in case. Not that Ilya wasn't a grown adult who couldn't take care of himself but once when Shane had stayed over and developed a rare headache, he had discovered that Ilya kept nothing but topical pain relief gels at home. Apparently, he had a mind over matter thing about painkillers. On that occasion, Ilya had gone out to get him some Tylenol but had insisted he take them with him when he left.

Bit weird. But then his dad thought Tiger Balm cured all ills, so.

"Shane?"

“I’m here. Sorry. Just. Maybe you should drink some water.”

Ilya made a rustling noise. He was rolling over in bed. And now Shane could see him a little bit, like a smudge of a person. “What time is it?”

All kinds of different alarm bells were going off now. “Ilya, are you *sure* you’re okay?”

“I’m just *tired*.” There was the irritation. Finally. “Don’t— don’t fuss, Hollander. Is exhausting.”

He was going to fucking fuss, exhausting or otherwise. “Ilya, how long have you been in bed?” he asked suspiciously.

“I don’t know. A few hours maybe,” he said, impatient, but slow with it. “Yesterday a little.”

“Okay. Okay.” This was *not* normal. “Did you hit your head or something?” He’d watched the game live – he watched all of Ilya’s games if he could – and couldn’t remember a nasty check or anything.

“No,” Ilya sighed. “It’s just a feeling. It’ll go away.”

That sounded like the voice of experience. “This has happened before?”

Ilya was quiet and Shane could *tell* he was deciding whether to be truthful or not. He clenched his teeth, then relaxed them when Ilya made the correct choice. “Sometimes. Not often. But sometimes I feel—” There was a long and heavy pause. “I feel very tired.”

Shane’s laptop was slotted in its smart charging station in the middle of the counter. He yanked it out with one hand, flipping it open and furiously typed into the search bar. *Boyfriend sometimes get tired for a long time for no reason*. He skim-read the handy-dandy Google summary, skipping straight over words like *physical injuries* and *vitamin deficiencies*, to the words *mental health issues*, words that practically screamed out the page. Like he hadn’t, in his heart of hearts, suspected this. Like the pieces of an Ilya-shaped puzzle hadn’t been slowly forming over the years they had known each other.

“Shane?” Ilya’s voice was the rawest of whispers.

“Yes?”

“Sometimes, I think I am not okay.”

*

Shane bullied Ilya out of bed over the phone. He bullied him into drinking a glass of water. And reheating a meal that Ilya insisted he didn’t want and picked over, frowning the whole time.

“I think someone should be with you.”

“I’m just tired,” Ilya insisted, indeed very tiredly. “I’m not— I’m not thinking of doing bad things right now.”

Shane’s eyes widened. He hadn’t, for *one fucking moment*, thought about Ilya *doing bad things*. He had been thinking his boyfriend was sad, in a big way, and needed company and maybe Svetlana or Connors or goddamn *Marly* could come over because Shane was a fucking plane journey away and had practice and a game the day after tomorrow. “Do you—” Shane had to take a breath. It caught, unmistakably, a little wrench in his throat. “Do you… think of doing things like that sometimes?”

Ilya’s face crumpled and he swept his phone away from him violently, sending it, and Shane, over the counter.

A horrible, horrified and *frightened* noise boiled up from inside Shane as his view became the artful collection of lights above Ilya’s kitchen island. He stuffed the sleeve of his sweater into his mouth, preventing it from coming out, and blindly pulled up Air Canada on his laptop, even though he *knew* he’d missed the last flight out this evening. He knew that fucking flight schedule like the back of his hand.

He could be on the first flight tomorrow though. He could— he could— he could yank his fucking sweater out of his mouth that’s what he could do. “Ilya. Ilya, I want to see you. I need to see you, please,” he corrected. Then, with a voice he sometimes used with rookies, “*Now*.”

“No,” came a muffled voice from far away.

So maybe shouting at his boyfriend hadn’t been the best course of action. He’d seemed to take a stern talking to earlier well; there was clearly a line. “Ilya, I love you, please, please let me see you.”

There was a small sniffing noise. A blurry shape passed over the camera and Ilya came partially back into view. He had been crying. “Sorry, I’m sorry, Shane.”

“Don’t be sorry. You don’t have anything to be sorry about. I think— I think we need to speak to a doctor? Not the team doctor,” Shane amended quickly, possibly overly paranoid about the ethics of the Raiders’ medical staff.

“We?” Ilya repeated, sniffing.

“Yeah. Okay. You, obviously. But— I could be there? I could find someone? Help you find someone.” He was *so* out of his depth here. Jesus. He felt like he’d been taken out at the knees and was freefalling. “I just think you need some professional help. There’s nothing wrong with that,” he emphasized. “But maybe it would be good to talk to someone about how you’re feeling.”

Ilya was finally looking at him, having spent much of this call studiously avoiding his eyes. “They will just give me pills.”

“Yeah, well, maybe. If that’s what is needed. They can help with—”

Depression. That was the word they were dancing around. *Depression*. A big word.

A word Shane knew nothing about, nothing more than the casual way it was tossed about sometimes by his team after bad break ups, after a loss, after the passing of a family pet. They'd had a mental health seminar a few months back, but it had mostly been about the pressure of the job and 'reaching out' to the appropriate people if it got too much. Shane had... Shane had been pretty dismissive, to be honest. Hockey was never too much. If anything, hockey was the thing that got him through everything else.

This was a whole other ball game. This was Ilya. Ilya mattered. "They can help with that." Like. He'd heard. "And are a good thing." Also like he'd heard.

The Air Canada website began to flash at him, warning him that his search was about to expire. It was so many hours until tomorrow morning. Too many. He might as well— wait. Holy shit. He didn't need to fly. He could *drive*. He could drive to Boston. If he set off now, he could be there in five, six hours?

"I'm coming to you," he announced, standing up.

Ilya's eyes changed just a little. Just a little, hopeful spark. "You are coming? Here?"

"Yes. I'm going to drive. Right now." He picked Ilya up and hurried into his bedroom, grabbing his duffel from his walk-in and throwing things into it. "I can be in Boston in a few hours, right?"

And drive back, what, tomorrow night? Or the following morning. Super early. Be back for the game on Friday. God, he needed to message Wiebe about practice. Fuck, this was crazy. But he had never been so sure of anything.

"You don't have to," Ilya said in a way that sounded absolutely like he had to.

So he would.

*

In the car, Shane switched them over to a voice call and plugged his phone into his car charger. He programmed the route to Ilya's. Less than five hours, this time of night, and hopefully the border wouldn't be too busy. Wow, this was such a good idea. He wouldn't have slept anyway waiting for a flight, just straight up worrying. "Okay. ETA is just before 2am."

"You are really coming?" Ilya had already said this twice before, each time in the same disbelieving tone. Which if Shane thought about too hard was probably pretty awful, like Ilya didn't believe he was worth Shane's time.

"Yup. You want to stay on the line with me?" Shane posed this as a question, though he really wanted to keep Ilya on the call. Gripped now with the fear about *bad things*, the potential unnamed thoughts his boyfriend might be experiencing, he wanted to have his eyes on him at all times. And if he couldn't have eyes, he could have ears.

This wasn't a sustainable plan, but it was all he had right now, all that would keep him breathing, keep the clutch around his heart from becoming all consuming.

"Okay."

They didn't talk. As he navigated his way out of Montreal, Shane mostly listened to the sound of Ilya moving slowly about his house. At one point he showered, which he thought was a good sign. He could have done without listening to him piss.

At the border, Shane handed over his passport. He waited, with bated breath, to be recognized but the guy just parroted the usual routine questions which Shane had been mulling over for most of the journey. "Visiting a friend short notice," he said, smiling, really turning up the Canadian charm he was inexplicably known for. "Lost track of time so set off later than I expected." He yawned, covering his mouth with his hand. "Sorry about that."

The officer wasn't remotely interested in this detail. "Are you bringing any food, alcohol, tobacco, plants, fruits, vegetables, or anything else you need to declare into the United States?"

"No, sir," Shane said promptly.

And then he was through.

Around about midnight, when Shane was crossing into New Hampshire, he suggested Ilya might want to go to bed. He had been muffling yawns unsuccessfully and it was making him yawn in turn.

"Not yet. Not until you're here."

Though it was encouraging how much more alert Ilya sounded, Shane worried about the late night. "Okay. But you have a game tomorrow."

"Mmm. Is okay."

"Do you maybe want to message LeClair? Say you're feeling sick?"

Ilya breathed out loudly. "Is fine, Shane."

"You think you'll be okay to play?" He didn't know how this worked. *Should* Ilya be playing?

"Yes. For a game, I will be okay. For you, too."

Shane chomped on his bottom lip, hard, desperate for the flare of physical pain to distract from the flare of emotional pain and said nothing for a moment until he had it under control. "Okay. I guess you know you the best."

Ilya made a plaintive noise. "My house is not tidy."

"Your housekeeper hasn't come?"

He sighed. “Told her not to.”

Shane absorbed that unhappily for a moment. These little signals that Ilya had been giving, unbeknownst to Shane. *Because he hadn't been there.* “It doesn’t matter. I don’t care about that.”

“You care a little.”

Sure, in usual circumstances he might care. He loved how house-proud Ilya was. But now was *not* the time. “I don’t give a shit if your house is untidy, Ilya,” Shane said, maybe a little too sharply. “Sorry.”

“Okay. I’m going to lie on the couch.”

“Good idea. Do you have your orange blanket?” he asked, then grimaced a bit at how that sounded. Like he was talking to an infant.

But Ilya didn't seem to take notice of this, utterly took Shane's question at face value. “Yes. Is here.” The line rustled as Ilya made himself comfortable. Shane could picture him clear as anything, just as he had been at Christmas. The way he tucked the blanket up, high under his chin, rubbing the material against his cheek. It had only been a few weeks ago. A few weeks ago, when Ilya had been incandescently happy.

And now this.

The repetitive lights of the highway and oncoming cars were beginning to make him feel a bit funny. He didn’t really like long drives. Being trapped in a car, moving but not moving his body, had never really sat well with him. He shook his head and blinked hard. He was very tired.

He passed a sign, welcoming him into Massachusetts. “Massachusetts now,” he announced into the silence.

Ilya didn’t say anything. He wondered if he’d fallen asleep. Good.

It was another hour before Shane was navigating his way through Brookline, the dark streets passing in a blur as he followed the droning GPS instructions. He had to climb out at Ilya’s gates to stab in the code, wincing at the first time he had stretched his legs in over five hours, then climbed back into the car to crawl down the drive before coming to a halt at the front. He figured he could just leave his car outside rather than deal with the garage situation.

Yawning hugely, he pressed the entry code to the front door with muscle memory alone and pushed it open. Silence greeted him. He shut the door quietly and toed off his shoes, padding in socked feet through to the living area, lit lowly by a single corner lamp.

Ilya was indeed asleep on the couch, wrapped up in the orange blanket.

Shane, whose heart was already so full of Ilya, so full to bursting, felt it swell to a new, disproportionate and impossible size. He stood for a long moment, drinking him in. Ilya, as was often the case, looked angelic asleep. And very young.

When he had his fill of watching his boyfriend breathe reassuringly, Shane looked around. Untidy was maybe an understatement. There was shit everywhere. Shoes and clothes and plates and bowls on every surface. Pizza boxes, lots of pizza boxes, and empty bottles of beer – had he had people over? And not cleaned up? There were several games controllers out. Half the couch cushions were on the floor. Why were the dining chairs against the wall? That painting askew?

He wiped a hand over his mouth. And prioritized.

He leaned over Ilya and stroked a hand over his head. Ilya slowly blinked himself awake and stared at Shane as if he had never seen him before. “Hey you, shall we go to bed?”

*

It was Svetlana, actually, who found Ilya a doctor. A Russian speaking one, a woman – Ilya’s only stipulation being *not a man*. She was the friend of a friend who moved appointments to make space for one Ilya Rozanov, three hours before his game. They were cutting it very fine and probably there would have been no real pressure to do this, except Shane was here now and he wanted action. Like, yesterday.

Outside the clinic, a squat, modern building, they waited in silence. Svetlana sat in the driver seat of Ilya’s G-Wagon, his most sensible car, while Shane sat in the back behind tinted windows, wearing what was his usual disguise – a hooded sweater, sunglasses and a baseball cap. On seeing him, Svetlana had suggested bulk ordering some fake facial hair which had made Ilya laugh for the first time, and Shane had loved her a little bit then.

“Did you know?” Shane asked, after nearly twenty minutes had passed.

“Maybe I suspected,” she said tightly.

The surge of anger was unreasonable. Shane pushed it back down, knowing this was unfair. When Ilya had called her on speakerphone that morning – like Shane, she had been on the receiving end of increasingly distant messages and had been bothering him to respond – she had become audibly emotional, even more so in Russian. *Particularly* when she had heard Shane thought it serious enough to drive through the night.

“Lot of side effects with these drugs,” she said next.

Svetlana had also jumped to the obvious conclusion about what was going on in that clinic. Even though neither of them were medical professionals, even though everything Shane knew about depression he had learned through Google in the last twelve hours.

“Yeah,” said Shane, trying to sound casually positive. “But they can vary, person to person.”

He had done some not-inconsiderable research into SSRIs while Ilya had slept on him earlier that morning. Though he had been very tired, his eyes all gritty and dry, he had only managed three or four hours of sleep before his unhappy brain had woken him up and he’d given in to the urge to scour the web. Early side effects of SSRIs commonly included nausea, headaches, poor sleep. Which might impact Ilya’s game. Not good. There was also possibly some sexual

stuff. Very much not good. Not thinking about himself, his own selfish needs, but knowing *precisely* how Ilya would feel about any changes to his libido. Ilya, who definitely considered his sexual prowess a defining feature of his personality, and one of the key ways he expressed himself to Shane.

Right now the doctor was probably explaining that to him. God. Shane closed his eyes, wishing he could have been there with him. Ilya had looked so dazed. He had suggested that Ilya record the session on his phone, so they could play it back later to understand everything together and Ilya had uncomfortably said ‘maybe’. He was doing this under duress. If Shane hadn’t forced a call last night, if he hadn’t *made* Ilya talk to him, he would probably have not done it at all. He would have just secretly been ‘tired’ from time to time. Maybe getting worse. Having thoughts about *bad things*.

A related thought occurred to Shane, a shock of cold horror. “Who is his emergency contact?”

“I am.”

That was good. A relief that it wasn’t, like, the coaching staff or his old agent or some nameless admin person. Then, worriedly, “Do you travel?”

“From time to time.” Svetlana half turned her head so he could see her perfect side profile. “We should exchange numbers. Then we can make sure someone who cares for him can be there, however we can be.”

“Yes. Please,” Shane added eagerly, glad they were one hundred percent on the same page about this.

“But maybe to talk about more than just Ilyusha, hmm?” She cocked her head to the side. “He is not always this interesting. We should become friendly if you are going to be part of his life...” Svetlana’s murmur faded out thoughtfully, as if she was only just realizing this was the case.

“I am,” Shane told her firmly. “I am going to be part of his life. I am part of his life.” Have been. Will always be. Forever and ever, *amen*.

“I see that,” she said quietly, now turning around to look at him properly. “I know. You love him. And he loves you. He would not have done this if he didn’t.”

Shane nodded, trying to convey his very intense feelings about Ilya to this woman he barely knew, but Ilya honored, through sheer force of will. “And he loves you, too,” he added, staunchly. He was fine with that. She had demonstrated she loved him, as well. *More* people should love Ilya Rozanov. Just, you know, not the same way Shane did.

Svetlana smiled. She really was *blindingly* beautiful. They would have made a very natural couple. They fitted. “Yes. Isn’t it very strange,” Svetlana said, a wistful smile gracing her beautiful face, “that it’s you of all people? But maybe it makes sense. Ilya loves hockey most of all. Or did.”

Shane found his own smile. “That’s pretty much what my friends said— oh, there he is,” he nearly yelped, as the doors of the clinic swung open and Ilya emerged, blinking into the daylight.

They both leaned forward, as if to see him better. Shane squinted. “Does he look like—”

She sighed. “Yes. He gets so splotchy when he cries.”

“He does, doesn’t he?” Shane said fondly.

She sniffed. “It’s because he gets so pale in the winter. Needs some sun.”

They both watched as Ilya shamelessly pulled a packet of cigarettes from his jacket pocket and lit one up. Though he wasn’t looking in their direction, there was a curl to his lip that suggested he knew he was being watched.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Shane muttered, slumping back into his seat.

“Tsk,” Svetlana said, pulling her cell phone out of her bag, as if seeing Ilya smoking somehow made everything better for her. As if it was *reassuring*. “He’s basically quit. What is the occasional vice? You worry too much. What is your number?”

*

Two days later, after much badgering, Ilya sent the recording of his session with the doctor to Shane. Of course, Shane had not put two and two together and worked out that the whole conversation had taken place in Russian. Which that asshole had obviously known.

He started to listen on the coach to the airport, then got distracted by the obvious sound of Ilya crying and – too overwrought by this – had to pause and wait until they got to Philly before he tried again from the quiet of his hotel room. This time, pen poised over the hotel notepad, he scribbled down the few words his beginner Russian skills could pick up – mostly because the Russian doctor spoke more slowly and carefully than Ilya did. Ilya, who had been rattling through this conversation at pace, clearly desperate to get it over with.

Then he listened again. *Mama*, Ilya said, more than once.

They hadn’t talked about Ilya’s mom much. She had died when Ilya was young and from the sounds of things she had been the only parent he had loved without complication. How she had died, Shane didn’t know. He had assumed cancer or something awful. That would certainly be something to talk about with a doctor.

He hadn’t noticed Ilya mention his dad though. Or even the word for ‘brother’. Shane knew both those words, too. Also a whole host of other relatives he didn’t think Ilya had.

He massaged his temple and ignored an incoming series of messages from the Metros group chat about dinner plans. He had already ordered room service.

The problem was time. It was always time. When they were together, Shane consciously pushed the hard topics aside because he wanted their time together to be *good*. To be happy.

To reinforce all the reasons they wanted to be together, to make long-distance worthwhile. And then in the phone calls in between... sometimes he did the same thing too. But a real relationship was built on more things than phone sex and chirping one another. It was built on foundational basics.

Asking Ilya how his mom had died was probably pretty basic. More basic than fucking favorite colors and whether or not he liked broccoli.

This was hard. This was so fucking hard.

This evening's FaceTime call was planned. His phone was already leaning against the complimentary bottle of water on the desk. He pressed answer when *Lily calling* appeared and then Ilya's beloved face filled the screen.

He smiled reflexively. "That bruise is looking good."

Ilya had got in a fight yesterday. He tilted his head up, so the light fell and highlighted the really florid part. "You should see the other guy," he quipped. So normal. So like his usual self.

"I did. I've seen the highlight reel from various angles. I saw his Instagram, too. You knocked out a tooth. What did he say to you?" Ilya had been very vague yesterday. All he'd wanted to do was jerk off together. It had probably been a distraction technique, come to think of it. Ilya could be very sneaky.

"It was already loose. And he was being rude to my rookie."

"The one that keeps tripping?"

"Everyone trips, Shane! Is no big deal!"

Shane pressed his lips together, charmed by this defense of a kid who, surely, should be sent back to the AHL where he belonged.

Ilya scowled. "How is your Russian translation going?"

"Asshole. I'm getting some of it," he said, folding his arms over his chest.

Ilya's alarm was palpable. "Oh?"

Clearly, he had not thought Shane would be able to pick up anything. "Very little, really. I think— would you mind... just telling me? What you talked about?"

Ilya had given both Shane and Svetlana the *barest* details of the conversation, mostly focused on the piece of paper with his prescription and his concerns about his dick. Predictably.

The doctor had, based on Ilya's description and some questionnaire he'd done, given an initial diagnosis of depression, suggested medication as an option and also that he find a therapist. She had given him a list of suggestions of Russian-speaking therapists in Boston

but invited him to research on his own. Shane did not know where that list had gone; Ilya had stuffed it into the pocket with his cigarettes, along with the prescription.

Then they had all gone back to Ilya's and Ilya had headed off for his game, taking Svetlana with him. Shane had spent his afternoon tidying Ilya's house, even though the housekeeper was coming the next day. He couldn't sleep in that house another night, not with greasy pizza boxes staining the marble countertops. When Ilya had come home after a narrow loss, he'd made it abundantly clear that he did not want to talk about his day, or why Shane had driven all the way. He wanted to eat something and fuck and not necessarily in that order.

Shane had allowed it. Allowed this very obvious avoidance of a conversation because Ilya had seemed better, more himself at least, energized by the game and Shane's unplanned presence in his house and he had zero willpower when it came to Ilya's bedroom eyes.

On reflection, he should have forced the issue. He should have *made* Ilya talk.

"I want to know. I realize it's very personal but we're— together. A team," he added, inspired suddenly by an analogy that they could both understand. They *were* a team. A team of two. "And I think it would help me understand you better. If you don't want to talk about it now, we can try another time. If it's too hard."

There. That was reasonable, right?

Ilya exhaled. His eyes were very blue. Maybe because of the contrast with the bruise. "That is... fair. I think I can talk about it now. Maybe should." He looked down and for a long moment fiddled with something on the table that Shane couldn't see. "Mostly, I talked about how I sometimes feel."

"Which is?"

"It's— a kind of tiredness." Ilya hummed. "More heavy. Like something is sitting on my brain. Sometimes I can feel it coming. Sometimes I can—" He pulled a face at Shane. "Kind of distract it. But sometimes I can't. Sometimes it just won't let go of me and I get... very sad. Everything becomes hard to do. It can last for a while. I can still do things but... it's harder."

Shane struggled to imagine it but he nodded as if he understood. "Does it happen a lot? Like the other day?"

"Um. Not a lot. But maybe... maybe more. Recently." Ilya looked down from the camera, giving Shane a fine view of the slope of his nose, the curve of his upper lip, and Shane was glad because he now felt *wretched*. He could see it on his face in the little rectangle in the bottom of the screen. This was definitely one of those foundational basics.

Shane manhandled his face into something neutral. "And now? Do you feel better?"

Ilya shrugged. "Less heavy, yes."

"But not normal?" Shane pressed, alert to the possibility that Ilya might feel like this all the time. That behind the bright eyes and smile he was *pretending*. Jesus.

"Not quite. But better, Shane," Ilya said, obviously trying to placate him. "She asked a few questions about my sleep. My other moods. About... drinking and other things. Whether the feelings affected things I normally enjoy." His eyes slanted up to Shane guiltily. "And she asked about some family history."

"Your mom?" Shane prompted, gently.

"Yes. That she... died— that she, maybe, was sad sometimes, too." He swallowed. Loudly. "She swallowed too many pills. That's how she died. It wasn't an accident."

Shane froze. Not that he'd been actively fidgeting but more that every cell in his body came to a halt. He had been wildly off-base here. "Ilya. That's— that's awful."

"She wasn't weak, Shane," Ilya pre-empted urgently, as if this was at all what Shane was thinking. As if it had crossed his mind for a moment.

Shane shook his head. "No, of course not."

"She was funny and beautiful but my father... he was so hard on her. She was so unhappy." He reached up to rub his nose. "I found her. It's something I think about, still."

"Yeah. It would be." Shane touched two fingers to his lips and then to the screen in a lame excuse for a kiss. It was all he could do. "Thank you for telling me."

Ilya's smile wasn't really a smile. "We are a team, yes?"

"Yes. We *are* a team. Have you— looked at that list of therapists? Or filled the prescription?" he asked, nervous about the response.

"Not yet." Ilya got a little vague about the eyes. He cleared his throat. "I wanted to think about it more. It's— pills are a big deal, for me. And I thought all this could wait until after our game."

He knew where this was going and *obviously* now he had the context of how Ilya's mother had died, he was sympathetic. He absolutely was. But. "Ilya."

"What?" Ilya's eyes widened. "If my dick stops working—"

"*Ilya*. Your health is more important."

"You will not be saying this if I can't fuck you, Shane."

"I *will* be saying this. I *am* saying this. Get the prescription, Rozanov. Take the damn pills. Find a therapist. *Fuck*, you are infuriating."

They stewed in silence, glaring at each other. Shane was *not* going to back down. There was more to their relationship than sex, he hoped. God. He had *known* Ilya was going to be

annoying about this. Of course, Shane reflected, if *he* had been told that his dick might stop working for an indeterminate period of time... no, no, he wasn't going to overthink this. It wasn't about him. It was Ilya and Ilya's health and the *bad thoughts*.

Besides, sometimes the side effects were temporary. And if they weren't, they could find some other meds. A lot of people on the internet had had similar concerns.

To Shane's surprise, Ilya caved reasonably quickly. "Okay. Okay, stop looking at me like that with the eyes." He gestured to his own eyes, which he made comedically big and wide. Shane sincerely hoped that wasn't an accurate impression. "I'll go tomorrow. I will take the pills. She said I would need to have a follow-up, after. So, we will see if they do anything."

"That's great!" He beamed at him. "You know, I read some people find it useful to set an alarm—"

"Shane. Enough."

"Yup. Too far. Got it."

Chapter End Notes

I was of two minds about bringing in Ilya's depression. I think he has been tested more in this version than he has in canon so it's possible it could have triggered more obvious episodes that he couldn't hide from Shane. He is a lot more open here than he is in the Long Game but then in the Long Game he's in a bad place about Shane differently than Ilya is here and Shane is also in a different place so is more confident about himself and pushier with Ilya. Also they're three years younger.

AH WELL I'VE WRITTEN IT NOW OK.

Honestly, publishing WIPs is not for the weak. I feel like I know what is going to freak people out now I've read all your (generally lovely) comments but I often get it wrong. Pressing post is NERVE WRACKING.

Look, I JUST WANT YOU ALL TO HAVE A GOOD TIME AND KNOW THAT I LOVE THEM BOTH VERY MUCH AND WANT THEM TO BE IN CHARACTER AND HAAAAAPPY (but first overcome the canonical hurdles to said happiness).

Wow. Remember last chapter when I said I wasn't often an author's notes person? Where did that person go?

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

All this time, Shane had been focused on his own action, fixing Petrov's hair, an unfortunately intimate gesture. That was what he had been kicking himself over.

Chapter Notes

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

Ilya bared his teeth at Shane, bright-eyed, alert, a little dangerous. “You look tense, *doosha moya*.”

For obvious reasons, the game, the plans after the game, this being the first time Shane had seen Ilya since he had all but forced him to see a doctor, Shane was on a knife-edge which made him a little sharper than he usually was. “What the fuck does that mean?” he demanded as they waited for the faceoff.

Ilya winked at him. Like his usual arrogant self. “I will tell you after we win.”

Oh, it was like that was it. “Fuck you.” Shane bared his teeth. “Not happening.”

The puck dropped, his focus became absolute, and Shane snaked it away, faking a pass to Hayden and sending it back to Lachy instead, leaving Ilya for dust. Fuck, he loved hockey.

Thankfully, Shane didn't often think about Ilya as his boyfriend during hockey games. His mind was very black and white about these things. There was some part of his brain, the id maybe, that prioritized hockey in these moments. On the ice, Ilya was his opponent. A thorn in his side. The threatening sound of racing blades behind him. But sometimes something would penetrate. Midway through the second period, Ilya whispered something else to him in Russian as he checked him into the boards in a very un-loving way.

“Lub—what?” Shane asked, panting, as Ilya skated off with the puck, Shane hot on his heels. It was 2-2. If he let them score again he would be getting *no* Russian translations and that was unacceptable.

Shane tipped them into 3-2 in the third period, thank fuck, and he retreated behind the boards to let the second line finish off the game, rinsing his mouth out with water. Sweat poured into his eyes. As it happened, he ended up next to Ivanov and he considered him for a moment, then considered the possibility that Ilya might have called him something seriously filthy and he would have to watch something in Ivanov's eyes die, and decided he could just be patient.

In that moment, Connors equalized and they went into overtime.

“Fuck,” said Shane, as Wiebe sent him back over the boards.

*

The Raiders won in overtime and Ilya’s smug look across the ice as his team celebrated was nearly unbearable. It made what he had to do in the locker room tantamount to impossible and he ground his teeth as he clomped back through the tunnel.

But there *was* a plan – there were plans on top of plans on top of plans – and Shane always followed through with a plan.

When enough of the right players had showered, Shane pounced on a momentary lapse between songs on the speaker. Despite the loss, the team was in a reasonably good mood, with Wiebe’s usual speech about leaving it on the ice doing its job. They were leading the division once again after all, whispers of a three-peat following them everywhere they went. “Meeting Rozanov for a drink after. You in?” he asked Hayden loudly and, he was certain, without any conviction whatsoever.

Shit. He had *practiced so hard*.

“Rozanov? Sure. Why not,” said Hayden robotically, similarly unconvincing.

There was a noticeable *frisson* of tension in the locker room, though. The Metros had picked up what they had put down. The game was on.

“You’re meeting... the Raiders for a drink?” Comeau repeated, frozen in the act of towel drying his hair.

“Just Rozanov. Probably Connors, too.”

There were now several pairs of suspicious eyes on them. Michaels turned the music down.

“Why?”

Shane shrugged, or he tried to, his whole body was so tense he might have actually only managed a twitch. “He’s a funny guy.”

“Er. What?” said Mitty, fumbling his water bottle and kicking it back up into his hand with his foot, to the obvious admiration of the rookies.

“He’s funny,” Shane said again, picturing his boyfriend’s smug face and momentarily unable to picture the *funny* part. If he was unbearable at drinks, he really might resort to violence. Or... drinks throwing. Or something.

“A funny *asshole*,” Hayden added which he said with enough truth now that he sounded halfway convincing.

Deliberately turning his back to the room, Shane applied deodorant possibly too liberally and gave Hayden some impressed side-eye. That was a solid effort. Better than his own.

“Yeah, that too,” Shane agreed, because it was an extremely accurate description of his boyfriend and Ilya would not be offended if Shane said it to his face.

“Rozanov does know where the best places are,” J.J. chipped in, actually selling it like he was thinking about it. He yanked on a fresh T-shirt, a considering expression on his face. “Can I come? Bet he can hook me up with one of his roster.”

“I thought you and Anniek were getting serious,” Hayden said, for a moment so utterly missing the point – fueled by his overwhelming desire for all his friends to be coupled up in wedded bliss like him – that he lost the script.

J.J. went a little cross-eyed, like *dude, get with the program* and Hayden winced in acknowledgement of his fuck-up. He had been doing so well. “Ah. You know, Pike,” J.J. said, now forced into sounding like a cheating dick and not thrilled about it. “Good to keep your options open.”

“What the fuck is going on?” Comeau wanted to know, looking around the room to see if anyone – anyone at all – could let him in on the joke.

Which was fair.

*

“This isn’t so bad,” Shane said with the kind of false brightness he’d heard people use when a situation seemed dire. It was supposed to be helpful, like a reverse psychology thing.

“I don’t know. It’s pretty bad,” J.J. muttered, glancing over at the bar nervously.

Between them they had managed to bring half a dozen of each of their teams to the agreed-upon bar. Ilya had messaged him to say that Marly had been oddly supportive of the idea, which was something, because otherwise it looked as if mostly they had come out of sheer curiosity. Or saw it as akin to a kind of school trip to the zoo. The Raiders were obviously the zoo animals in this metaphor.

But right now, everyone except for Shane, Ilya and J.J. were clustered together in their team groups, eyeing each other suspiciously and then casting *very* curious glances at the single ‘mixed’ table. Hayden had stepped out to take a phone call, looking somewhat relieved to be doing so. He and Ilya had been poking at each other all night through gritted-teeth smiles.

“Couple more drinks and it’ll be fine,” Ilya said with that rousing confidence he was known for. He rose and clapped his hands together before spreading them wide. To the collective he announced, “I’m buying everyone shots!”

His team immediately cheered. Shane’s team were looking at Ilya as if he might be about to serve them poison and then they all stared at Shane to check how he felt about it.

He gave them all thumbs up but to Ilya, he murmured, “No shots for me.” And, he conveyed using his well-known powers of telepathy, *none for you either*.

At Shane's apparently very irritating urging, Ilya had read out the extensive instructions that had come with his antidepressants to Shane over the phone. He had lingered at length on the potential side effects, really ramming that point home, and then sped through the other contraindications as if he didn't care about them. But he had noticed that Ilya had been nursing a single beer this evening and Shane was kind of hoping it would stay that way.

Ilya smirked knowingly, whether that was because Shane *had* discovered he had telepathy or because he was just being an asshole. "Not you, *malys*. I'll get you another ginger ale in a little glass."

"What does maloosh mean?" J.J. whispered suspiciously when Ilya had left.

Shane shook his head. "You don't want to know."

"Is it rude?" J.J. narrowed his eyes, as if he was prepared to do battle on Shane's behalf, like Shane was a fucking moron or something, Jesus Christ, why was everyone like this. "Is he being an asshole to you?"

He had to be honest. For the sake of their friendship. And any future friendship between Ilya and J.J. "No, it's cute. He's being cute."

J.J. grimaced and blew out a breath, as if he had narrowly escaped something nasty. "Ah, *ouais*, I do not want to know."

Really. He couldn't win here.

"What are we whispering about?" Hayden asked, returning from outside where he'd had to take a call from Jackie. He was pink-cheeked and smiling. He dropped into the chair next to Shane and picked up his beer.

"You don't want to know," J.J. said confidently.

"Oh, okay," Hayden replied, surprisingly cheerily. All his awkwardness about the evening seemed to have evaporated. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "Um. I've actually got some good news, guys. That was Jackie. We're pregnant."

"*Again?*" gasped Shane.

"*C'était voulu?*" said J.J., similarly horrified.

Hayden took this about as well as to be expected. He thumped Shane on the arm and kicked J.J. under the table. "Hey, guys, come on. You're supposed to congratulate me."

They both managed *something* that sounded like that, but being in their mid-twenties and child-free, the concept of a fourth child was something their minds couldn't quite grasp. Though he loved him dearly, Shane wasn't so sure he was over *Arthur* yet.

Ilya returned with a tray of shots. "What are we congratulating Pike for? Did he learn how to tie his laces by himself?"

“He’s having another kid,” said Shane, not sure if his tone came off in any way celebratory. *Four* kids. Hayden was only two years older than him. It was inconceivable.

“*Another?*” Ilya said, unfortunately mimicking their collective response as well. “Don’t you have enough already? You have heard of over-population, yes?”

“Jesus.” Hayden took a shoot and tossed it back without preamble. “You all suck.”

Ilya sighed, threw back his head as if he was monumentally pained. “No, no, Pike, this is happy news. I will get the good vodka. We should wash the baby, *da?*” He eyed Shane grimly. “You will have to drink now. It’s tradition.”

*

Shane’s phone vibrated and as he had been matching Ilya’s minimal drinking he was by no means too far gone to know it wouldn’t be Ilya, who had been on his very best behavior all night, much to Shane’s simultaneous disappointment and relief.

It *was* Petrov, however. Shane tried to keep a neutral expression as he clicked on the message, aware of Ilya’s eyes upon him.

Petrov: *I’m sorry, Shane, the photo is out.*

Petrov: *A media conglomerate came in with a ludicrous offer plus some leverage I don’t have*

Petrov: *We’ve looped your agent and mom in with our team.*

“What is it?” Ilya asked, as no doubt Shane’s face was no longer *neutral*.

The breath had left his body so he had to suck some oxygen in. “It’s the photo. It’s out.” Shane put his phone face down on the table, slammed it, really.

“Fuck,” said Ilya.

“What photo?” J.J. asked, looking between them.

“Yeah, what photo?”

Ilya raised his eyebrows at Shane, as if to ask why Shane hadn’t mentioned the looming specter of a photograph that could bring down his career to his two best friends. Shane raised his eyebrows back as if to say *why do you think*.

“A few weeks ago, someone took a photo of Petrov and me, outside a restaurant. It maybe looked bad. It’s been—” Shane sighed and looked away from the expression on J.J.’s face which could only be described as *are you for real*, “—circulating. Like there’s been some bidding war for it.”

Which was *ludicrous*.

“Why does it look bad, Shane?” Hayden asked, glancing at Ilya with an oddly concerned look. Or maybe it wasn’t odd at all. Maybe it was just the right amount of concern.

“We weren’t *doing* anything. We were just—”

“Found it,” J.J. announced, fingers dancing on his cell phone. “It’s on the *Daily Mail*.”

“Isn’t that a British tabloid?” Shane demanded. A sleezy one that pedaled photos of partially undressed celebrities and members of royalty. He’d been featured last year, at the tennis, because he’d been in the Royal Box a few rows behind a princess. “What the fuck do they care about hockey?”

“It’s not the hockey. It’s him. Petrov part owns a left-wing newspaper or something. They hate him.”

Ilya grunted. “Of course he does.”

They all leaned over his cell phone, their heads nearly touching. Impatiently, Shane spun the phone toward him so he could see it best, which he felt was his right. He sucked in a breath. Okay. It *was* bad. Ilya spun the phone toward him next and cursed in Russian. Then it was Hayden’s turn. He wheezed, “Fuck, Shane.”

Then, having looked away with a wince, staring blindly at Peetie who was taking photos at the bar, Shane spun the phone back again so he could look with fresh eyes. Really take it in.

All this time, Shane had been focused on his own action, fixing Petrov’s hair, an unfortunately intimate gesture. That was what he had been kicking himself over. But in fact, this photo captured the little moue of distaste on his face, his lip curled slightly, which utterly corroborated what Shane remembered and what he had told Ilya about his actions. It was not in any way sexual-looking. He didn’t look loved-up or even particularly affectionate, if you ignored the fact that his hand was kind of in Petrov’s hair.

But what the photographer had *also* caught – what Shane had not thought about at all – was Petrov’s expression. Shane hadn’t been looking at Petrov when he fixed his hair (*ugh, Shane, you idiot*), so he’d entirely missed it. Missed, captured now in about a million pixels, Petrov’s unusually open and soft appearance. His lips were parted, his lids were slumberously lowered.

He looked exactly how a man might look if he was about to kiss someone. Shane had seen that expression enough on Ilya’s face to recognize it now.

Fuck.

“I’m so sorry,” Shane whispered, looking at Ilya. It honestly felt a little as if he’d been caught cheating.

Eyes shuttered, Ilya shook his head shortly and stood up. “I’m going to get another drink.” He held up a hand as Shane, helpless, tried to rise, too. “Just a Coke or something. I will be back. Just give me a moment, Hollander.”

Hayden was clearly taken aback, glancing between Shane and the retreating back of Ilya. He was flushed. “It’s— well. I see why you were trying to hide that.”

“*What the hell, Shane?*” J.J. demanded in French, also pink-cheeked but more with outrage. “*You said there was nothing going on.*”

“There isn’t,” he hissed to them both, glancing toward the bar where Ilya was being waylaid by a laughing Marly. He watched Ilya put his façade on, slap his friend on the arm. “It wasn’t anything. Alex Gaultier was there, they were just inside. Some photographer was waiting for us. He was fixing my coat, that’s all. It was just.” Shane sighed. “A series of unfortunate coincidences.”

“*But you told Rozanov?*”

“I did. Because I knew how it would look.” Well, he’d known but he’d not *known*.

Hayden squirmed. Discomfort was written all over his face. Possibly etched in his bones. “Has— has Petrov ever—”

“No. No, *no*.” Shane groaned. He slapped his hands over his face, caught in this absolute hellscape where *Hayden* was concerned for his fucking virtue or something. “Oh, God, this is going to be so bad for him.”

“It’s not going to be great for you, *mon ami*,” J.J. said drily, unamused.

Shane’s phone vibrated again. He glanced at the screen, resigned. “It’s Farah. I should take this.”

*

Farah was calm. She had – thanks to Shane’s embarrassed but sensible advance notice – been prepared. “We do nothing for the time being. It’s not hit any North American press, yet, and there’s nothing in hockey circles. Perhaps a member of the British Royal Family will do something tomorrow and the news will cycle.”

“Okay.”

“Should this get louder, we will assess and discuss going ahead with Plan B.”

There was a Twitter post ready to go, with some pre-written copy. He couldn’t believe this was happening.

Shane had taken the phone call outside, his face resting against the rough brick wall across from the bar. He pressed his face, hard, against the surface. He probably looked insane.

“Farah— when we discussed this before, we didn’t know what the photo would look like.”

“Yes, that doesn’t change the narrative,” she said brusquely. “The photograph was taken out of context. You were at dinner with two colleagues. It was public and friendly. Everyone went home separately. There are more compromising photos of you with your teammates than this one.”

“If you’re talking about the one when Hayden is licking me, we were very drunk.” He rolled his head to the side, pressing his cheek against the brick. It was weirdly soothing.

“There are several of J.J. kissing you.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes. The night you won your second Cup.”

“Haven’t seen those.” Shane wasn’t surprised, though. “He does like to kiss people.”

“Exactly.”

Shane pushed off the wall and scratched at a bit of raised mortar with his finger. “Have you spoken to Petrov’s people?”

“Yes. We are aligned on the agreed plan,” she said lightly. “Let us handle this.”

*

Shane shared a silent Uber back to the hotel with J.J. and Hayden, grabbed a couple of things from his bag, and then caught another Uber immediately back to Ilya’s. He had knocked on Hayden’s door to let him know he was leaving. Hayden didn’t question this, just promised to cover for him with Wiebe. Shane didn’t know who they were fooling here. Wiebe obviously knew that if they were in Boston Shane would be doing whatever was in his power to see Ilya.

Apparently, Farah had looped Wiebe in, too. Shane didn’t want to think about that. Wiebe would be disappointed, he knew it. Wiebe’s disappointment *burned*.

Ilya was waiting for him, still dressed in his fancy shirt and sexy jeans, sitting on his couch with a bottle of water. The bottle of water made his heart squeeze even tighter.

Shane was a big guy. He studied Ilya and the oodles of room on that couch and thought: *fuck it*. He climbed on Ilya’s lap, straddling his thighs because that was where he wanted to be.

“Hi,” he said.

Ilya tilted his head up to meet his eyes. His own eyes were somber but they weren’t angry. He didn’t think. “Hello.”

Shane searched his face some more, looking for any hint of how Ilya was feeling, anything that would give him an inkling how to approach this conversation. “How are you doing?”

“I am contemplating driving to Montreal and punching him in the face.”

“I think he’s in France,” Shane said, helpless in the face of his own pedantry.

Ilya shrugged and took a sip of his drink. He licked his lips. “I’ll get on a plane.”

“Mmm.” Carefully, Shane laid his head on Ilya’s shoulder. The pressure inside eased a little when Ilya didn’t tense up or otherwise reject him. “You have a game the day after tomorrow.”

“It would not take long.” Ilya mimed a punch. “Has he messaged you since?”

“No. I’ve been cc’d on an email from his PR people, though.” Shane sighed. “They’ve got a statement ready to go if it escalates. Farah’s reviewing it as they’ve tweaked the language.”

“Tweaked?”

“Nothing major. I think they changed a word. I signed off on most of it, couple of weeks back. It basically says ‘Shane Hollander is my colleague and friend and there are better things to talk about’. That’s the party line.”

Ilya put his hand on Shane’s lower back and adjusted him slightly, tucking them closer by a millimeter or two before slipping down to rest on his ass. Shane melted a little bit more into him, reassured by this gesture. “Okay. And do you have a statement?”

“Yes, but not for immediate release. I’m just supposed to ignore it. I’m straight, after all, and, you know, regularly get naked with my peers so this is nothing.”

“Mmm.” Ilya did not appear to find this lame attempt at lightening the mood particularly amusing. He took another sip of water. “He would have kissed you.”

Shane sat up again. This required eye contact. He was so good at that now. “I would have been really fucking shocked if he had.”

“Mmm,” Ilya said again. He tilted his head to the side and surveyed Shane shrewdly.

The flush was inevitable. That look *said* things. Shane found one of his favorite moles and studied it carefully, really gave it the attention it deserved. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what? Shane, you are not as naive as all this. You know, now, when a man wants you.” Ilya’s hand squeezed Shane’s ass, as if making a point.

“I— I know when *you* want me,” Shane said slowly, blushing because it hadn’t passed him by that they were both hard now, a Pavlovian response to the way they were sitting, slotted together like this. “It’s— I don’t think about other people like that. It just doesn’t—” He sighed. “I don’t know how to explain. If someone is interested in me, it has to be super obvious.”

Ilya smirked. As he should be – and could be – because no one had been *more* obvious than Ilya-shower-jerk-off-Rozanov.

But Shane wasn’t just thinking about Ilya. “Even before I knew I was only interested in guys, if a girl came up to me in a club or something, they had to outright *tell* me they wanted to hook up.”

“Oh,” Ilya said sounding interested, “did that happen a lot?”

“Surprisingly, yes, asshole,” Shane said, grimacing with the remembered awkwardness. What he’d once mistaken for the nervous butterflies of youthful attraction had, in fact, been the nervous butterflies of *I don’t really want this*.

Ilya patted Shane’s ass again, his face somewhat quizzical. “I was joking. Of course, girls hit on you. You’re very beautiful.”

Shane ignored this for being irrelevant. “I’m trying to tell you – I don’t think of him like that. Like, I’m not *blind*, he’s attractive, but he’s—” He waved a hand in the air aimlessly before realizing there was a really obvious answer. “He’s not you. He’s just... not you. I can’t— see anyone like that now. Because of you. I don’t think about him like that. I don’t think of him really, at all, whereas I think about you all the time. Maybe to a really worrying amount, actually, like is that normal?” Shane laughed nervously because it seemed like he was now just saying things he shouldn’t. Embarrassing things. “It’s like you’re a surface layer thought at all times.”

He rubbed his neck and looked at Ilya through his lowered eyelashes. He appeared to have stunned Ilya into silence. Couldn’t tell if it was good or bad.

“Does that... make sense?” Shane asked tentatively, concerned he was maybe coming off as a crazy person. Like he was low-key obsessed with Ilya. Which was probably less low-key and probably more in the upper register of keys. High key. Very high key.

Ilya opened his mouth to say something, then closed it. Then tried once more. “Ah. Yes, Shane,” Ilya said, fumbling a bit. Was he a little pink? “I think so. That is— thank you for telling me this.”

“You’re welcome,” Shane replied promptly. Maybe it was okay.

“Um,” said Ilya again, somewhat helplessly, a really *odd* look on his face. “I think—” But Shane didn’t end up hearing what Ilya was thinking because he dove forward jerkily and crashed his mouth against Shane’s instead. His hand came up to the back of his neck, the water bottle sloshing somewhere as Shane was kissed ravenously, a kiss where he felt like he was having to catch-up, Ilya’s mouth moving at such pace that he was two licks behind at all times.

Impatient hands tore at Shane’s shirt. “Off, off,” Ilya chanted.

“I mean, okay,” Shane panted, as he tried to undo buttons while Ilya’s octopus-arms were untucking the back and unzipping his fly, “but are we done talking about this?”

“Yes, yes, you don’t want to fuck him. I believe you.”

“Exactly!” Shane exclaimed in triumph – *he gets it* – as he was thrown down on the couch, really quite forcefully, and Ilya yanked down his pants and underwear to his ankles where Shane finished the job by shoving everything off with his feet.

Ilya shed his own clothes at a speed Superman would be proud of and crawled over Shane, kissing his way up from his bellybutton, up his neck and back to his eagerly awaiting mouth.

“And,” Ilya breathed, “he knows he can look but he cannot touch. Bet that makes him hard.” His smile was a brief flicker. Wicked. He arranged himself between Shane’s legs, pressing their dicks together. “It would make me hard.”

Grinning, Shane wrapped a leg around Ilya’s thigh, chasing Ilya’s mouth. “Everything makes you hard.” Like he could talk.

Ilya shook his head, very serious, kissed the tip of Shane’s nose. “Only you, Shane. It is the same for me. I only want you.”

Shane met his mouth for a brief but meaningful kiss, his heart going a mile a minute. “Only you,” Shane said back earnestly. “I just love *you*.”

“I love you, too.” Then Ilya began to kiss his way back down Shane’s body, hands dragging behind him until Shane caught them and held them against his chest, pressing their joined fingers into his pecs.

Ilya nosed around Shane’s dick, nuzzling the base, before he mouthed at Shane’s balls. Shane let out a hiccupping moan. He was very sensitive down there, which Ilya well knew. “Fuck, Ilya,” he murmured, clutching his hands, nearly delirious with pleasure.

Ilya licked and sucked each ball into his mouth, getting them really wet while Shane squirmed underneath him. God. He *loved* this. He loved it. Ilya knew exactly how much pressure to apply, exactly how he wanted it. He could probably come from this alone, actually. Oh, oh, actually— “Ilya, I’m gonna— holy *fuck*,” he gasped, as the first hot spurt of his come hit his stomach.

Ilya kept sucking as Shane finished coming and then, in the filthiest way possible, he licked the come from Shane’s abdomen, staring up at him the whole time.

*

“Sometimes... sometimes I think he would be a better boyfriend for you.”

Shane jerked out of his post-sex slumber. They had made it to Ilya’s bed where Shane had sucked Ilya as far as he allowed before he had folded Shane up like pretzel and fucked him into teary incoherence. He was *not* expecting more serious conversation. “Hey, *no*, he wouldn’t. Ilya.”

Wow. Shane often didn’t know what was going on in Ilya’s head – and sometimes the distance between them made the more paranoid part of his brain go a little haywire. But sometimes Shane got the feeling that Ilya’s head created hellish scenarios just to hurt himself. Maybe that, too, was a mental health thing.

He turned his head so he could kiss Ilya, tasting them both on his lips. “Come on. You are perfect for me. You are the best boyfriend. I am so lucky to have you. I would not swap you for a million Petrovs. Believe me.”

Ilya rolled his forehead against Shane's, blinking slow. "He is there in Montreal with you and I am not." Ilya's quiet voice hitched. "And *his* brain isn't fucked-up."

It was not the time to point out, though Shane wanted to, that Petrov was in Montreal about as much as Ilya was. Which was rarely. The point was how Ilya perceived it. The distance between them. Always. And that in Ilya's head, somehow, bizarrely, *he* was inadequate. It blew Shane's mind. It was so implausible.

"Nope. That is not a factor. We're making this work. We'll make *any* distance work." Shane kissed him again and Ilya slipped his tongue into Shane's mouth, pushing up against him. Tempting as it was to lose himself in that again, he pulled back, gripping Ilya's face. "I love you. I *love* your brain. It's not fucked up. It's— just got a lot going on." Like fucking *childhood trauma*. "And the meds will help with that. And maybe someday talking to someone?"

Ilya grunted, dismissively, and buried his face in a pillow. "Shane."

Ah, well. It was a good try.

Shane tangled his fingers in Ilya's hair, tugging a little. "I will be more careful, you know. With Petrov, and the way things look," he said quietly, forcing himself to address a reality that he hadn't wanted to. There was a line, even if it was a line of perception-only, and he – possibly they – had crossed it. He was a public figure in the spotlight and Petrov even more so. It wasn't a *normal* situation. Nothing about Shane's life was normal.

Ilya exhaled. "I know, Shane. I am... trying not to make this a big deal."

He nodded. Shane had to acknowledge that Ilya's reaction had been considerably more balanced than before. "I'm sorry it's something we have to deal with at all. I know it doesn't help on top of everything else."

Ilya reached up and brushed a thumb against Shane's cheek. "Is okay. A cross I have to bear, having such a pretty boyfriend."

"Oh, fuck off," Shane laughed, relieved that Ilya could be ridiculous now.

Eyes dancing, Ilya leaned forward and kissed Shane again, fingers digging into his sides and making him squirm. "Okay, Hottest MLH player is actually ugly troll who should live under a bridge. All the magazines are wrong."

"Fuck *off*," Shane said, ruining the effect by giggling, in a manly way. It grew less manly the more Ilya tickled him and then tears were running down his face and Ilya was licking up every one which was gross but also pretty hot and then they were kissing again, sloppy and wet and everything felt good, everything felt *okay*.

*

Three days later and the story had broken in hockey circles and beyond. Shane was officially tabloid fodder and front-page news and *not* for his hockey prowess. One of the more lurid

headlines described him as Petrov's 'boytoy', which made him want to throw up.

To make things even worse, suddenly, social media was flooded with *other* photos. The ones from the Christmas gala made a reappearance and now there were *more* of them. Not just the professional shots that had been cropped suggestively to make it look like Shane had been Petrov's date but apparently a whole bunch of guests had been taking fucking photos at the party and decided now was the time to fuel the flames by sharing them online.

It didn't stop there. Blurry fan shots taken from the cup celebration on the ice, of Petrov hugging Shane were one thing, one totally explainable thing, but the shots of Shane and Petrov tucked up in a booth together later in the club was another.

Without the context, it was difficult to make out anything truly incriminating from these photos. They weren't sitting particularly close. It was obvious that there were other people around them. But it was just the two of them in a booth for six, placing Shane and Petrov in another social situation which once again could be *construed* as intimate.

Ilya was remarkably stoic about this, which surprised and worried Shane who thought this sudden lack of emotion was a sign of something being really wrong. He fell into a trap of repeatedly asking *are you okay?* and this led to a small fight about his lack of chill, as if Ilya had totally forgotten he had been massively *not chill* before. And then he was proved right when he woke up early one morning to find a series of messages sent at 3am.

Lily: *I just wish I had been there.*

Lily: [image]

Ilya shared one of the blurry photos of Shane and Petrov in the booth.

Lily: *I watched you from Moscow. Every game. I was so proud.*

Shane recalled with absolute clarity the following day, the cavernous sadness he had felt when Ilya hadn't even messaged him. Slowly, he typed, *I wish you had been there. I wanted you there. I wish you'd said something.*

To his surprise, Ilya replied immediately, though he had to have been up late: *I asked Sveta to keep my phone for me.*

Lily: *I knew I would be too weak*

A surge of ill-feeling struck Shane then. A taste of the old anger. He hit dial and Ilya answered immediately. "I fucking hate that you didn't message me," he spat before he could say anything. "I think you could have at least done that."

"Yes," Ilya agreed, immediately, sounding croaky with sleep. "I regret it. I regret many things but particularly that. I made Svet promise not to give me my phone. She knows I am my own worst enemy so even when I begged her, she refused. And even at my worst I couldn't tell her the truth about us. That I loved you already. And had broken it."

To say the wind had been taken out of Shane's sails was an overestimation. Shane flailed around a bit, looking for a route forward.

"I'm sorry, Shane," Ilya whispered in the silence.

"Yeah," he said. There was no point going over it. It was over. And maybe the pain would fade completely one day. "You— so you were in Moscow already?"

"There was no reason to be in Boston. I wanted to get drunk and get high and not be reminded of you everywhere I went."

Shane closed his eyes. He had lived through the *last* summer Ilya had spent in Moscow, when they had been balancing precariously on the edge of a relationship neither of them wanted to acknowledge.

Though he had not been the instigator of their break-up, Shane's overly heightened sense of guilt crept in. He had really done his best not to think about Ilya over the summer when they had broken up and hadn't even allowed himself to wonder what Ilya had been doing. Or he'd tried not to, at least. He chewed his lip. "Was it awful? At home?"

He knew without asking now that Ilya had been depressed. Very depressed. It fit the pattern. The highs and the lows. The coping strategies. The drinking and drugs and fucking around.

"Yes," his boyfriend said crisply. "Let's— I do not want to talk about it."

"Are you sure?" Shane ventured, feeling brave for pushing. More and more he was thinking the idea of a therapist was looking like a vital resource. He didn't know how to get Ilya to accept that. Or if this was a choice Ilya was going to have to make on his own.

Ilya paused. "Maybe when I never have to go back again."

The prickling need to discuss *this* summer raised its head once more. God. It was so hard to tell what were things they needed to talk about, urgently, and what were things that could wait until they were together, when it was easier to understand one another. "Will Sveta be there this summer, do you think?" he asked.

"Yes, Shane," Ilya said patiently, obviously hearing what he wasn't saying.

There was something, at least. He had her number, too, just in case Ilya disappeared.

"So... do you do those kinds of drugs a lot?" he asked tentatively, wincing at the need to both ask this question and know the answer. Ilya did not do things with restraint. It was... a worry.

"Not like that. Not anymore, sweetheart." Ilya's laugh was unamused. "Don't think they mix well with the brain meds."

"No. And maybe didn't help overall anyway?"

"Mmm, you are probably right." Ilya sighed heavily. "I have made an appointment with a therapist."

Shane gasped, genuinely shot through with happiness. And then he clamped that shit down, afraid that his enthusiasm would somehow turn Ilya off the idea. “That’s great,” he said, trying to sound neutral as possible. Super casual.

“Yes, yes, whatever, Hollander,” Ilya grumbled, “is probably a good idea.”

“Such a good idea,” Shane whispered. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Ugh,” said Ilya, with feeling.

*

After finding himself scrolling through endless comments about himself, which ran the gamut of homophobic, racist, perverted and also grossly, rampantly horny, Shane had to once again delete Instagram, Twitter and forward all incoming calls to Farah. His mom was fighting fires with his sponsors, with one of his campaigns for Rolex put on indefinite hold.

Every day he walked around like there was a band wrapped tight around his chest, a constant reminder of the pressure of the outside world. He couldn’t even go for a run without someone shouting something at him, or stopping him – which, admittedly, was sometimes supportive but in the worst kind of ways. Like *sorry, man, I know what they’re saying about you isn’t true, you’re not a fucking fag*. Ugh.

The final stressful straw, Wiebe called an emergency Retro so that Shane could face down his team. Who definitely thought Shane had been secretly fucking the team owner for months.

The guys were clearly torn over this. Half seemed to think that if this was the case, if Shane was fucking the owner, they deserved to know. The other half seemed to think this might have been getting Shane some kind of special treatment? Shane dreaded to think what that might entail. Out-of-contract bonuses? Better hotel rooms? What?

After a few rounds of repeating variations of *I’m not fucking him, you morons*, Shane gave up and went off plan. “Look – I’ve got a fucking boyfriend, okay? And I would *never* jeopardize my relationship with him,” he shouted, growing increasingly red-faced at the doubt on his teammates faces. “And I’m getting enough grief from him, to be honest, so I’d appreciate it if you could all fucking chill out.”

There were murmurs of mixed surprise, intrigue and some dissatisfaction. He glared at each and every one of them. “I’m not lying to you about this. I don’t lie about things,” Shane said, coming down – exhausted – from the high of overtly displayed emotion. “If you can believe anything, you can believe that.”

Silence rang in the air for a few moments, everyone - particularly Shane - hugely uncomfortable.

“Didn’t know you had a boyfriend, did we?” Mitty muttered resentfully. He said the word ‘boyfriend’ very carefully.

“Fuck you, it’s private. I’m— you *know* I’m pretty private. And it’s only been a few months. He’s not out, so it’s difficult.” Peetie opened his mouth and Shane, in a rare moment of prescience, or at least remembering the interminable story about his uncle’s coming-out, held up a finger. “No. No comments on that front. There are reasons why he is not out and shame isn’t one of them.”

In fact, he was pretty sure if Ilya could come out, he would do it in the most flamboyant *fuck you* way possible. Possibly a fucking parade.

Peetie’s mouth shut, mollified.

Wiebe took a deep breath. “Does anyone else have any more questions or legitimate concerns?”

“Are you going to issue a statement?” Lachy wanted to know. He had been mostly quiet, a furrow dissecting his brow, so Shane didn’t read anything into the question other than what was on the face of it.

Shane shook his head. “No. Because there’s nothing going on we decided me saying something would just add more fuel. The, ah. Public perception of me is generally still that I’m straight. Which— I have you guys to thank you for.” He guessed. He didn’t know if it would have been better or worse that the public had started to hear that Shane might also be gay. He had *assumed* worse. At least if he was perceived as straight he’d have some way to fight the rumors. It did beg the question of what would happen if – when – he did come out. “I didn’t ask you to keep it a secret but you have.”

“Sure, Cap, it *is* your private business,” Lachy said easily, though he was still kind of frowning at Shane, like he was a puzzle. Shane wondered if this was a case of his theoretical gayness now being applied to actual gayness. These were two very different things which a straight guy might find hard to compute.

He made a mental note to keep checking in with Lachy. He needed their chemistry on the ice to be unaffected.

“And you can talk about your boyfriend if you want to,” Peetie added with obvious concern. “We’re not going to be weird about it.” He aimed a look at Franks who held up his hands defensively and mouthed *I haven’t said anything*.

Shane groaned; he couldn’t help it. “Guys. I— don’t need to do that. I don’t want to do that. It’s not who I am.”

Comeau drew in a breath and Shane instinctively braced. “We’re not expecting you to gossip, Hollander, and God knows I don’t want to know what you get up to in the bedroom—”

Wiebe loudly cleared his voice, glaring at Comeau.

Comeau continued, semi-apologetically, but not really because Shane knew for a fact that he really *didn’t* want to know what Shane got up to in the bedroom and that feeling was entirely reciprocated, “But I think I speak for the team when I say that we’ve learned a lot about each

other over the last couple of years,” there were a series of nods, some kind of begrudging, as if they had been hostages to this learning, “and you can tell us as much or as little as you want, it’s no big deal here. I mean. Honestly? It’s nice to know that you’re finally getting laid on the regular. Now that I think about it, you’ve definitely been less uptight, am I right, guys?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Wiebe muttered, hitting his face with his iPad as some of the team unfortunately murmured their agreement with this statement, looking at Comeau once again as if he was some kind of savant.

Really willing to take what he could get here, Shane guessed the sentiment was nice. Sometimes the thought really did count. “Thanks, Gil. That’s... that’s... something.”

Peetie decided to take this as encouragement. He smiled happily. “So where did you meet? Can you tell us that?”

“Uhhhh,” said Shane, blanking.

“Oh my God, was it that app?” Eagerly, excitedly, Mitty clicked his fingers, as if he was searching for the name.

“Grindr,” said Johannes, with confidence.

He pointed to Johannes. “Yessss. That’s the one.”

J.J. protested, probably trying to help Shane out when he was clearly flailing. “*Non*, that’s just for hooking up. Cap wouldn’t do that.”

“No,” agreed Shane quickly, and he could have *sworn* half the guys looked disappointed that Shane hadn’t had a hoe phase.

“So where *did* you meet?” Michaels asked with polite interest.

“Umm.” Where *did* gay guys meet potential boyfriends? Bars? Would he have to admit to going to a gay bar? He didn’t actually know any gay bars in Montreal. Fuck. Was there another app for gay guys? Like a wholesome one?

“Oh,” said Peetie, eyes widening with sudden realization, “was it through work?”

Michaels was immediately alert. “Hey, do we know him? Is that why we can’t know who it is?”

“Ahhh,” said Shane, looking at Wiebe in a panic. He could feel Hayden practically vibrating beside him, his whole face scrunched up in anticipatory agony on Shane’s behalf.

Wiebe’s wide-eyed stare back was not encouraging. But he sat forward and summoned his professional smile. “Ah, guys, let’s not speculate. Think it’s time to wrap this up.”

Wiebe was ignored. The gossip was, apparently, *too* juicy. “It can’t be someone here,” Mitty said thoughtfully. “Why wouldn’t you be able to tell us? We’re all rainbows and shit here.”

“Unless it was someone worse than Petrov,” someone chipped in. The fucker.

“Who could be worse than Petrov?” Lachy wondered, like he was *really* wondering.

Franks gasped. “Holy shit, is it another player?”

“*Is* it another player?”

“Oh my God, another player?”

“Fuck me, what if it’s Dallas Kent?” Comeau laughed, face creased with hysteria.

The group broke out into ribald suggestions of who Shane could possibly be dating, each theory – in their minds – more outlandish than the next. Scott Hunter was thrown about, which had a red flush once again crawling back up Shane’s face as he denied it. Ryan Price, that massive defenseman, Jesus Christ, he would probably crush Shane in bed. Not that this opportunity would arise, absolutely not, that was just a weird thing his brain had cooked up. Some rookie on the Colorado team who Johannes described as ‘very pretty’, a statement which was, thankfully, fairly muffled by Ivanov’s suggestion of the super intense Chicago goalie who apparently gave off a ‘gay vibe’ that only he had noticed.

“It’s... not one of us, is it?” Franks asked with widened eyes as the laughter eased. Everyone scanned the room, quite a few eyes lingering on Hayden in a way that had him making an incoherent shrieking noise of outrage.

“Fuck off, *no*,” Shane ejected, revolted, into this farce. Apparently *too* revolted.

“We not good enough for you, Hollander?” Comeau joked, wiping tears from the corners of his eyes.

Three water bottles were thrown in Shane’s direction by offended teammates. Wiebe began to make weak protesting noises, but it was clear he didn’t have the energy anymore.

Shane honestly didn’t know if this Retro had made the situation better or worse. “No, you’re not,” he said, bluntly. None of them could hold a candle to Ilya Rozanov. Not even close. “Can we do the fucking group hug now or what?”

A few seconds later, as they all awkwardly stood in a circle half-heartedly slapping each other’s backs, Comeau made a sound. “Wait. Is *Lily* your boyfriend? You’ve been messaging for *years*. Jesus, Hollander, you should put a ring on that already.”

Comeau was really becoming absolutely *lethal*. “I’m out of here,” Shane said, hastily slipping out of the scrum.

*

Jane: *Ended up telling them I had a boyfriend.*

Lily: *Fuuuuck. Not in plan.*

Jane: *Yeah. Jumped the gun a bit there.*

Lily: *How did they take it?*

Jane: *They asked if it was Dallas Kent*

Lily: 🏴‍☠️ 🏴‍☠️ 🏴‍☠️ 🏴‍☠️ 🏴‍☠️ 🏴‍☠️ 🏴‍☠️

Lily: *He is very ugly. You have better taste*

Jane: *Fuck, right? Offensive.*

Jane: *It's Scott Hunter or no one obviously*

Lily: 😡

Jane: *you're right that was uncalled for sorry* ❤️

Jane: *how are you?*

Lily: *I'm fine, Hollander, don't worry about me.*

Lily: *but we could call?*

Jane: *give me 5 minutes*

Chapter End Notes

I don't know why it is that whenever I do any Metros team ensemble piece it sort of ends up a bit crack-fic? So bizarre 🤪. Like I know fundamentally this fic is funny (mostly because my preference for character voices has always been that) but the team bits are so wildly ridiculous. Oh. Is it because I think groups of men... are actually ridiculous? Possibly.

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Wiebe's breakfast was mostly prunes which, when he'd seen Shane eyeing it with concern, he had told him, obliquely, "If you're still travelling this much when you're forty, you'll understand."

Chapter Notes

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

Shane's cell phone rang with an unfamiliar New York number two days later when the Metros were on the west coast, about to play San Jose at the start of a week-long roadie. He was not expecting a call and was currently eating breakfast across from Wiebe. Wiebe's breakfast was mostly prunes which, when he'd seen Shane eyeing it with concern, he had told him, obliquely, "If you're still travelling this much when you're forty, you'll understand."

Vaguely suspicious, Shane answered the call, the nerves from an unexpected cold call fluttering. He'd only recently turned off call-forwarding. "Hello?" he answered, hoping it wasn't a weirdo.

"Hi, is this Shane Hollander?"

"Speaking," Shane said, the professional tone somewhat settling his nerves.

"This is Lydia from Commissioner Crowell's office."

Shane's eyes shot to Wiebe's with panic. *It was happening.*

"The Commissioner would like to speak to today if that is convenient?"

"Is it convenient for the Commissioner to speak to me today?" he repeated for Wiebe's benefit.

Dropping his spoon, Wiebe picked up his own phone and sent a quick message.

"Yes. I believe you're in San Jose at the moment but won't be playing until this evening."

"Um. Yeah, that's right. Um. Maybe later would be good. I'm just— at training." Shane grimaced. If Lydia knew anything about hockey routines, she would know training before a game was unlikely. Any exercise today would be light; he'd mostly be fueling and napping.

But Lydia seemed unphased. “What time would be good for you? I’m just looking at the Commissioner’s schedule.”

“Um.”

Reading something off his phone, Wiebe mouthed ‘tomorrow’ at him.

“Can he do tomorrow, actually?”

“Tomorrow, tomorrow,” murmured Lydia. “How’s 2pm?”

Shane, whose mental schedule of games and flights – and not just of his, but Ilya’s too – was practically written on his eyelids, blanked. “Erm. 2pm?”

Wiebe typed again.

“Ah, let me just check that. Ha ha,” he said nervously, “you know how it is. Never know what city I’m in—” Wiebe gave him a thumbs up. “Yes! 2pm is good!”

“Fantastic. You’ll receive a calendar invitation, but the Commissioner will call you on this number.”

“Sure, sure. Sounds, ah, great. Thanks, Lydia.”

*

Alex was holding their phone much too close to their face. He could see their pores and possibly the hole where a nose-stud might have once been. “We have been expecting this. Obviously, the photo situation has fanned the flames a little on this front and apparently he’s really got a bee in his bonnet now about *gays in hockey, ostie de crise*. So, I’ve got Hank here to talk you through some key points.”

“Hank?”

“You know Hank. One of our lawyers?”

“I don’t think we’ve met.” And Shane couldn’t currently see him. Apparently, there were no available conference rooms and Alex and Hank were currently crammed into Alex’s office while Alex tried to install Skype on their new laptop. Wiebe was sitting next to Shane, and they were using his tablet to speak to Alex. It was propped up in the smart case, resting on the table in the little meeting room the hotel had arranged for them. The window had a nice view of a little pond that Shane had earlier considered drowning himself in.

“Oh. Hank, say hi.” The phone span around and a red-headed man wearing glasses lifted a hand in greeting.

“Hi,” said Hank.

“Sorry, Hank, could you take the phone for a moment? Actually, you know what, why don’t we just start. Apparently, I need an admin password for this.”

“Sure.” Hank took control of the phone and held it at a much more normal distance from his face. Like Shane, he also had freckles, though significantly more of them. It was always nice to meet a fellow freckle compatriot. “So, Shane, I just want to remind you of a few things to reassure you of your rights. As you know, you are employed by the Montreal Metros under a Standard Players Contract. That contract operates within the collective bargaining agreement between the League and the MLHPA, as well as the applicable League rules. You are not the Commissioner’s direct employee but you are subject to the League’s disciplinary jurisdiction. With me so far?”

Shane swallowed.

“With you,” said Wiebe, for him.

“I imagine you have met him before?”

“Only— after winning the Cup. I think at a couple of awards ceremonies. Mostly photo ops.”

“Of course, of course.” Hank nodded. He had a sweet smile. “From what I have been briefed, the Commissioner is concerned about the ‘noise’ you are creating as part of the Metros organization. He’s likely going to try and bully you into aligning to his preferred narrative and he’ll do that by making you feel like he has a right to do so because of his role over off-ice conduct that’s laid out in Article 18-A of the collective bargaining agreement. That’s the Commissioner’s authority over off-ice conduct. Are you familiar....?”

Shane managed a nod. This was how guys got suspended from games. But for, like, big deals like domestic abuse and stuff. It was unfortunately a not irregular occurrence.

“Obviously your off-ice conduct isn’t in question here, Shane, and Crowell knows that, but we anticipate he will *infer* that is the case because it is through Article 18-A that he has some authority. Which might give you cause for nervousness.”

Yeah, it might just do that.

“We want to make it clear to you, Shane, that he can infer all he wants,” Alex said, leaning over to talk to the phone, but he could only just see the top of their head. “So don’t get all hierarchical about this. He can do *nothing* to you.”

Hank cleared his throat pointedly.

“What Alex is trying to say is that you have rights here. If this call stops being a conversation and becomes an interview concerning conduct for which he *implies* you might be disciplined for, the League has obligations too. The CBA requires the MLHPA to be notified and give reasonable opportunity to participate. You don’t have to pretend it’s just a friendly call while the Commissioner suggests he’s raising some kind of disciplinary case against you.”

“You think... you think he’s going to do that?”

“He might. He’s been swinging his dick about on the golf course about it,” Alex chimed in. “We just want you to be prepared.”

Jesus.

“What kinds of things might he infer?” He had read the soundbites Petrov had given him at that disastrous dinner with Ilya. But after the fact and in such a state of nervous disassociation that he now couldn’t remember a thing that they said. He thought they were mostly about Shane’s agreement about the importance of diversity. Something about Pride Nights...? Charity...?

“It is likely he is going ask you questions about Mishka, Shane,” Alex said crossly. “Personal ones. How often do you have dinner? What is your relationship like? Has he ever *pressured* you to do anything you’re uncomfortable with?”

Slowly, Shane leaned forward until his burning-hot face touched the table.

“Shane’s going to need a moment,” Wiebe said, patting Shane on the shoulder. “Um. If I might ask something obvious. None of this sounds like it has anything to do with Shane?”

“Yeah, got that right,” Alex said, sneeringly.

“I take it the Commissioner and Petrov don’t see eye to eye.”

“Nope.”

“Is he going to ask me if I’m gay?” Shane asked the table, his voice echoing back at him.

“If he does ask you that, firstly you are under no obligation to respond to a direct question like that.” Hank almost sounded excited. “The MLH CBA expressly protects sexual orientation. You also play for the Metros and under Quebec law, the Charter expressly identifies sexual orientation as a protected characteristic and prohibits discrimination on that ground. It also prohibits harassment based upon protected characteristics. Article 18-A doesn't give the Commissioner an unlimited right to investigate your private life. But, again, you are not being investigated, because he cannot do so without informing the MLHPA. So if he asks you if you’re gay, if you are in a relationship with Petrov, I would strongly advise that you say the following... do you have a pen, perhaps?”

“I do,” said Wiebe, clicking the button on a ballpoint pen.

*

Shane took the call in his hotel room, alone, standing above the usual pointless and unnecessarily small round table by the window, his text message chain with Ilya open on his phone, Ilya’s last ‘❤️’ a little beacon of light.

The phone rang at 2pm on the dot and he pressed answer, putting the phone on speaker straight away so he could remain standing to attention. “Shane Hollander,” he said, firmly. He was super proud that his voice didn’t waver in the slightest.

“Shane! It’s Commissioner Crowell. How are you?”

Shane visualized the man he had met before. Tall. Silver hair. Tendency for the end of his nose to get red when he'd had a few drinks. "I'm very well, sir. How are you?"

"Good. Good. Montreal having yet another great season. Few weeks out from the playoffs. Looking solid."

"Yes, sir. Not bad."

"Always tough, defending a title," Crowell said, as if he had any idea. He hadn't played hockey – he'd been a football player in college and had the build for it still. His mom had called him 'handsome' when they'd met at the draft and giggled when his dad had elbowed her.

"Yes, sir," Shane said, again. "But I've got a great team."

"Yes, yes. Been a lot of changes over there, hmm?"

"Sir?" said Shane, playing ignorant.

"New management. Lost some good guys. Always liked Phil, though we play golf from time to time."

"Yes. Phil's... much missed," Shane lied. He couldn't say he'd thought about the previous GM once since he'd gone. "Christine is fantastic though."

"Mmm," said Crowell and apparently that was all he had to say on the Metro's GM because maybe she had better things to do than play *golf* because he continued heavily, disapprovingly, "But of course he's a public fella, Mister Petrov."

So, Wiebe had been correct. This *was* more about Petrov than it was about Shane.

"Oh. Not intentionally, I don't think."

"European, of course."

Shane looked down at the notes Wiebe had carefully written out, sensing that 'European' wasn't said in a positive way but not sure if 'European' counted as a protected characteristic. "French, I believe," Shane said faintly.

"Ah, yes. I remember. Diversity is important."

Did being French count as diverse? Was 'French' a euphemism?

"It can be hard to find a balance," Crowell continued into Shane's baffled silence. "We, as a league, and a sport, want to talk about inclusive and diversity in hockey. But too much talk about that stuff can be... distracting, don't you think?"

Shane squeezed his eyes shut. Oh God. He would definitely have once agreed with that. "I guess that's where the balance comes in," he managed, trying to be true to himself.

“Exactly. Balance. *Monsieur* Petrov doesn’t seem to agree, of course. *He* seems want to put all our energy into *policy* and all the while— all the while— well, Shane, you have seen the news. You are *in* the news.”

Shane said nothing. Really, really hard. Hank had cautioned him to *listen for the questions* and not pre-empt with unasked for answers. Apparently that was a trick.

Crowell waited a beat and tried a new tactic. “Now I’ve also heard – and you do not need to confirm this – that you might also be homosexual,” Shane guessed ‘French’ really had been a euphemism, “and you don’t have to tell me but let’s say that the rumor is true—”

“Oh, it’s true, sir,” Shane said, straight away. “I’m not publicly out, though. The team knows, of course, and close friends and family, but that’s it. Everyone has been very supportive. It’s so great to work for an organization like the Metros that is respectful and inclusive.”

This stumped Crowell. Stumped him *hard*. This, as Hank had pointed out, was an effective strategy if Shane was willing to use it – because it meant that any of the other leading questions Crowell might pose would cross a line.

“And that’s,” Crowell said, buffering, “Ahhh. As you said. The MLH supports the L...G... B...T community one hundred percent. Did you know we sell Pride merchandise year-round on our website now?”

“Mmm, I know. It’s a good first step, but the money doesn’t go to LGBTQI,” he said, emphasizing the ‘QI’ that Crowell had missed off, “charities.”

Shane hadn’t known that. But it had been in the package that Petrov’s comms person had put together for him and Alex had reminded him of it on the call. It was a small but worthwhile point.

“Doesn’t it? Well. That’s a good point, Shane. I’ll write that down and look into it. Not into the finer details there, ha, ha. We’re also expanding our Pride Nights,” Crowell said, with some false cheer. “Every team has them now, and we’re planning the first joint Pride Night game.”

Great, Shane thought. More of that fucking awful Pride tape. And, God, he hoped one was never scheduled between Montreal and Boston. He’d probably cry. Or launch himself at Ilya.

Crowell bulldozed his way on through Shane’s silence. “I know that, historically, hockey hasn’t been the most inclusive sport, but obviously anyone can make it to the very top if they work hard enough. I mean, you’re proof of that. You didn’t need some *loud* initiatives to get to where you are.”

Wow. A micro-aggression. Shane hadn’t experienced that in a while. He ground his back teeth together as there was a long, obvious pause where – what – Crowell was expecting Shane to *thank him*? Well, fuck that.

And that was *definitely* a less-than-subtle reference to Alex’s Code, too. So, Crowell wasn’t pleased about that, either. Of course he wouldn’t be. What Alex was doing was putting in

place something better, more robust, than the MLH's common practices. Something Crowell knew he couldn't enforce. Didn't want to enforce maybe. Either way, Alex – who also fitted into that diversity bracket that Crowell was so uncomfortable with – was showing him up.

When Shane didn't say anything, he continued, "But the thing is, Shane, your private business is your private business. And it should stay that way. Mister Petrov should be mindful of *involving* you in his— his *sphere*— not when he is of such interest to the tabloid press."

"I don't think Petrov is inviting photographers to follow him around. Sir," he added.

"It seems to happen often enough!" came Crowell's falsely jovial tone, like he was trying to fake a laugh and failing. "And each time it does the League is put under the spotlight and there's all this noise! It's unnecessary. Takes the attention away from what's important."

Shane assumed that the hockey was the important thing there.

"But, look," Crowell said, sighing, "if you want to plan some... announcement or something," Shane could practically *hear* the disgusted lip curl, "we could look into planning something together. We'd be happy to do that with you. For you."

"I have no plans to publicly come out at the moment. My focus is on hockey," Shane said coldly. And he certainly wasn't going to fucking do it 'with' the MLH.

"Of course, of course, that's what I like to hear. But if you change your mind..."

"I'll think about it," he said through his teeth.

"Fantastic. Well, it's been great catching up."

"Yes, sir. Thanks for your time."

"And you, too, Shane. Good luck this evening."

They hung up and Shane leaned over the table, hands pressed on either side of his phone and tried to process what had just happened. And how he felt about it. It *had* been vaguely threatening – clearly Crowell wanted all the *gay* talk to go away. Which perversely made Shane kind of want to do the opposite. Just announce his status to the world. Fuck everyone. Fuck Crowell who thought *Pride Nights* would fix shit.

He couldn't do that of course. The chatter about him and Petrov was ongoing. Announcing something like that now would probably *really* set his career on fire. There had to be a better time to do that. Maybe after his third cup. Or his fourth. Or after he and Ilya got married.

But he wanted to do *something*.

His phone beeped.

Lily: *How did it go?*

Without thinking, Shane pressed call.

Ilya answered almost immediately and he was somewhere loud. It didn't take any time at all to recognize the boisterous sound of a team activity accompanied by a pumping music beat. "One second," Ilya answered, somewhat breathlessly. "Fucking *move*, Banks, or I will move you. What you think I'm joking? I thought not."

"Sorry, I can call back," Shane whispered. Of course, he was at the gym with the team. He'd known that.

"No, no, no," Ilya said, "let me just find— somewhere—"

The line plunged into sudden, worrying silence. "Ilya?"

"Yes," he sighed, "I am here. I am in the bathroom. The nice one, with the window. Only pretty sure Marly took a shit in here about half an hour ago so maybe not so nice." He whistled a breath out through his teeth. "Ooof."

They'd all been there. "To think," Shane said wistfully, "we could have chosen different careers."

"Where we didn't have to share close spaces with disgusting athletes? Yes. Maybe office job. With boring Excel." Ilya grunted and there was a clang. "Yessss. I have opened the window."

"Do you know how to use Excel?" Shane asked, thoroughly distracted.

"Yes. Used to do all my budgeting when I was a rookie."

"You did?"

"Yes. I had a template. Made it myself. Had all the sums and everything."

Shane's mouth dropped open. He sat down onto the end of his bed. "Wow. I did not know this about you. Do you have any other skills with the Microsoft Office Suite?"

"I made a PowerPoint for St. Simon's birthday once."

"You are shitting me."

"Yes. It was fifty slides of bad taxidermy animals that he looked like."

Shane laughed, properly laughed. He fell backwards, still laughing, all the stress from the call with Crowell leaving his body. "You are so weird. I love it."

He could hear Ilya smiling. "You sound better."

"You've made me feel better. You always make me feel better." Shane groaned and rubbed his face. "It was a shitty call. He's made me so mad. And I kind of want to do something crazy but I wanted to ask your opinion about it first."

“Because we are a team, yes?”

“Yeah, because we’re a team.”

*

After the call, after a little diversion which might have involved a short, efficient and very illicit-feeling joint jerking off session made hotter by the idea that Ilya was doing it in a bathroom surrounded by his team, Shane cleaned up and returned to the table. He tapped down to his contacts and hit ‘dial’ on a number he had never had reason to call before.

“Allô?”

“Hi, it’s Shane. Shane Hollander.”

Alex laughed. “Yes, I know it’s you, Shane. How was the call with Crowell?”

“Fine, it went fine.” Shane didn’t care about that now. “Have you— when is your announcement thing? With Ottawa? Has it happened?”

“Ah, no, actually. We had a couple of hiccups which had to be smoothed out. It’s scheduled for next week. Why?”

“I’m in. I’m on board. I want to be there,” he said hurriedly, knowing as he did so that he should have run this decision past Farah, past his parents, instead of just Ilya.

“Oh. Wow. Really?”

“Yeah. Really.”

“Wow, Shane that’s— that’s *fantastic* news. Thank you. It’ll really lift the engagement. But... are you sure?” they sounded doubtful. “You didn’t seem that keen before.”

“I—” He paused and decided he could probably be honest with them. Should probably be. “No. I wasn’t. I didn’t initially like the idea of being the face of the Code. It’s been a thing, my whole life, you know. Like I’m so kind of pillar of diversity, even though I’ve done *nothing* to deserve it but be born to a Japanese mom and a white dad. It makes me uncomfortable.”

“Shane, you don’t have to do it,” they said immediately.

“No. I kind of feel like I do. I should. I want the MLH to treat people better. I want to stand for something *good*. And the Code is good. I believe in the Code,” he said and did wonder for a moment if they should give it a different name. It was sounding a bit cult-ish.

Alex was quiet for a little while. “I appreciate that, Shane. And I also believe in the Code, I really believe we’re making significant progress. But your concerns are also valid. I know that in the past you have been used that way and I’m sorry for it. I’m wondering if maybe you should think about this a little more? I’m guessing,” they laughed softly, “that Crowell pissed you off.”

“Yeah, he did,” Shane said slowly, “but I’m not flying off the handle here. I’ve thought about it.” A bit. “And this is what I want to do.”

Because *fuck* Crowell. Fuck anyone who wanted to control who Shane was and who Shane loved. Who anyone loved.

Alex still sounded hesitant. “Okay. Tell you what – I’ll hold off confirming the details with the team for another twenty-four hours. And you can get back to me tomorrow if you’re still sure. No pressure. I don’t—I don’t want you to feel like that with us. That’s not what we’re about.”

Shane was pretty certain he wasn’t going to change his mind. But at least this would give him a chance to give Farah and his mom a head’s up.

*

It was J.J. who reminded them, the text coming through as Shane was relaxing the first night he was home, watching some rugby game on TV. He’d always thought he was so well-rounded, being interested in what he considered to be a reasonably niche sport, at least in Northern America. Turned out it was the shorts. Or the men’s thighs in the little shorts.

He bet Ilya would look amazing in those little shorts.

J.J. *We still doing this?*

J.J. *[Image]*

Shane stared at the photograph from their night out with the Boston team which now felt like an eternity ago. Peetie had taken it, early on in the evening after the first round of shots, and after they’d toasted Hayden’s baby. It was a nice candid photo. Just the four of them, seated around a sticky bar table. Hayden’s mouth was open as he had been caught hoovering down chips and J.J. was the only one looking at the camera with an appropriately camera-ready smile.

Ilya was looking at Shane, smirking. Shane was looking down at his drink, smiling.

J.J. *He also took this.*

J.J. *[Image]*

This time it was a picture of Marly and Mitty at the bar. Mitty was gesturing, a wide smile plastered across his face. Marly had his head thrown back, eyes closed, clearly hooting with laughter. They were both wearing their own team T-shirts.

J.J. *And this is très amusant.*

J.J. *[Image]*

Comeau half bent at the knees, face caught in a moment of taken-aback enjoyment, mirroring the posture of Connors as Franks leaned smugly against a bar stool, clearly having delivered

some kind of comment deserving of this level of hysteria. God. He hoped it had nothing to do with showers and soap.

When they'd told Peetie to take pictures... he guessed he thought they would be a bit more posed. Awkward. After all, he hadn't really expected anyone to look like they were enjoying themselves. He'd just been grateful that no one had actually started a fight.

He kept going back to the one of Comeau. What the hell.

Hayden: *[Image]*

Hayden: *Hate to say it. But Rozanov is really down bad for you, bud*

Hayden had reshared the first photo but this time he had cropped it to just the part that showed Ilya and Shane.

Shane smiled, zooming in Ilya's face until it was nothing but a blur of loving pixels. He forwarded the photo to Ilya with a heart. There were probably only a handful of photos of them together outside of a rink, wearing opposing jerseys. There had been the draft, of course. Then there had been that skit at the MLH Awards, though he had no idea if Ilya had kept the photos. Maybe they should frame this one and put it... somewhere.

Another message came through.

J.J.: *Looked up that word.*

J.J.: *Probably Rozanov shouldn't be calling you 'baby' in public. Lot of Russians in our teams.*

Hayden: *Oh gross.*

Shane frowned. *Are you being homophobic right now?*

Hayden: *Hey, no!*

Hayden: *I don't think so?*

J.J.: *More... Rozanovaphobic?*

Shane: *Not sure that's better.*

Hayden: *Sorry, Shane.*

Hayden: *My bad.*

Hayden: *I'll work on it.*

J.J.: *Want me to post them, Capitaine?*

Shane: *Actually, no. Let me think about it.*

*

Shane stayed up until well after midnight, cycling through the photographs and staring at all the little details, and then he decisively redownloaded Instagram for maybe the one-hundredth time in his life.

Ignoring the influx of notifications, he uploaded all of the photos – except for the zoom-in crop of him and Ilya. It had been a long time since he'd used Instagram himself and this was very out of his comfort zone so it took him a while to remember how to do all the things he needed to do, including laboriously tagging his teammates. He didn't tag the Raiders – he didn't follow any of them, for one. Not yet anyway.

For the caption, he kept it simple: *Here are some other photographs for people to talk about.*

He pressed 'post'.

Then, chewing his bottom lip until it bled, Shane searched for Ilya and clicked 'Follow' on his profile, his heart pounding in his ears the whole time. For the sake of verisimilitude, he did the same for Connors and Marly and the rookies and a couple of other Boston players who Ilya said were tolerable.

And, then, because he was doing this now so what the hell, he searched for a few others. Zane Boodram. Wyatt Hayes. Carter Vaughn. He already followed Scott Hunter because who the hell didn't. But there were others he had met through TROL who hadn't been total assholes, so he followed them, too.

His social media team were going to lose their minds. Apparently, they had been kept busy with the death threats, so he was sure this was just going to lead to another surge. God knew what would happen after the announcement of the Code agreement with Ottawa. There were some *super* weird people out there.

Finally, exhausted by the prospect of more noise, even if it was noise he had deliberately created, Shane turned off his phone and went to bed.

*

"Didn't know you and Rozanov were actually friendly," said a defensemen from Seattle.

Shane smiled tightly. This was about the dozenth time someone had said this to him and he'd only been in Tampa six hours and he'd been in the gym for two of them. "We were in the same draft," he said, hoping this time it would land.

So far, the response had been the same. Maybe said differently but always the same. "Yeah, but you guys shit on each other all the time," the guy said patiently, as if *Shane* was an idiot.

He didn't allow his smile to waver. "Just friendly banter. You know how it is."

The defenseman didn't. Because he wasn't part of a generational rivalry and didn't play for an Original Six franchise. And, therefore, he was fucking *irrelevant* and Shane needed to remember this. What was relevant was that this loser – well, he wasn't a loser, he was

apparently the best Seattle could offer which wasn't saying much – had noticed that things were different between Shane and Ilya. *That* was the message that needed landing.

He got shit for Petrov, too, because Shane's life was never easy, and because he'd spent his entire career being perfect and in the space of a few weeks this had unraveled and people had Big Feelings about it. His fixed smile got a lot of use as the evening wore on. The hotel wasn't even full of players yet as the All Stars weekend didn't start until tomorrow. Not everyone saw this as a networking opportunity like Shane – and Shane's mom – did.

Not that it was all about networking. By midnight, Shane was face down on the bed in Ilya's hotel room, moaning, his boyfriend's tongue in his ass. Finally.

"Condom?" Ilya asked conversationally, after he had replaced his tongue with his fingers. Shane felt the edge of his teeth as Ilya bit down lightly on his left cheek and sucked.

"Mmm." Shane thought about it. Ilya's room had two beds. So, they could sleep in the other one if they messed up this one too much. He stretched out his hands, stretched out his whole body, luxuriating in the impending orgasm. "Yeah, no condom. Inside me. Now."

"Fuck, Shane," Ilya said shakily, the novelty not worn off. He kissed Shane's spine and reached for the lube.

Afterwards, in the other bed, they exchanged minty kisses sleepily, sloppily, smiling like loons, arms wrapped around each other. It would not be physically possible to get closer, not unless Shane unzipped Ilya and climbed inside. "Dick still works, then," he said. He'd now been on the antidepressants for a few weeks. Ilya had been informing Shane of every time he successfully jerked off which was... a lot.

Ilya pinched his ass. "Yes."

"Are you still feeling sick sometimes?"

"No, that stopped."

"Good."

"I definitely can't drink as much anymore. Hangovers are *killing* me."

Shane's eyebrows rose disapprovingly. "Hmphf. That sounds like a good thing."

This got him another pinch and another kiss, just a little one.

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask after Ilya's second first therapy session had gone but he snapped it back.

The first therapist had been a bust. Ilya had been vague about this initially – some grumpy murmurings that they hadn't 'clicked'. Later, after Shane had successfully not made a big deal about this, Ilya had embellished a little more. In person, she had seemed a little young and known a little too much about hockey, as in she admitted to being a Raiders fan, which he had found unsettling. Not knowing hockey became a requirement going forward and Ilya,

demonstrating an incredibly attractive stubborn streak, had spent the subsequent couple of weeks researching all the names on his doctor's list and beyond before settling on a woman who actually wasn't based in Boston.

Remote therapy, Ilya had claimed blithely, as if he had experience of this, would be more convenient given their schedules. His first session with this therapist had been yesterday and Shane had to keep reminding himself to let Ilya come to him about his progress, rather than constantly – it felt – nagging him. It was a work in progress.

So instead of asking, he whispered, “How many people asked you about me today?”

“Mmm, maybe a hundred,” Ilya laughed, squeezing Shane. He was so *happy*. God. The relief of it. “You?”

“Even one of the bar staff asked me.” It had been the only time when Shane's facsimile of a professional smile had slipped. That and there was apparently no ginger ale in the entire hotel.

“People need to get lives.”

“Hard agree.”

There had been more photos taken today to add to the meagre collection. Carter Vaughn had snapped a selfie of the three of them, all standing side by side at the bar, the necks of their beers clinking in a toast. Later, much later, Ilya had thrown his arm around Shane's shoulders in that bro-y way that Shane had never been able to replicate, and it would never occur to him to do. While Shane had fizzed with the nervous excitement of being touched by his boyfriend in public, Bood had taken a photo of that, too, laughing and saying he was going to post it to Instagram and tag him. Ilya had shrugged and said *fine*. Shane had said *please, do*.

He hadn't checked yet but judging from the pings from Instagram and Twitter on his phone screen and the messages from his mom it was already up. They were even on the same team this year, for the first time. It was like the stars had aligned to help their narrative.

“I love you,” Shane whispered, kissing the end of Ilya's nose, soppy.

Ilya nuzzled Shane's cheek, right over his freckles. “I love you, too.”

“Going to destroy you in the skills competition tomorrow, though.”

Ilya huffed out a laugh, all crinkled up with glee. “In your dreams, Hollander.”

*

On the flight home, his body weighed down by the knowledge that it would be several weeks before he saw Ilya again, Shane scrolled through the photographs from the weekend. Which he had permission to do because they were all public property now. Not secret shots taken in hotel rooms to be deleted moments later in a flurry of panic. No, these were *legitimate*.

Vaughnie had probably been the most prolific documenter, perhaps because his Instagram wasn't public so he was only sharing with 'friends', one of whom was Shane.

He'd had his phone camera out at every opportunity and had snapped dozens of photos – from action shots of the competition to footage of the locker room, to the various snaps of players and their families enjoying downtime. Shane and Ilya featured in many of them.

There was Shane and Ilya in the locker room, half dressed and watching something on Shane's phone (a clip of Ovechkin's falling goal against the Phoenix Coyotes, one of Shane's favorites).

There were a collection of Shane and Ilya in the pool with all the kids, Shane at one end with his team, Ilya at the other end, both of them deadly serious as they briefed their wide-eyed audience on tactics.

There was that posed shot of the three of them clinking beers, and Shane didn't think he'd ever had such a genuine smile on his face, he really didn't. Another of them sitting squashed against each other in a booth, Ilya making an absurd face at Scott Hunter as Shane sipped from his can of ginger ale.

Shane downloaded each photo, one by one, then marked each one as a 'favorite' so he could look at them later.

Then he moved on.

Bood's Instagram mostly featured photos of the food he had eaten – complete with ratings like *7/10 meat tender (sous vide?) but sauce too mild* – and pictures of his wife whose name Shane couldn't quite remember. Carrie, maybe? She'd been nice. Oh, no, there it was, she was tagged. Cassie. *Cassie*. That was right. Ilya had flirted with her, outrageously, but in a way that no one had mistaken for anything other than Ilya being an amusing shit-stirrer. What was more, Cassie had given it right back, right there, right in front of her husband, her smile bold and confident, her eyes glittering. Even Shane had been hard-pressed to feel anything other than impressed with this performance and he and Bood had exchanged several eyerolls when Ilya had laid it on particularly thickly.

It had been weirdly nice, that part. As if Shane and Bood had been complicit in their partner's bit, even though Bood had no idea Shane was Ilya's partner, of course.

He paused when he found the photo where Ilya had casually, so casually, put his arm about him. Ilya was saying something to him – Shane couldn't actually remember what, because he had been so caught up the sensation of being held by Ilya in front of their colleagues – and gesturing with his free hand. Shane was blushing. Thankfully, everyone was a little pink. They'd all caught some sun so it didn't *look* obvious, right? Probably it was obvious to anyone who knew him. He looked *soft*.

Shane downloaded that photo too. He had some vague plan to get them printed. He'd have to buy a photo printer himself, of course. Couldn't send these off somewhere, not with his name attached to them. Maybe he'd set the printer up at the cottage this summer. Get a bunch of picture frames. Just... line up photos of him and Ilya along mantelpieces and shelves.

This was an insane thought – he obviously couldn't do this – but it was a comforting one.

Shane exited Bood's Instagram and scrolled down past the posts from Reebok and that seltzer water he was forced to follow and like the posts of – well, he didn't, the social media people did – and, finally, he found the *pièce de résistance* of his weekend, *ilyarozanov81*'s Instagram.

His heart gave a double thump. Following Ilya's on Instagram made the existence of Instagram entirely worth it for him, though his grid was by no means as salacious as it used to be. Very few thirst traps slipped through the net these days and if they did, they were usually taken from the bathroom attached to Shane's very own gym, not that anyone knew that because Shane's gym bathroom was about as bland and ubiquitous as they came. But he knew and that was the important thing. It was important because the girls – and some men – that posted horny comments did so not knowing that these photos were taken usually immediately after Ilya had fucked Shane on the floor of his gym. Ilya wasn't sweaty and glistening from an hour on the stationary bike. He was sweaty and glistening from an hour on Shane.

Okay, often *not* an hour, not on the gym floor. But that was not the detail that mattered.

Smiling, Shane took a sip of his ginger ale, ice clinking pleasantly in the glass. Ilya had posted three photos from the weekend. They had chosen them together in bed, combing through the literal *hundreds* Ilya had taken.

The first was a group shot from after the game. Both teams crammed into a single image, climbing on tables and chairs in the bar to get into the picture. Ilya and he were in the very center, squished together. No one but them had known that Ilya's fingers had been hooked into the back of Shane's pants, pulled tight so that he was pressed against him. Ilya was beaming at the camera. Shane was smiling but undeniably nervous looking. In bed, Ilya had called this expression 'cute' and 'one of my favorite Shane smiles'.

The second photo was from the pool. A ridiculous shot taken by one of the moms of the kids they had been playing with that Ilya had demanded she share with him. In the foreground, blurry but still distinct, Ilya was pretending to drown, attacked by a 'shark'. In the background Shane was— well, there was no other word for it – *posing* on a sun lounger, shirtless, wearing a pair of swim shorts that Hana had sent him in multiple colors that strained over his thighs and were about two inches shorter than he was entirely comfortable with.

The third photo was a repost from the MLH's official recap of the event.

It was of the massive kiss Ilya had pressed to Shane's cheek in front of thousands of screaming fans after their winning goal against the opposing team. Watching Ilya repost this had made him breathless. The *risk*. Even Ilya's carefully thought-through comment – *okay was fine being your wingman @shanehollanderhockey but only for a weekend don't go getting ideas* – hadn't tampered down the feeling that they were going to be *caught* that it was *obvious*.

He scrolled through the comments, shaking his head with increasing incredulity at the hysteria these photos had caused but no one, literally no one, was hysterical about the right thing. No one was suggesting for one moment that he and Ilya were fucking. At least, not genuinely – there were definitely some ‘shippers’ in Ilya’s comments, but they were all being soundly shut down by Rozanov fans.

He scrolled back to look at the photo of them in the group shot. They were practically merged together. Ilya’s arm was definitely behind Shane and not draped over his shoulder in that bro-like way. And that kiss— that was not a bro-kiss right? The tip of Ilya’s tongue had touched his cheek, granted no one could see that, not through a photo, but still.

How could they not know? People were blind.

Which was fine, Shane reassured himself. People could be blind for a little while longer.

Chapter End Notes

I'm on holiday (vacation) now so I've had some wine. So I think this is fine? Who knows.

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

“Fuck. I’m sorry. Shane. I was not thinking straight. You know I have not been... so good about him. The photos of you everywhere. Little cozy sushi dinners and galas and your sexy tight suits and his fuck me eyes and your fucking Calvin Klein billboards, and that photo of him about to kiss you, I know, I know, it was after, but it was all I was imagining, last summer. Christ, Shane, is impossible, you were driving me insane and he was always there—”

Chapter Notes

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

“...apparently this means the kid will be born with masses of hair. Which will be a change because the twins and Arthur were basically freakishly bald for the first few months.” Hayden laughed and nudged Shane as they showed their passes to security. “Remember that?”

It had been precisely three minutes since Shane had met Hayden in the parking lot before practice and Shane already knew too much about this pregnancy. With the exception of the times they’d been forced to car pool, Hayden was *never* early for practice and no one was ever as early as Shane was. But today he’d drawn up into his usual space alongside Hayden’s sensible family SUV, to see his friend slumped against the driver-side window, drooling. Apparently, it had been a tough night.

He regretted waking him up. Should have just left him there in the car so he could enjoy his usual quiet pre-practice routine.

“I do, Hayd. They looked like real freaks,” Shane said vaguely, nodding his hello at Guy, one of the equipment guys.

“Hey!”

“Like little bald dictators,” he opined, wistfully. For Arthur’s first Halloween, Jackie had drawn him a little moustache and dressed him a onesie that looked like a suit. It had been pretty funny.

“Hey!” This time Hayden laughed.

The locker room was, predictably, empty and Shane’s nose twitched. “Smells funny.” Hard to tell if it was better or worse, though. There was just a different layer of chemical smell over the usual awful.

“They’ve switched to eco-friendly cleaning stuff. Didn’t you read the email?”

“Jesus and *you* did?”

“What else am I supposed to do when I’m up at 2am rubbing Jackie’s back?”

“Cannot believe you guys are doing this ag— what the fuck.” Shane came to a halt in front of the whiteboard.

The whiteboard in the locker room was *supposed* to be for quick, factual information. Next game. Logistics. Line combinations and D-pairings. What it was *actually* used for was requests for their pre-game song playlist and roasting each other. Best and worst chirps. ‘Awards’ for most embarrassing plays. A tally of number of trips that season. For a while they’d had a fake fine board but that had got out of hand after they’d started to rack up enormous debts to each other.

As Captain, Shane was used to being a regular feature on the board – often prime source of roasting – even if he didn’t contribute to it much himself. He took it with good grace. Last week, the board had been covered in Who Said It? quotes. One of which had been ‘*If you can’t pronounce the ingredients, it’s already too processed*’ and literally everyone had written his name beneath it.

But it was Monday and someone had wiped off the board and instead it now read: CAPS ‘SIGNIFICANT OTHER’ SWEEPSTAKES and then there were a list of rules

Rules:

1. *One guess each*
2. *\$50 entry*
3. *No changing your answer if new ‘evidence’ comes out!!!!*
4. *Winner gets the pot if/when Cap reveals the name himself*

“Fuck. That’s actually pretty coherent,” Hayden muttered.

Open-mouthed, Shane read on to see the guesses which were *hideously* over annotated to the point of being almost impossible to read.

Someone from Ops??? – Mitty (Bruce is really really married – Michaels) (Cap’s not a cheater!!!! – Lachy) (What’s the male name for ‘mistress’? – Franks) (Think it’s a gigolo – Lachy) (It is absolutely not a gigolo guys – Peetie)

New yoga instructor? Bendy! – Franks (Hollander’s yoga instructor is a woman and he follows her on Instagram – Peetie) (is she hot? – Franks) (she’s definitely bendy – Peetie)

Ali?????? – Michaels (Ooooo you’re onto something with this – Lachy) (This would be on brand for Cap – Mitty) (Dunno Ali told me he hates kale and that’s 90% of cap’s diet – Franks)

Marlene – Connie (HAHA – Mitty)

Scott Hunter – Comeau (are you for real – Michaels) (insane take, Gilly – Mitty)

And then, right at the bottom, in the corner, someone had written in all-caps:

ROZANOV – anonymous (whoever wrote this u have to put ur name, thems the RULES – Mitty) (even if it's insane – Lachy) (HAHA imagine – Franks) (He is pretty hot 😊 – Johannes) (Buddy is there something you'd like to tell us? – Mitty) (This is a safe space, Jojo – Peetie) (anonymous I think you're on to something!!!! – Comeau) (Gilly was this you, you freak??? – Mitty)

“Should we... wipe it off?” Hayden asked tentatively, his blue eyes glancing to Shane and back to the board nervously.

Shane didn't know what to do. His first – totally freaked out, heart-racing thought – was that this locker room was not totally private. Lots of people came in and out of here. Cleaning staff. The equipment guys. Security. Plenty of people could look at this board and... know some things about Shane. His fingers twitched to wipe the board completely. Just erase all this conjecture on his love life. Pretend it didn't exist.

His second was that the guys had tried to be reasonably discrete. ‘Significant other’ was clearly them trying to be mindful of Shane's predicament which – in and amongst the anxiety – gave him a really swell of affection. They were assholes but they weren't *assholes*. Sure, that had then unraveled immediately by the list of men but, still. An attempt had been made.

“Shane?” Hayden pressed. He'd pre-emptively picked up the board wiper.

Shane's eyes lingered in the corner, the anonymous suggestion written in what was obviously Comeau's handwriting. Nerves fluttered. This felt... this felt like a big decision. He had opened the door to this. He had opened the door to his team knowing he had a boyfriend, to *talking* about said boyfriend. He tried to visualize the next few steps. The constant pressing to get ‘clues’. The ribald suggestions of players who might be his boyfriend. They would probably say something every time he was remotely friendly to a player on another team – that would get annoying.

But it was going to be good-natured. That was what this board told him. Maybe they would come to the conclusion about Ilya all by themselves, with enough exposure.

Maybe it would be fine?

“No. Leave it.” He grabbed his phone to snap a photo to send to Ilya. His hands were shaking.

“You sure?” Hayden said gently. He hovered close to the board.

“Yeah, leave it. Maybe... maybe you should write something.”

Hayden chewed his bottom lip, clearly very torn. Gently, he laid the board wiper back down and picked up a red marker, surveyed his options. Then, with great consideration, he carefully amended Rule 4.

4. Winner gets the pot if/when Cap reveals the name himself and donates to LGBTQI charity of his choice

“Great idea, Hayd,” Shane murmured, eyes prickling.

Hayden continued. In very, very small letters next to the Rozanov suggestion, he wrote (*Seconding that this is a safe space, Jojo – Pike*). “Think it would be too obvious if I said anything about Rozanov, right?”

“Yeah, probably.”

“Well, this will have to do.” Hayden clicked the cap back on his marker decisively. “Maybe J.J. can make a, what’s it called, when you do something to send people the wrong way?”

“A red herring.”

“Yeah, J.J. can do a red herring or something. I’ll send him a message so he can think about it.”

Which was why, thirty minutes later J.J. swanned into the locker room and, to a chorus of anticipatory ‘ooohs’, walked straight up to the whiteboard and scrawled in red pen next to the Scott Hunter suggestion:

(*Capitaine did once tell me he was really hot – J.J.*)

“Fucking knew it!” Corneau roared.

The teams gaze swung to Shane who rolled his eyes. “No comment,” he said. And then he smiled.

*

A few hours later, sweat running down his face mid-drill, one of the assistant coaches yelped ecstatically from the bench. It travelled across the ice, distracting enough that Hayden and Comeau nearly collided with each other and kicked Mitty and their back-up goalie out of whatever weird meditative communing they were doing in the net.

“What is it, Sorren?” Wiebe shouted, annoyed.

“It’s Rozanov. You’ll never guess what. He’s been traded to the fucking Centaurs,” Sorren laughed, waving his cell phone around like a trophy. “Can you fucking believe our luck?”

The team skated toward the bench to grab their own cell phones, a lapse in etiquette that Wiebe seemed to let slide as he was doing exactly the same. Sorren started to read out parts of the breaking news story he’d received – detailing what was known about the trade. It was not just Ilya who had been traded. The Cens had given up their 1st round draft pick *and* a prospect in the deal. Which made sense for Boston, who wanted – desperately needed – new blood. Particularly now they were losing their star center.

Shane went straight to his messages, to where the photo of the whiteboard from earlier that morning hadn't been replied to yet. His hands were shaking for the second time that day.

Jane: *A heads up would have been nice?!*

Jane: 

Jane: *How are you?*

Ilya was typing for a while before a message finally landed. It had clearly been written and rewritten because he eventually only sent a single word. *Weird.*

Jane: *Yeah.*

Shane glanced over at Wiebe, who was still pouring over his phone and *not* looking at Shane as if he might have any insider knowledge or anything.

Jane: *Call after practice?*

Lily: *Can't. Flight is in two hours. Need to pack and leave*

Shane winced. Mid-season trades were jarring. *Call when you land, then?*

Lily: *I do not feel much like talking* 

Lily: *My head is messy.*

Jane: *I get that*

Jane: *We can always be silent*

In any other circumstances, this would have been opening for the obvious innuendo about Shane's ability to remain quiet, but there were no more jiggling dots and no more messages.

Shane sent a final message into the void, one which he hoped would be of some comfort. *I love you.* And then, because he really, really couldn't help it, *Did you take your pill?*

"All right, everyone, back to work."

*

Shane dithered for about twenty minutes when he got home from practice. Ilya hadn't texted – not Shane directly, at least, he'd sent a polite 'thank you' to the congratulations from his parents in the message group Shane had set up. He was probably on the plane now.

And obviously not in a great head space. Which was perfectly natural, but his Ilya-senses were tingling. Meds or no meds, this was a situation which *was* a brain-fuck-up.

Shane wasn't a spontaneous person so it felt incredibly reckless to once again be throwing stuff into an overnight bag, fueled by a single thought to be in the same city as Ilya, even if

he didn't want to speak. He had a home game the following afternoon so worst came to worst, he would stay the night with his parents and drive back in the morning.

He called his mom from the car. "Hey, it's me," he said, totally unnecessarily. "I'm on my way."

"Oh. Oh! Of course." There was a loud noise in the background which suggested his mom was making a coffee which at this time of day he knew would be decaf. She stepped away from the machine and the gurgling decreased in volume. "Have you spoken to him?"

"A little bit. Not much. I think he's pretty cut up. I don't exactly know what the plan is. He's in the air now so I guess maybe he's meeting the GM this afternoon? Tomorrow morning? I don't know."

"Hmm. They'll probably put him up at the Brookstreet for the time being."

"Yeah, I figure. But I'll come home first. I should be there by the time he lands and then I'll let him know I'm around."

"I'm sure he would find it comforting to see you."

He exhaled and tried to imagine himself in Ilya's situation. Would he want Ilya with him? Without a doubt. But Ilya was not Shane. "Yeah. Probably. It's a bit... weird right now." And Shane was now familiar enough with Ilya's coping strategies to know that Ilya wasn't always especially good at recognizing what he needed in emotional situations, nor communicating them if he *did* know what he wanted. Which left Shane in the difficult position of having to guess. "I know this was his choice but..."

"Moving teams and countries in one day is stressful. And probably bittersweet."

"Yeah, you're right. Okay. I'll see you in a couple of hours."

"Sure thing. Oh, Shane," his mom said with sudden urgency, "if you do speak to him— your father and I were thinking if he wants to stay somewhere, and he doesn't like the idea of one of those anodyne temporary apartments, he could always stay with us. Our house is set back so privacy won't be a problem. He can have your room and we can give him as much space as he wants. It would be wonderful to spend some more time with him."

Shane found himself smiling. Unreservedly. "I love you, Mom. I'll let him know that's an option."

"Of course. Oh, Shane—"

"Yeah?"

"Isn't this great news?" Her voice was bright with excitement.

"Yeah. *Yeah*." God. He hadn't even really thought about it properly. "It is. *Ottawa*."

It couldn't, actually, be better. They would be in *driving* distance from each other from now on. Shane could do exactly what he was doing now, which was throw a few things into a bag and just... drive to Ilya for the night.

Fuck. It was everything.

*

He texted Ilya from his parents' driveway as soon as he arrived. There had been no updates from him but that wasn't going to stop Shane. He had decided on the drive that he was going to bulldoze his way through Ilya's defenses. Just force him to accept Shane's support. He could be a pest, too.

Jane: *I'm in Ottawa, at my parents.*

Jane: *If you want me to come to you, or anything, I'm here*

Jane: *Or we can speak on the phone*

Jane: *Or not speak.*

Jane: *Whatever you want*

Jane: *I love you*

It was at this point Shane wondered if the names they had given each other all those years ago were really working for them anymore. Obviously, it had partly been because if a girl's name popped up on their screen, it wouldn't be suspicious, but there was also the increasing possibility in this Cloud-based world of leaks or hackings. It wouldn't take an absolute genius to piece together this puzzle if either of their phones got compromised.

As he watched, thinking about the ramifications of this, the little typing bubbles started again.

Lily: *They're putting me up at the Brookstreet*

Progress!

More jiggling dots.

And more.

Was he writing an essay? Jesus.

He was not.

Lily: *I don't want to be alone*

Shane, who could count on one hand the number of times Ilya had asked for something, knew this was about as close to a screaming cry for help as he was going to get. Immediately, Shane put the car in reverse and dialed his mom, who had probably heard his car arrive and

been wondering what he was doing sitting outside with the engine running in the dark. “He’s at the Brookstreet,” he said without preamble when she answered. “I’m heading there now.”

*

Shane had stayed at the Brookstreet a few times – it was better than the Fairfield and closer to the rink than the Marriot downtown – and he knew it well enough to know that getting to Ilya’s room without a keycard was going to be next to impossible.

So instead they had to time it so that Ilya came down to the lobby to get a new keycard under some false premise that his had stopped working and Shane, wrapped up in his warmest coat with the hood up and sunglasses on looking, yeah, probably hugely suspicious given the sun had set now, breezed past him and waited by the elevator for Ilya to join him.

This covert operation had Shane’s blood pressure pretty much through the roof, made even more so when they stepped into the elevator with a couple who were obviously part of a wedding party and a few drinks down. He spent the entire journey to the eighth floor terrified that they were going to clock that they were sharing an elevator with none other than Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander the day of Rozanov’s trade and, wow, there was no coincidence in the world that would explain *that*.

Thank God, the couple got out on the fourth floor – still giggling about the groom’s brother whose pants were apparently an unacceptable length – and the rest of the journey to the eighth was spent in relieved silence, both of them staring fixedly at their phones for the purpose of the elevator cameras.

Shane followed Ilya to one of the corner rooms, which he knew were the ones with the balconies overlooking the golf course. No sooner were they through the door than Ilya turned to him and made a small, helpless gesture with his arms.

He launched himself at Ilya, possibly too hard, because they stumbled against a wall. It was in no way sexy. “Weird day, huh,” he whispered, squeezing him tight, his down coat rustling between them.

Ilya nodded, tucking his head into Shane’s neck. “Thank you for coming.”

“Of course I came.” Shane squeezed him tighter, really throwing every ounce of hard-earned muscle into the embrace, but after a few minutes when Ilya did not seem inclined to let go, had to wincingly request that he needed to give in to two pressing biological needs. The first was to rapidly remove his coat because he was overheating and the second was to take a piss. When he came back, Ilya was sitting at the end of the bed, morosely staring at his cabin bag.

“What do you want to do?” Shane asked, dropping down next to him. He put his arm about his waist and kissed his shoulder.

Ilya shrugged and rubbed at his nose. “I don’t know.”

This very much set the tone for the next hour. Shane asked things; Ilya responded with short, often monosyllabic answers. *Do you want to watch TV?* Don’t mind. *Have you hung up your*

suit? Yes. When would he meet the GM? Tomorrow morning. Has he seen his schedule? Yes. Has he spoken to Marly? A bit. Did he eat on the plane? No. Has he eaten anything all day? No. Was he hungry? Shrug.

“Okay, well I’m going to order some things.”

He ordered a couple of salads, a burger with all the trimmings and a club sandwich on whole wheat and was pleased when Ilya inhaled the burger and fries and picked at one of the salads. The food seemed to loosen him up a bit – and he got to hear about the negotiations for his trade. He’d put in the request to trade in December and had been on the receiving end of Farah’s calm updates for weeks until a flurry of activity over the last few days ended with Farah’s call to him first thing this morning, telling him not to go to practice.

“I can’t believe you kept this from me. I know you had to,” Shane hurried to explain, concerned this came off as accusatory, “I just mean it’s impressive.” He wondered if he would have been able to do it. He felt vaguely stressed just thinking about it.

“Was hard.” Ilya sipped his Coke. “I didn’t like it.”

The corner of Shane’s mouth pressed inwards. “Yeah. Definitely.” He wondered if the secrecy had contributed to the episode Ilya had in January. Fuck.

“Nearly told you a couple of times. When Ottawa was looking receptive. Though for a minute I was considering Buffalo. Would get Green Card sooner.” Ilya made a *comme ci comme ça* gesture. “Now I have to start all over again.”

Shane nodded, withholding the automatic grimace. Buffalo was better than Ottawa, hockey-wise, just about, but there weren’t even direct flights from Montreal to Buffalo. “Did you have to make them assurances? That you would stay longer than your contract?”

“Yes. I told them my partner is in Ottawa.” Ilya looked at Shane through lowered eyelashes. “Confidentially. Farah said... she said it would reassure them. That I was planning on settling down. That they wouldn’t just have me for two years and then I sign somewhere else.”

“That’s good. That’s—” Shane’s mouth twitched, mostly because he was trying to hold back the biggest, sappiest smile. *Settling down*. God. He wanted to *settle down* with Ilya so badly. And they were *inching* closer to it. “That’s nice.”

“Helped that there hasn’t been much news about me recently.” Ilya’s mouth turned up into a smirk. “Look like I’ve started from a clean sheet.”

Afterwards, giving Shane a very combative look, Ilya stepped out onto the balcony to smoke. Which he was *not* allowed to do as there were signs everywhere about it being a smoke free property. Shane decided to be magnanimous and not say anything as this was an exceptional circumstance.

Sighing, Shane tidied up their plates and shoved the tray outside of the room. He hated the way that food smells lingered in hotels.

He got comfy on the bed and replied to the messages from his mom to reassure her that he was with Ilya, that he was okay as could be, and then went on Twitter to see what people were saying. There were some really crazy theories already and he read them with increasing incredulity.

“What are they saying about me?” Ilya asked when he came back inside. He went straight to the bathroom to brush his teeth.

Shane scrolled around to find some of the actually entertaining ones. “Someone called *Rozyswifey81* thinks that you got a Canadian girl pregnant and have shotgun married her. They’ve apparently tracked this date back to a game you played here eight months ago. She’s due any day.” Guess this sort of thing only helped the story he had told the Cens management.

Ilya snorted around the whirl of his electric toothbrush.

“This guy thinks *Rozyswifey81* is on to something and is reposting pictures of you and Svetlana.” Shane frowned. He’d obviously seen one or two photos from when Hayden had decided to stamp on his heart, but it hadn’t been an in-depth study as at the time said heart couldn’t take it.

He clicked on the photo that *Artfulpuck* had shared. Fuck. Ilya looked *so* drunk. His eyes were hazy. His hair was all over the place. It was even more obvious here that Svetlana was basically holding him upright. She had great upper body strength, which the definition of her arms in her sleeveless dress also demonstrated. He wondered if she did Pilates.

Ilya returned and leaned over Shane, tilting his head to the side in a recognizable way and opening his mouth. “Smell. Okay?”

Withholding a put-upon sigh, Shane sniffed. Ilya had obviously washed his face as well. The smell of cigarette smoke was really only on his clothes. “I think you should take that T-shirt off.”

Grinning provocatively, Ilya stripped. Not only the t-shirt but the sweats as well. The phone in Shane’s hand grew lax as he was struck with the mind-melting appreciation that was experiencing Ilya Rozanov in the nude. In the old days, of course, they’d have been all over each other two feet into the hotel room. Shane would have probably dropped to the floor immediately.

He swallowed the spit that had pooled in his mouth and pulled off his own T-shirt, kicked off his sweats. “Fuck. Fucking come here.”

Ilya climbed on top of Shane and bent down to kiss him ferociously, pushing him into the soft pillows. “Wait,” he said, pulling back with alarm. “Did you bring—”

Shane tried to follow his mouth before the words, and their meaning, caught up. “Huh? Yeah.” These days he packed lube and condoms before anything else. “You mean you didn’t?”

Ilya shook his head. “I didn’t know...”

Shane laughed and affectionately pinged a curl. “That we would ever have sex again?”

“No.” Ilya pulled a face, eyes slanting away. “I wasn’t thinking I would see you soon. In the new schedule, we don’t play until the 14th.”

That was a month away. “Wow.” Shane had been prepared to laugh this off as a packing accident. But this required a conversation. “So, you thought, what, you’d make all the effort to move teams to be closer, and we’d still only see each other around games?”

Ilya very obviously flushed. “Yes. No. Not exactly.”

It was *exactly* what he had thought. Shane could read it, clear as anything, on his face. Very slowly, Shane closed his eyes. “We really don’t talk about the right things.”

The mood somewhat killed, Ilya rolled off him, sighing. His arms flung above his head. “We couldn’t really talk about this.”

“No, but maybe we could have talked about hypotheticals.” Shane climbed backoff the bed and went to get his iPad from his bag, as well as the lube and condoms, which he threw at Ilya with raised eyebrows. “I think we should look at our schedules first. Cross reference our games and see when we can spend time together. And Mom said— my mom said you’re more than welcome to stay with my parents, while you’re looking for a place. They’d like to get to know you better.”

Ilya opened and closed his mouth a couple of times and then looked away, out toward the balcony, blinking fast. *He better not be thinking about another cigarette*, was Shane’s first thought. Then of course he realized what it really was and his heart squeezed.

He powered up his tablet and dropped back down next to Ilya. “Hey, come here,” he said, pulling Ilya against his side in an awkwardly arranged cuddle. Ilya leaned into him, rubbing under his eyes and trying to keep his head turned away.

“Ah. They mentioned an apartment, maybe.” Ilya swallowed thickly. “But maybe I will think about it? If your parents really don’t mind.”

“It was their idea. They would love it,” Shane said with absolute confidence. “You can have my room.”

“Sexy,” Ilya murmured, half-heartedly.

“We’re going to get better at this,” Shane announced, kissing his temple.

Ilya shifted a bit so they were more comfortably situated. “Can not get worse.”

That was true. Shane opened his calendar. He stroked his thumb back and forth across Ilya’s shoulder, struck by a funny thought. “Don’t you think it’s mature of us to have this conversation before sex?”

Ilya grunted, opening up the Centaur's schedule on his phone. "Yes. We are old married couple, Hollander, but let's do this quickly so we can fuck."

*

For the first time since the photo had broken containment, Marlene scheduled Shane and Petrov a Skype call, which was a safer bet than meeting in the office. They hadn't really talked much in between, the occasional polite message about the team's progress. Petrov had pushed their last 1-2-1 due to a work conflict and hadn't rescheduled. Shane hadn't made a fuss about this; he kind of felt they needed the distance.

Though the story about them had died down somewhat, helped by the waitress who had served them coming forward on her own social media to confirm that Shane had been at dinner with both Alex *and* Petrov, it still felt as if eyes were always on them. Periodically a photo of Shane would appear on social media doing something really uninteresting like getting gas or grabbing a smoothie and someone would concoct a story about his proximity to where Petrov apparently lived. *MORNING AFTER! Captain Hollander Seen Sneaking Out for Breakfast Following Overnight Stay With Metro's CEO!*

Ilya, at least, had begun to find it funny, sending screengrabs of his favorites to the family chat. This chat had rapidly become Shane's favorite form of contact – initially Ilya had been very formal, replying to any messages with polite, grammatically correct responses usually accompanied by a smiley face. Since he had moved in with Shane's parents this had devolved into colloquialisms, requests for favorite meals, and regular shit-stirring where Shane was the (willing) victim. His dad totally enabled him, sending a stream of laughing faces to anything Ilya sent, whereas as Yuna and Shane would respond with matching angry emojis.

In many senses, his response to the tabloid misinformation was an improvement on Ilya's mute fury. Shane liked to think it was a sign that Ilya was more comfortable with their relationship, but who knew, maybe Ilya was getting into it with his therapist every week. Ilya had weekly sessions and so far his only comment on them was that they were 'very tiring, Hollander, like being wrung out, the playoffs for the brain, maybe' and they mostly talked about Ilya's childhood. His therapist, it turned out, was based in Ottawa which had obviously been an intentional choice on Ilya's behalf.

Petrov began their 1-2-1 grimly with a statement, "I've decided I'm going back to France."

Shane's first thought, unbidden, was that Ilya would probably crow with happiness when he heard this. His second was genuine regret. "Fuck. I'm sorry."

"Yes, for at least six months. I'll work out of Europe." Petrov shrugged and sat back. It looked like he was in a hotel room somewhere. Shane could easily recognize that style of layered dark hotel curtains which framed Petrov and his tight white T-shirt very nicely. "Should be long enough for the last of the whispers to die down. And I've a... friend, there, who will hopefully be a distraction."

Shane recalled the dinner date photos. "Your ex?"

Petrov did a 'yes-no' gesture with his head. His eyes were contemplative. "Kind of."

“Kind of not your ex?”

“Sometimes. It’s complicated. First love and all. Lot of,” he drew in a deep breath, eyes going distant, “baggage.”

Shane felt the corner of his mouth lift. “I know how that is.”

Petrov’s eyes crinkled. “Yes. I guess you do.”

“Are you... okay?” he asked, figuring that this was allowed.

“No. I’m pissed.” Petrov folded his arms, a sulky expression on his face. “This is precisely the kind of nonsense I wanted to avoid.”

His shoulders hunched automatically. “I’m sorry, I really am.”

“*You* have nothing to be sorry for. You have behaved with nothing but propriety,” Petrov said formally.

Shane cringed. “Doesn’t feel like that.”

The dark eyebrows winged up. “Because you’re an anxious person who takes too much on those responsibly broad shoulders of yours. Let me take this one. I maybe...” He scrunched up his face, “...could have tried harder.”

That was skirting very close to the topic Shane liked to ignore. He looked down at the keyboard of his laptop. In his mind’s eye, he saw the photograph – the expression on Petrov’s face. Was it weird to want to know? For definite? He was in a relationship. Petrov was his *boss*. What did it matter?

He had promised Ilya he would be more careful. So, he would be.

Shane cleared his throat, intending to raise the topic of team player reps for next year. He wanted to put Peetie forward – it had been J.J. for, like, ever – but instead Petrov decided to throw a grenade into the conversation.

“Shane, I think perhaps it is worth addressing the elephant in the room now.”

“We do not have to do that,” he said hurriedly.

“I think we do. I think there comes a point where dancing around it makes it worse. And there are about a thousand photographs of us on the internet that are not helping.”

“Fuck,” said Shane, who had apparently made a real hobby of dancing around unspoken things. He really was a terrible dancer.

“It’s not that big a deal, Shane.” Petrov appeared to consider this statement for a moment. “Though I say that knowing full well that there have been several points over the last couple of years where I have almost walked *myself* into HR.”

Shane didn't know what his face was doing. But it was doing a lot and none of it was good. "Oh my God. I had—I had no idea."

Petrov laughed. He actually *laughed*, tilting his head back, showing the strong cords of his throat. "I thought you knew. I really did. When you came out to me—I thought, *fuck*, you were making a move. I nearly had a panic attack in the bathroom."

"Oh my God," Shane mouthed. "That wasn't—I wasn't doing that."

"No, I *know* that now. I know. Believe me." He shook his head, as if amused at his own fallacy. "Maybe it was a little wishful thinking on my part. It was why I put some space between us. It was fucking badly timed, in retrospect." He winced. "Sorry about that. I was worried about the perception of it all. And also my ability to stick to my morals."

Shane groaned and pressed his hands to his hot face. This was all... a bit much. "Should we be talking about this?"

"Probably not," Petrov agreed. "But it really felt as if the cat was half out of the bag and I wanted to apologize for making you uncomfortable, if I have ever done that. Acknowledging that I'm making you uncomfortable now."

"Mmph," said Shane, into his hands. "You haven't made me uncomfortable."

"Good. I'm glad. That's something, at least."

He dropped his hands down. Bravely. "Did I— did I *do* anything? Ever?" he asked, really ripping off the worry band-aid. "To suggest that I would—" Shane had already been humiliatingly red. Now he was possibly volcanic. He was going to die here.

"Do you really want to know?"

"I guess?"

Petrov held up his thumb and forefinger. "You were a little flirty at the Cup celebration."

Shane groaned. He knew it. *He knew it.*

Petrov's mouth twitched. "Fortunately for both of us, Alex was there. I have been subsequently subjected to an almost daily lecture. But you were *so* cute. You – God, I had drunk so much of that terrible champagne, that was a big mistake – you kept touching my leg and telling me I should cut my hair."

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"I don't remember any of this."

Petrov waved this off. "Oh, you were drunk and... you were just being... you. Young and happy. There's nothing wrong with that. Don't blow this out of proportion, truly. This is incredibly mild in the grand scheme of the corporate world. If we were a heterosexual couple, no one would think anything of it. And nothing happened."

Shane kind of wanted to scream. That didn't sound like he had behaved with propriety. It sounded like he *was* a tease. A slutty, slutty tease. God. Did he have to tell Ilya about this? Was that necessary? They hadn't even been together at the time. Maybe he should run this past Jackie.

"I sound like— I sound like I was kind of leading you on."

Petrov crinkled. "Shane, I am significantly older than you. And, dare I say it, significantly more experienced. You could only lead me on if I wanted to be led. And whilst that was at times very tempting, hopefully you won't take this the wrong way, the work we are doing here is more important."

Shane exhaled. Heavily. "I don't take it the wrong way."

"Good," Petrov said and it was very kind-sounding. "Plus. You have a boyfriend who is very devoted to you."

Shane smiled reflexively. "Is he? I mean. Yeah. He is. We are."

"Which he made that *very* clear to me, by the way." Petrov's eyes crinkled briefly. "Also, he maybe suggested his family is *very* well connected and should I put a finger on you there would be repercussions."

"He what?" Shane asked, not sure he was following.

Petrov's eyebrows swooped up, as if he was letting Shane in on a juicy secret. "Oh yes, been a while since I was actively threatened by a jealous lover. Really took me back."

"He *what*?" Shane repeated, *sure* Petrov wasn't suggesting what he thought he was suggesting.

Petrov was gleeful. Full eye crinkle now. "I've never been so flattered, Shane, really." He touched long fingers to his – very nice – chest. "Took ten years off me. *Ilya Rozanov* of all people. Almost my proudest moment."

"Fuck," Shane muttered, not sure what to do about this information. It was *kind* of an unfortunate turn on, which was probably not something he should mention to anyone. Ever. Certainly not Ilya, who really shouldn't be going around and threatening people with— what did *connected* mean? Was this a mafia thing? An FSB thing? *Was* he connected? "When— was this... at dinner?"

"Yes, while you were out of the room." Petrov hummed, almost happily, *clearly* this was something he had been sitting on and was thrilled to get it out there. "He got straight to it. I think he had planned it."

That fucking asshole.

"You can stop being so amused. This isn't funny." Shane's eyes bulged with burning outrage, which was a better, more appropriate response than being turned-on. "He told me nothing happened. He lied! He *threatened* my boss."

“Well, I’m still alive so…”

“Not funny!”

“It’s a little bit funny. For me at least. And it was really quite masterful. Polite. Honestly, a deft piece of work. And maybe he was right to say it.” He grimaced. “He clearly clocked me straight away which is… a blow to my ego.”

Shane groaned. This was all too much.

Petrov exhaled heavily. “I’m really glad we’ve had this discussion. It needed to be done. Thank you for allowing me that. Believe me when I say that I cherish our relationship as it is. Getting to know you, becoming, I hope, a lifelong friend and seeing how wholeheartedly you are embracing who you are… it is an honor and a pleasure. Please take this in the manner which I intend, but I’m so proud of you.”

Shane made a series of sounds that were nothing more than confused buffering noises as his brain ran into several walls.

His water bottle was resting by his elbow. He took a quick drink and wiped his hand across the back of his lips. “Okay. Um. Thanks. You too.”

The crinkle was back. “Promise me I’ll get an invite to your wedding.”

“For God’s sake,” Shane muttered. “At this rate, there won’t be one.”

Because Shane will have killed Ilya. With his bare hands.

Petrov snorted. “I’ve got him into trouble.” And Shane was under no illusions here – Petrov liked that. “Don’t be too hard on him. I get the feeling you – we – have put him through the wringer.”

“Yeah, well,” Shane grumbled, really not prepared to let this slide, “I didn’t go around threatening the three-million girls he slept with while we were hooking up, did I?”

Petrov brightened with obvious delight. He then glanced regretfully at the bottom of his screen. “If I didn’t have another call in five minutes, I would love to unpack that. Another time, perhaps.” He morphed back into seriousness. “What we’ve started with the Metros is important to me, Shane. *You* are important to me. I want to be involved, even at a distance. Best believe, I *will* be returning; Montreal is my home now. And in the meantime, Alex is going to stay behind, working on the Code— did they tell you about that? We’re getting somewhere with Vancouver, believe it or not, thanks to your help with the Ottawa announcement. It’s really picking up momentum.”

Shane nodded and, relieved, let Petrov turn the conversation safely back to work.

*

Shane waited, calmly, until Ilya was available for a call when he was neither tired from a disappointing game nor had one on the same day. He knew they were going to have a fight.

He had mapped the scenarios in his head. He was angry and Ilya was going to get defensive.

The difference was that they were in a committed, loving relationship now and every fight was a building block to a more solid foundation. Which was more or less a quote facilities had added to the Retro room that Shane had stared at, dead eyed, the last time he'd had to listen to Peetie talk about the disease-riddled cat he had decided to foster after their last team outing to that animal shelter.

"Ilya," Shane said, as calmly as he could once he had downloaded his (edited) news from Petrov, watching Ilya's face shift from elation to what was obviously pure guilt. "You cannot, you *cannot* go around threatening people."

His boyfriend winced. Violently. "Yes. I know this."

"You elected not to tell me."

"Yes, it was—it was embarrassing. It was not good behavior. I didn't want you to know."

"Obviously. You didn't want me to know you had threatened my boss."

"It wasn't a *threat*," he said, unconvincingly.

"So, you didn't say your family is very well connected."

"No. I maybe," Ilya shrugged, super casual, very *no big deal*, then ruined this by wincing again, "implied it."

"You *implying* a threat isn't any better." Shane clung to his calmness. "He is my boss. You can't *threaten* him just because he has... had a crush on me, a crush he has *no intention* of acting upon—"

"Oh ho," Ilya's face lit up with self-righteousness, "so you have really talked about this now?"

Fuck. "Only in the context of you threatening to have him *murdered*."

Ilya rolled his eyes. "I didn't threaten murder, if he said that he is liar, a lying liar."

"Oh, fine, so just a little light bashing then?"

Ilya threw up a hand and with it made an expressive, irritated noise, pacing away from where he had propped Shane up in his parent's kitchen. They were thankfully not at home to witness this drama. "It was not like this! But fine! Yes! You're right. It was bad. I know it. But—" He returned and now he was plaintive. Guilty. "Fuck. I'm sorry. Shane. I was not thinking straight. You know I have not been... so good about him. The photos of you everywhere. Little cozy sushi dinners and galas and your sexy tight suits and his *fuck me* eyes and your *fucking Calvin Klein billboards*, and that photo of him about to kiss you, I know, I know, it was after, but it was all I was imagining, last summer. Christ, Shane, is impossible, you were driving me insane and he was *always there*—" Ilya collapsed on the counter, bowing his head so all Shane could see were his curls.

“Okay, okay, okay.” Shane pulled at his hair, trying to force the calm back through pain. “I know. I know it was difficult. It wasn’t so fucking easy for me either—”

“I’m *sorry*. I’m really, really sorry. I shouldn’t have done it and I should have,” he exhaled, “I should have told you. After. That was wrong. You are right to be mad.”

“You should have told me. It makes me wonder what else you’re not telling me.”

“Nothing! Nothing, I promise.”

“Can you look at me and say that, please?”

Ilya sat bolt upright. Eagerly. “I promise. I am not hiding any more secrets from you.”

Shane pressed his mouth together, trying to sort through his thoughts. “I just— this is a little crazy. Really crazy. We’re lucky Petrov is—” An adult? Had a sense of perspective? What? “We’re just lucky, is all. Can you tell me next time if you are feeling that kind of way? Like. He’s my boss. This is my career, Ilya.”

Ilya whined. The head went down again. “Fuck. I know. I know. I am an asshole.”

“Petrov said it sounded as if you planned to say it.”

For a moment, Ilya was silent. Then, very, very begrudgingly, face still pressed to the table, “I maybe did.”

Shane sighed.

“Worse,” Ilya continued, looking up guiltily, “I maybe had been planning it for many months?”

“Months.”

“Yes. It was... kind of a soothing daydream for me,” Ilya explained, wincing almost with his whole body. He stood again, but kind of hunched over. “Which is... a little crazy, yes.”

Shane breathed out. Maybe this could be counted this as a successful argument. *Foundational*, so to speak. “Yes. A little crazy.”

“In any case,” Ilya said, thumbing his nose carelessly as he turned to practical matters, “I don’t think my brother would help me. He is very angry about the finances, he cannot get more money from me whenever he wants. He has had to go back to work.”

“Ilya. Jesus.” Okay, maybe he took back the foundational thought. “That is... very much not the point.”

“Sorry, sorry.” Ilya pulled a face. “I promise I will never do something like this again. It is... out of my system.” He sighed and tilted his head back. “Ugh. It was very bad. I know this, my Shane. I regretted doing it, almost as soon as I said it. He was pissed. He was right to be pissed. He told me—”

Once again, Ilya paused and Shane's dread began to rise. "He told you what?"

"He put me in my place," Ilya said slowly and Shane could tell he was very embarrassed indeed. "Said I was disrespecting you."

Woah.

"He was not wrong," Ilya said quietly and that was probably why he was embarrassed. To be put in his place by his arch nemesis - crushing. "Though I did not see this at the time."

"No," said Shane, actually thinking that very much summed up his feelings on the matter. "You thought I was too naive to look out for myself."

"I'm sorry," Ilya said again, this time more formally. He stood up straight, his blue eyes burning with earnestness. "I know that is not the case. I let my own insecurities—" He waved a hand in front of his face, "—cloud my judgement. I will do better by you. And I will apologize to him."

"Oh, God, no," Shane said, alarmed at even the idea. God forbid Petrov thought that Shane sent his boyfriend to apologize. This wasn't fucking kindergarten.

And he never wanted to talk about this again. It was done. Over. Petrov was going to Europe for six months. Plenty of time for *everyone* to calm the fuck down. Everyone could move on.

Shane had discussed the leg-touching thing with Jackie in a furtive call sitting in the parking lot and they had agreed it would be better if that piece of information was purposefully lost. Ilya, after all, didn't know the details of the guys he'd fucked that summer, either. Nor did Shane want to know any details of what he had got up to. This, Jackie assured Shane, was perfectly reasonable. *You were on a break*, she had said heavily and then had to explain this apparently very culturally obvious reference to him. He hadn't had much time for TV in his life, okay?

But Ilya, goddamn him, was insistent. Genuinely repentant, shaking his head, curls bouncing about. "No, no, is the right thing to do. Give me his number."

"Ah...."

Ilya's eyebrows rose, somewhat threateningly. "You don't trust me."

"Not really!"

Ilya's face fell, collapsed in devastation. "Really?"

Ugh. That face wasn't fair. "No, look, okay, it's not totally that." It was a little that. "You've been better, about Petrov, recently." Shane sighed. "It's just he's, or at least *Marlene*, is pretty funny about giving out his personal details."

"Who the fuck is Marlene? His mother?"

“Um. No. His,” *evil*, “personal assistant. Um. Can I just check if he is happy for me to give you his number first? You *did* threaten him after all, asshole.”

For a moment Ilya just stared at him and, honestly, Shane couldn’t tell if he’d just accidentally pressed another button. Then the eyebrows rose again. Impatiently. “Any time, Shane.”

“Oh, shit, now? Right.”

He messaged Petrov quickly, knowing this was insane, feeling as if he had walked himself into a trap. *Can I give Ilya your number? You can say no.*

He was a busy guy. Shane was really hoping that he was in a timezone that— oh, no, he was writing back straight away. Great, great, great.

Petrov: *Is this to help the Bratva track me down? Does he want my address too?*

Petrov: *Should I give Rene the heads up?*

Shane scowled. *Still not funny!*

Petrov: *There will come a time in our lives when you will look back on this and it WILL be funny, Shane.*

He fucking wouldn’t. What was wrong with people?

Petrov: *Yes, you can give him my number. I’m looking forward to whatever comes my way.*

“He says, yes, in the most annoying way possible. Promise me you won’t be a dick.”

“I promise, Shane. I know I need to—” Ilya whistled air through his teeth as he sought for the English. “Make reparations? That’s right?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Shane said quietly.

Shane read the number out to Ilya and just decided to... let go of the situation. Just let whatever happened between Ilya and Petrov be their business. He wasn’t going to interfere. He would trust that Ilya had Shane’s best interests at his heart *now*. And that Petrov could see through Ilya’s jealousy like a pane of glass.

Ilya looked smug. He picked up his phone and started tapping away, giving Shane a somewhat pleasing close-up view of his mouth.

“So... you think maybe he would be up for threesome, then?” suggested Ilya, utterly seriously but obviously not. “Shane sandwich?”

Shane gasped at this unbelievable turn of events. Now he was joking about it? *What the hell?* Honestly, if it turned out giving Ilya Petrov’s number was the way to get him to be okay with their relationship, he was going to kick himself.

“Oh, *fuck you*,” Shane said, hanging up before he could do something stupid, like, think about that scenario with any level of explicit detail at all.

*

Petrov: *Your boyfriend is a menace.*

Shane: *Don't tell me*

Shane: *I really don't want to know.*

*

Jane: *You're not sending him dick pics are you?*

Lily: Yes. Yours 🍆💦

Jane: *you better be fucking joking*

Jane: *wait you said you deleted those*

*

Shane: *I am not complicit in anything he says to you*

Petrov: *Understood.*

Shane: *or any photos he sends*

Petrov: *Intriguing.*

*

Lily: *you know he has a villa in Ibiza???*

Jane: *are you still talking to Petrov?*

Jane: *why are you talking about villas*

Jane: *please tell me this isn't threesome related*

Jane: *Ilya???*

*

Jane: *tell me you deleted the pictures*

Lily: *I have, it was joke, I promise, milyy*

Lily: *you are very good to me, Shane*

Jane: *huh?*

Lily: *I am lucky, that's all*

Jane: *call?*

Lily: *yes*

Chapter End Notes

We will not speak of the chapter count. I am trying to write an epilogue that will be posted with the last chapter. Shhh. You've seen nothing. I've had some wine (I'm still on holiday).

Also I am aware that Ilya is a leetle red-flag in this but it was in the PAST. He has GROWN AS A PERSON. WE ALL MAKE MISTAKES WHEN WE'RE DATING SHANE HOLLANDER OKAY? And also Petrov is enjoying fucking with him since he won't get to fuck Shane unless he agrees to the threesome. Shhhhhh.

Last also - someone (very pleasant) on Threads said today that they predicted I would post this chapter to schedule within 12 hours and I cannot tell you the sudden stress I put myself under to finish this hahahahaha. FFS I hate myself.

Don't come for me on the details of Ilya's trade. Google can only give a person so much education on NHL contracts.

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

“Scott Hunter messaged me today. Wants to meet up when we play New York.”

“Hmmm?” said Ilya, running his fingers through Shane’s hair sleepily. “Your mom thinks this year is Hunter’s year.”

“Yes, she won’t stop fucking saying that to me, either.”

Chapter Notes

Welcome to THE END everybody! and I am STILL on vacation, posting this from the terrace of the villa.

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

“I think I need to move house.”

“Sell your sexy apartment?” Ilya asked, somewhere in the vicinity of Shane’s left hip.

“Yeah. I think—I think we need more privacy. Like maybe something a bit set back. Or with a garage so you can drive straight in.”

“You want to talk about real estate.” Ilya squeezed Shane’s thigh. “This makes you horny.”

Shane smiled. “I mean. It does a little.”

Ilya chuckled. “I know.” He rolled onto his back and shuffled up the bed. He coaxed Shane onto his chest. “Then I will buy a house, too. You will help me.”

They had squeezed in a night and day to celebrate Ilya’s move properly, now that Ilya was a couple of weeks – and a few games – in his new team.

Things were... fine. The team wasn’t great – Ilya’s main topic of conversation was usually a rant about his right wing, a guy Shane had literally deleted from his memory because he was so average – but Shane had faith that with a couple of years of work, and definitely a new coach, things would start to look up. Already the media were talking about Ottawa’s rebuild positively.

Hopefully Ilya had that faith, too.

Today was also, and this was mere happenstance, Valentine's Day. They had decided to keep things low-key on that front. Shane admitted to Ilya that he was still a little raw from *last* year and wasn't exactly ready to celebrate this as a milestone. Then they had both cried a little about it, Ilya sniffing and apologizing and Shane repeatedly, and unconvincingly, saying it was fine.

Privately, Shane wondered if he would ever feel great about Valentine's ever again. He'd been half thinking that they should do the opposite and go all out next year. Try to create new memories to erase the ones of the past. He'd think about it.

Tomorrow, however, they would meet publicly at a restaurant in Ottawa, driving separately from the fancy hotel room they had booked for a little privacy from Shane's well-meaning but entirely too-close-for-comfort parents. Shane would be early and he would be polite and reserved and offer his hand to shake when Ilya arrived. Ilya would chirp and be borderline offensive. And then he would tweet about it later. *Ottawa's own Shane Hollander showing me around*, he was going to write as the caption, and he planned to take a selfie, with a deliberately bad photo of Shane. "You'll have your eyes closed, or something. Maybe a little drool... here," he'd said, pressing at the corner of Shane's mouth.

The thought of it kind of made Shane want to die. In a good way.

Shane wriggled his head, trying to find the good position on Ilya's chest, where his cheek was cushioned just right and his ear wasn't squashed. It took him a moment to get comfortable, Ilya lazily stroking fingers down his spine. He teased the tendrils of Ilya's chest hair between his fingers.

"Unless," Shane said, because he really *did* like real estate.

"Hmm?"

"Unless we buy somewhere in between."

"In between— Ottawa and Montreal?"

"Yes. Why not? We'll still keep apartments close to training." On game days, they would have to have somewhere to go home to nap, and if the game ran really late, that was just practical. "And maybe we do find somewhere with more privacy anyway. But if we find somewhere else, or *build* somewhere, off the 417 or something, we can see each other even easier."

Ilya's fingers trailed up Shane's spine to the back of his neck so they could nestle in his hair. "We could live together?"

"Yes," Shane said, still thinking this through, trying to decide if this was a crazy idea. Their schedules were complicated and rarely overlapped to any decent degree but when they did, they wouldn't have to drive to each other. Or not as far anyway. Why hadn't he thought of this before? "I think if we're careful, if we didn't, like, live in a small town, kept ourselves to ourselves, we *could* live together. Kinda."

Moments later, Shane found himself flat on his back, the air knocked out of him, being thoroughly kissed. “Can we have dogs?” Ilya asked, pulling back just enough to speak.

“Er. Dogs?” He maybe could have anticipated this. He pushed Ilya’s curls back from where they were half covering his eyes; he really needed a trim. “I mean— they’re kind of mess—”

Ilya silenced him by kissing him again, open-mouthed, wet kisses. “We get a housekeeper. A housekeeper who signs an NDA.” Shane already had a housekeeper who had signed an NDA. Hadn’t Ilya’s in Boston? Jesus. What a thought. “What about a pool?”

Shane was more comfortable with this idea. Swimming was extremely good for the joints and for rehabbing after injuries. “Sure, we’d probably have some land so—”

“Land!” Again, Ilya kissed him, teeth catching on his bottom lip. It was a little like being attacked by a puppy. “Can we look at houses? Tomorrow?”

Of course they couldn’t look at houses *tomorrow*. He would need to speak to his real estate guy. Put a brief together. Plot out areas to research, equidistant between Montreal and Ottawa. Maybe look at traffic patterns... privacy hedges... security cameras... Ilya was definitely going to have to get some non-descript car. Couldn’t be driving that orange monstrosity around – that would get too much attention. Actually, perhaps they should get identical cars with very similar license plates. That would be sneaky.

“I take it you’re on board with this idea,” Shane said drily.

Ilya took Shane’s hand and delivered it to the bulge in his underwear. “Real estate makes me horny, too,” he said, before lapping his way back into Shane’s mouth.

*

Much later, epiphanies done for the night, and limbs so relaxed Shane didn’t know what was his body and what was the mattress, he remembered something else he had wanted to talk about. “Scott Hunter messaged me today. Wants to meet up when we play New York.”

“Hmmm?” said Ilya, running his fingers through Shane’s hair sleepily. “Your mom thinks this year is Hunter’s year.”

“Yes, she won’t stop fucking saying that to me, either.” Which was *infuriating* because the Metros had made the playoffs and she should sure as hell be on his side. Ilya, of course, hadn’t even made the wild card spot – but that was to be expected. Ottawa had been nowhere before he’d joined and he couldn’t be expected to make that big of a difference in so short a space of time. Not that he hadn’t been keeping his points up.

Amused, Ilya hummed. “What does dinosaur want?”

Shane summoned a weak giggle. “Dunno. Food, attention, and the return of the Triassic period, maybe?”

There was a small, delicate pause. Then the bed began to shake as Ilya rumbled with laughter. “Shane. That was so good. I am so proud of you.”

Shane lifted his head. “Did you get it? The Triassic period was the *earliest* dinosaurs. So, he’s, like, really, *really* old.”

This time Ilya’s laugh was boisterously loud, nearly blistering Shane’s eardrum. Ilya pulled a pillow over his face to muffle the sound.

Pleased with himself, Shane lay back down. He sighed. “I don’t know what he wants. He said he want to talk about something private.”

Ilya yanked the pillow off his face, immediately paranoid. “He better not be asking you out.”

“I cannot believe this is the first conclusion you come to.”

“Can you not?” Ilya said drily, with an admirable degree of self-awareness.

“Okay. Maybe I can believe *you* would think this.” Should he be flattered? That Ilya thought every man was attracted to him? Shane thought every woman was attracted to Ilya, after all. How could they not be?

“Your team also think this.”

“I think they’re mostly shit-stirring.” Shane groaned. “Did I tell you we had to get a second whiteboard for the locker room?”

Ilya *loved* the whiteboard and requested new photos regularly. “You did not.”

“Ran out of space.” God. What was his life? “We also changed the rules so you can have more than one entry.” The pot had now cracked \$1000. Apparently, some of the equipment guys were in on it as well as the physio staff. The cat – his sexuality – was very much out of the bag.

Occasionally he experienced a wave of fluttery nerves about this. And then they went away.

Ilya snickered. “Am I still there?”

“Yes – though people still think it’s crazy.” Though, and Shane wouldn’t say this because he didn’t want to jinx it, there was a certain *vibe* to the room where it was getting less crazy. Particularly after Ilya’s shock move to Ottawa. Comeau had been *very* interested in all the theories about that. “The latest favorite is a guy in catering that I don’t think I’ve ever spoken to.”

“Hot?”

“Not my type,” Shane said succinctly. Not that he knew for definite if Tremblay was gay but if he was— well, he wasn’t exactly tall and athletic. He could probably only bench what Shane warmed up with. If he lifted weights at all. And from what he’d overheard he wasn’t working for the Metros because of, like, the love of hockey but actually because he wanted to pursue a career in catering. Baffling.

“Ah,” drawled Ilya knowingly. “Not a big, strong top.”

“Fuck off.” Shane decided to change the subject. “But can you really imagine? As *if* Scott Hunter is gay too.”

Ilya snickered and Shane joined in. Yeah, it was pretty implausible.

*

“I’m gay.”

Not that implausible, apparently.

“Holy shit,” Shane said which was really the only response when something *this* out of the realms of possibility happened to a person in a non-descript bar in New York, sitting opposite one of the best players in the MLH.

Scott Hunter. Gay. Holy shit.

Scott Hunter blinked nervously, awkwardly, at Shane from across the table. He was hunched in on himself as if he could possibly make his 6ft 4inches frame as small as possible.

“I mean, wow, thank you for telling me. I’m, ah, honored?” Why had he made this a question? Shit. He really had to give credit to everyone he’d come out to before. He was totally tanking this. “Really, Hunter, I mean, Scott,” *fuuuuuuuck*, “I know that was hard for you. I mean. I *know*. Because I am, too. Gay?” Double fuck. He closed his eyes. “Jesus Christ. Sorry. Didn’t mean to— you know. Steal your thunder there. Sorry.”

He took a long gulp of ginger ale just to shut himself up.

“Yeah. I, ah, had kind of heard.” Hunter unclenched by a couple of millimeters. “Is it true there’s a whiteboard in your locker room with a list of guys from the MLH you’ve slept with?”

“Oh my God, what?” Shane gasped. “*No*. Is that what people are saying?”

“Er. Yeah. Heard it from someone.”

“Well. They’re wrong. It’s not— ah. Like that. I mean there’s a whiteboard but it’s—about something else.”

Hunter’s face was a question mark.

“Let’s not make this about me,” Shane said quickly, summoning a smile. “Thanks for telling me, man.” There. That sounded almost normal. “Does your team know?”

Hunter shook his head. “No. But... yours does?”

“Yeah. I told them a few months ago.”

“How did it go?”

“It was okay. Weird. But we’d kind of been working on being more inclusive and shit and the biggest asshole in the team got traded so.” Shane shrugged. “It was mostly just awkward for me. Because I’m, ah, awkward. Which this conversation is certainly demonstrating.”

Hunter smiled briefly. He really was *very* good looking. Wow. If only teenage Shane had known; it might have changed the course of Shane’s life. Or his confused sexuality.

“Drapeau, right? The asshole in question.”

“Yeah. He was a real lynchpin in the toxicity in the team. Thankfully he moved on once he realized we were no longer a good fit.”

“Heard he tore his ACL.”

Shane grinned. “I know. Couldn’t happen to a nicer person.” Out for the rest of the season, too. He’d been so thrilled he’d nearly *liked* the announcement post on Twitter.

“Our own asshole just got put on Waivers.” Hunter took a sip of his beer.

“Yeah, Zullo, right? Heard about that. He was a hot mess. Oh. Is that why—”

Hunter nodded and ran a hand through his hair as he sat back in the booth. “I was thinking—I mean, he was a loud voice in the room, but I mostly had it under control. I was thinking, though, maybe I could... say something now.”

Shane nodded. This had been his thought process after all. “Are you close to anyone in the team? Vaughnie maybe?”

“Yes. Yes, I am. I think he would be good with it. And Huff and Bennett, maybe?”

Shane nodded. He didn’t know either of those players particularly well. “What’s your management like? Coaches?”

“Murdock was one of the first black players in the MLH. So I think he’d be decent. He’s actually been really interested with what you guys are doing.”

“Oh yeah? Well, he should reach out to Wiebe. We’ve actually—” Shane stopped himself. There was a time and a place for selling the Code and this was not the time or the place. “So, my advice is maybe to speak to Vaughn and your friends first. I told Hayden and J.J.,” he said, somewhat marveling that he was in the position to be giving Scott Hunter advice. “And then maybe your coach. It’s easier if you have people on your side at the beginning. Wiebe and I worked on how I would tell the team. It helped.”

“Shit. This is getting so real.” Hunter laughed nervously and took another sip of his beer, eyes scanning the quiet bar. “I’m not expecting to get beat up in the locker room or anything... it’s just a big line, right?”

“It is.”

“My agent is going to shit himself.”

“Ha! Is he old school?”

“Todd? Yeah. I mean, he’s decent, yeah but no one wants their star athlete to come out as queer, do they?”

Shane reflected, not for the first time, that he was lucky with his own management team. Farah and his mom had been nothing but supportive. “You pay him. If he’s a dick, I know a great agent,” he joked. Half-joked.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

Shane lifted his glass. “Well. Congratulations, man.”

Grimly, Scott tapped his bottle against Shane’s glass. “Thanks.”

They both drank in silence for a moment.

“So, what *is* on this whiteboard?”

Shane rolled his eyes. “Like, keep this to yourself, of course, but my team is trying to guess who my boyfriend is.”

Hunter’s face lit up. “Oh, so you’re seeing someone?”

Slowly, Shane nodded.

“Me, too,” said Scott shyly, lowering his eyes to his bottle. His smile became a little wistful.

“Hey, that’s great. Are they—” Once again, Shane found him stopping himself. He had been about to ask if they were *also* an MLH player, which would have been an insane question. There were other men outside of hockey circles. He sometimes forgot that.

But Scott seemed to – wrongly – preempt Shane’s question. “He’s out, yes. He’s— his name is Kip.”

What a stupid name, Shane thought, but didn’t say. “Cool,” he said for lack of something better to say. He supposed it was short for something. Kipper? Kipley? Were those even real names? They were equally stupid.

Oblivious to Shane’s wandering thoughts on the etymology of ‘Kip’, Hunter continued sorrowfully, now picking at his beer label, “And he’d— he’d really like it if we could be out. Together. It’s been hard on him. The secrecy.”

Shane bit his lip, briefly. “Yeah, it is hard.” He took a sip of his drink, his thoughts naturally turning to Ilya, Ilya who had sent Shane about a dozen different links to houses he’d found on Zillow only this morning.

“And you? Are you guys— I guess if your team doesn’t know?”

“Yeah, he’s not out. It’s complicated. More complicated. Um. But we’re working on that.”

This obviously intrigued Scott but like Shane he chose silence, which Shane appreciated. More people should chose silence, in his view.

“Hey,” said Shane, inspired by a sense of *bonhomie*, a real sense that maybe he and Scott Hunter could one day be actual friends, “can we take a selfie? I’m trying a new thing with social media.”

“Yeah, I noticed. And sure. Why not.” He shrugged. “We thrashed you, anyway, it’ll look like good sportsmanship.”

That sense of *bonhomie* faded real fast. “Hey – thrashed is a *strong* word.”

“Apt though, am I right?” Scott’s sudden smile was very toothy.

“Fuck you, man.”

Scott laughed and his eyes were still shining with that laughter when Shane arranged them into a suitably bro-like selfie. He was getting good at this.

“You’re on the whiteboard and this’ll really send the team into a frenzy,” Shane added, wickedly.

“They think it’s someone in the MLH?”

“It’s been pointed out to me – several times – that my social circles are very small.”

Scott laughed again, really getting into it. “Fuck, Hollander, no one told me you were funny.”

“MLH’s best kept secret.”

*

Sargant gave Shane a lingering, critical one-up, one-down look when he met him at the door. “This is not hideous,” he said of Shane’s outfit.

“Thanks,” exhaled a relieved Shane, who had maybe spent a little more time than absolutely necessary dressing himself for a visit to his tailor. He’d arranged an early morning appointment, squeezed in before their later flight home. With this and the catch-up with Scott Hunter the day before, he really felt he’d made the most of the trip to New York, which was satisfying.

Could he have done with a lie-in? Probably. But that was not the point.

“How have you been?” Sargant walked through to the back, Shane on his heels.

“Good, good. Oh, actually, really good.” This had been his first visit to Sargant since he and Ilya had got back together. He had a vague sense that he had not been totally himself the last time he’d had a fitting. “I, um. Got back together with the person I was seeing?” Shane rolled his eyes at himself. “The guy. The *guy* I was seeing.”

Not for one second did Sargant express any surprise at this. He just pulled the rail over to the little podium. Four suits were lined up in various states of readiness. Three were new game day suits for the playoffs. And the last one was the suit that he was having fitted for the awards he was anticipating attending as a contender for the Art Ross, maybe even the Hart. “I’m glad for you, Shane.”

Shane, who was really expecting *more* of a reaction, studied Sargant closely. “You’re not surprised I’m gay?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Mmm, couldn’t tell you for definite.” Sargant waved a long-fingered hand about vaguely. “But I usually have a good ear for this sort of thing. Maybe you have been careful with pronouns in the past.” He presented Shane with a pair of pants and a bland smile. “Go get changed, please.”

Huffing out a little laugh, Shane obediently retreated to the little changing room and stripped down to his underwear, before easing the *very tight* pants on. “Jesus,” he muttered, turning to look at his ass.

“Remember you’re about to lose some weight,” was Sargant’s mild comment from beyond the curtain.

“Yeah, but still.” He pushed back the velvet curtain and raised his eyebrows. “I feel like you and Hana are ganging up on me.”

Sargant smiled. “Just creating the right canvas to enhance your assets.”

“Oh my God.”

He blandly held out a shirt, clearly no time or patience for Shane’s delicate sensibilities. “Put this on please.”

Shane shrugged into the shirt and tucked it in automatically. It was one of the ones Sargant used just for giving ‘context’, as he put it, to the whole outfit. He was given the suit jacket next. “Wow,” he said, as he looked in the mirror at the completed picture. “It’s really... purple.”

The suit was a dusky purple, the color of a ripe plum, and probably the boldest color Hana had convinced him to try. Some guys might not feel this color was a very masculine color. Shane really didn’t know if he was one of those guys.

“On a scale of one to ten how does this make you feel? One being considering witness protection. Ten being... hmm, main character energy?” he suggested with a little wry twist to his mouth.

Shane didn’t know what main character energy meant – which he was guessing Sargant knew – but he got the gist. And he was nowhere near that gist. The gist was on the horizon,

whereas witness protection was two doors down. “Umm.”

Sargent hummed sympathetically. “Let’s try it with a black shirt instead. Might tone it down for you.”

He let out a breath. “Yeah, maybe that’ll help.”

*

Shane still wasn’t sure about the purple suit. He’d taken a picture of it in the mirror and sent it to Ilya who had replied with a series of panting emojis, which wasn’t very helpful so he’d followed up asking if it made him look gay. Ilya hadn’t replied to that yet but then he was gearing up for a game that afternoon so was probably not in the mindset to deal with Shane’s crisis.

Shane made it back to the hotel with a few minutes to spare, grabbed his stuff from his room and joined the rest of the team as they milled about in front of the coach.

He showed the photo to J.J. “What do you think?” he asked.

“It’s really purple,” was J.J.’s extremely helpful view.

“Like *purple* purple or just, like, purple?”

J.J. hummed and hawed a bit. “I think just like purple? What do you think?” He handed Shane’s phone to Hayden and Shane had to remind himself that he’d turned off message previews on his phone and even if Ilya sent him something pornographic no one would see it.

“Dude, that is *purple*,” Hayden said decisively, frowning.

“Like *purple* purple or—”

“I have girls. That’s *purple*.”

“What the fuck are you fuckers talking about?” Comeau asked as he shoved his way between them in the line for the coach, draping his arms about Shane and J.J.’s shoulders.

To Shane’s vague disquiet, his phone was handed to Comeau who squinted at the photo – then winced because the action probably hurt his taped-up nose – and then nodded. “Nice, Hollander. Finally getting some taste.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” He handed the phone back and nodded again as if Shane had really impressed him.

Shane didn’t know what to think about this.

“You don’t think—” He couldn’t believe this was his life. He clambered up the short steps into the coach and threw himself into the seats behind Wiebe. Hayden dropped down next to him. “You don’t think it makes me look gay?”

“You are gay,” Comeau said bluntly. Correctly. “But no, no more than usual. Hey, we should co-ordinate. Remember my pink suit?”

No more than usual? What the hell did that mean?

“Everyone remembers your pink suit,” Mitty commented, shoving Comeau further into the coach. “They could see your pink suit from *space*.”

Shane had actually forgotten the pink suit – maybe deleted it from his memory – and was wondering now if Comeau’s approbation was really worth much.

J.J. leaned over from the seats behind him and Hayden. “I’ve got a purple suit, you know. Maybe we *should* co-ordinate.”

“Jesus Christ,” Hayden muttered. Hayden exclusively wore black or navy blue. Maybe Hayden’s opinion didn’t matter either.

Fuck, he really needed Ilya to message him back. None of these assholes were any help whatsoever.

*

Shane was at home and in bed by the time Ilya did message him back, but it wasn’t about the suit. It was with a series of letters and numbers that initially didn’t make any sense. Was this code?

Lily: *PHX 9:10 PM Thu → LHR 3:05 PM Fri → IST → VKO*

Oh, they were flight details. He didn’t recognize the acronyms though. Phoenix to London Heathrow? What was IST? VKO?

Jane: *What is this?*

Jane: *did your flight get rerouted because if so this is insane.*

Lily: *My flight details to Moscow*

Lily: *My father died.*

Shane hit call, immediately, his heart practically jumping from his body. The call was immediately declined so he did it again. And *again* the call was declined. “What the fuck, Ilya?” he complained to his empty apartment.

Lily: *Stop*

Lily: *In car to airport*

Lily: *if I speak to you I will embarrass myself*

Shane jumped out of bed, vibrating with pent up energy.

Jane: *What can I do?*

Lily: *nothing*

Lily: *he is dead, Shane*

Fuck. He'd looked up, once, what it would take to travel to Russia. He'd need a visa and that could only be arranged through the Russian embassy and there was no way that process would be quick. Besides, what would he fucking do there? Say to people? *Yeah, I'm his friend from hockey. Mmm, best friend, totally platonic. Oh, you've heard of me have you? Famous rivals? No. That's a translation error.*

And even if he did go, he wouldn't be able to touch Ilya. They couldn't share a bed. It would be fucking dangerous.

He made a noise, out loud, a pathetic little noise. Fuck. Fuck. This— this had always been on the cards. He hadn't thought beyond what it would mean for them, Ilya's ties to Russia dwindling. He hadn't thought about the practicalities. That Ilya would have to go back. Alone.

Jane: *Can Sveta go with you?*

Maybe he could book her travel for her or something. Put her in First Class on the first available flight.

Lily: *she is already there for work*

Jane: *thank God!*

Jane: *and the funeral and stuff?*

Lily: *all arranged. Put plan in place with estate planner*

Jane: *of course you did*

Jane: *did you use Excel?*

Lily: *you made me laugh*

Lily: *thank you* ❤️

Jane: *call me whenever you can*

Jane: *any time ok? I love you so much*

Lily: *ok*

Lily: *я тебя люблю*

Ottawa didn't announce the *why* behind Ilya's absence from the handful of games before the playoffs so there was a lot of talk in hockey circles – some more suspicious than others, given he had so recently been traded. That pregnancy rumor picked up traction again; someone even posted a fake birth announcement that went viral for a few hours. God. He hoped when it *was* announced why Ilya was absent that person felt really bad about it.

Shane didn't mention it when Ilya finally called him. He was having a shit enough time as it was.

"They fucking hate me. All of them," he hissed, his anger hovering on that very thin line before it tipped into devastation.

"Assholes. They're all assholes," Shane said. He had called his dad to get advice for how he should behave in this situation. His dad had been pretty clear – as Ilya's boyfriend, his one job was to be sympathetic. *Solutions should only be offered if asked for*, his dad had recommended. *I know you and your mom default to this but even she only wanted to be allowed to be sad or to be supported in however she wanted to feel.*

"My brother is— I think high, all of the time."

They were currently in the middle of a period when the open coffin was available for visitors to visit and say their goodbyes. Ilya's dad was apparently high enough in status that many very important people had visited, all puffed up and pompous, which really re-emphasized how much Shane could *not* have been there. The funeral itself would be in two days' time. And then there would be a procession to the cemetery and then there would be a farewell dinner. Shane might have done some research into Russian Orthodox funeral processes.

"Ugh," Shane said.

"Sveta says there is a mistress. A *mistress*, Shane? After all my father put my mother through? How could he?"

"Double *ugh*," Shane said, learning for the first time that Ilya's dad had probably not been faithful to his mom. Great. Just great.

"I hate it here." He sniffed and it was wet. "I wish— I wish you could have been here."

The pang of pain was acute. "I wish that too. So much."

"I would want to hold your hand at the funeral." Ilya huffed out a little laugh. "That would be very bad."

"I was thinking about that. It would have been really hard not to touch you."

"Fuck, Shane." Ilya broke down then, making small, soft noises. He had refused FaceTime for this reason, which had been heartbreaking. Shane hadn't wanted to force it. He wasn't sure watching Ilya cry over phone would have made either of them feel better but maybe there was no better in this scenario.

"It's okay," he whispered, uselessly, "it's nearly over."

*

In Ilya's absence, Shane had been allowed to be helpful in one sense – he'd arranged for Ilya's things from Boston to be packed up and moved into storage in Ottawa, which was a task Ilya had allowed to lapse. He'd also arranged for his cars to be brought over to a garage which had been more than thrilled to house Ilya Rozanov's stupidly impressive car collection.

These things were, admittedly, tasks that could easily have been outsourced but it had been pleasant for Shane's brain to do them himself. The only way he could support Ilya, in any meagre sense.

He'd also scouted out six possible houses in Ottawa for him, twenty minutes from the rink, all with garages and sufficient privacy for Shane to visit without being spotted from the street. He'd had the realtor video the properties, too, though he hadn't shared that with Ilya. Now was not the time.

What he *did* share with Ilya was the one thing he suspected his boyfriend would care about and want to be distracted with - which was dates of the house viewings for the houses they'd shortlisted for *their* house. It had been tricky to co-ordinate with their schedules and the need to do this without anyone else being present – and by 'tricky', he meant *nearly* impossible, but he had found two different days before the playoffs started.

Ilya had made it clear to Shane in a conversation that had been heavily and obviously assisted by Ilya's dialogues with his therapist – involving many 'I feel' statements and a particular wincing look that suggested Ilya would rather be shot than have this conversation with him – that Ilya had not had it in him to wait for progress on this front. This had been made even more overt now his dad had died and Ilya's main topics of their messages outside of 'my family are assholes' ranged from the adorable - 'maybe we could adopt an old ugly dog that no one wants 😭' – to the obscene – 'want big shower with little ledge to fuck you on yes?'. He wanted some evidence that they were moving towards a future together and Shane got that, he really did.

None of the houses were perfect, in Shane's view, but most could be improved by renovation. Extensive renovation. Which was something that he would have to ease Ilya into as a concept. Buying a house, *yes*, living in said house immediately, *probably not*.

"Is the house thing crazy?" he asked his mom the night before Ilya arrived home. They were on T-12 hours on Ilya's return. He was currently at Moscow Domodedovo airport. He had packed up and left the moment the memorial dinner was over and called Shane from the car.

Shane felt like he wouldn't take a proper breath until Ilya's plane had left for Istanbul.

"You two living together?"

"Yeah."

"Mmm," said his mom thoughtfully. "I don't know. It obviously opens up the possibility that you get caught. Properties the ones you're looking at are well known in the community."

People will be naturally curious about who has bought in the area.”

Shane had been thinking about this. Some of the houses they planned to look at were set back, with lots of trees. He was thinking for the others about also planting a big privacy hedge, plus adding a security gate. He’d floated the idea of them both getting new, identical and sensible cars which had led to a week-long argument about what constituted ‘sensible’ which Shane was not sure he had won.

“How long do you think you will stay secret for?”

“Now that Ilya’s dad has passed, I don’t know. I’m guessing we will need to make a proper plan for that now.” That had been on his mind, too. Maybe he should start making a list of things to talk to Ilya about when he was home.

“Are we talking years? Or months?”

Shane thought about it. “Probably more in the months.”

Which was *extraordinary*. But he couldn’t help but feel how much easier it would have been, in some senses, if they had been in an open and committed relationship in the last few days. Putting aside the Russia of it all, he could have been the one who had spoken to the press. Quelled rumors of Ilya’s illicit baby.

Ilya’s dad dying had reminded Shane of the wider implications of their secret relationship. He’d already been worried about if he had another depressive episode. And what if he got injured on the ice? It was all well and good when he had been in Boston, where Svetlana lived, but now he was in Ottawa so that was fucking useless. Shane would find out about it from the news probably. What about if *Shane* got injured on the ice? They’d call his parents before Ilya. Unacceptable. Shane wanted *paperwork* so that didn’t happen.

“Then I think the house makes sense. In the short term, at least,” his mom continued wistfully.

Shane opened the hotel room drawer where he could usually find a notepad and paper, vaguely thinking he might want to draw out a timeline. “In the short term?”

“Well, sweetheart, you said it yourself. Living between Ottawa and Montreal isn’t going to change the fact that your schedules rarely line up. It’s going to be tough seeing each other regularly. Most of the time you’ll be like ships passing in the night.”

Shane said nothing. Because he couldn’t. Instead, he leaned, frozen, over the dresser, staring at his expression in the mirror. His pupils seemed to swell, go on forever and ever.

“I’m not saying it won’t be *better* than it is now. It definitely will be,” she continued positively. “Emotionally I know it’ll feel better for both of you. More concrete. But maybe you should be planning for a more obvious answer.”

He stood up straight, turning to look out of the window at a view he had seen thousands of times before. “What, like one of us retiring?”

“No, Shane,” his mom laughed, “you both playing for the same team.”

Oh yeah.

“Montreal can’t afford both of us,” he said immediately. They’d have to free up Cap space. He couldn’t currently picture how they would do that. His team was *perfect*. Not that it wouldn’t be more perfect with Ilya. All Stars had given him a taste of what it would be like to play with someone of his own calibre. It had been delicious. Too delicious.

“Mmm,” she said.

Shane narrowed his eyes. “You’re not suggesting I move to Ottawa, are you? Mom!”

“I’m not *not* suggesting it. It doesn’t even have to be Ottawa. It could be,” she sighed heavily, reluctantly, probably the die-hard Metro in her dying a little death, “even somewhere else, I suppose. I guess what I’m saying is that if Ilya is it for you—”

“He is.”

“Then I think you’ll have to keep an open mind.”

Shane resumed his search for a pen and paper. He couldn’t think about this now. She was probably right. But he couldn’t think about it and the reason for that surprised him; he wanted it too much. And as with everything in their relationship, it was impossible.

Then again, as Shane drew a horizontal line along the piece of paper and put today’s date at the beginning, they were making impossible work. Maybe being on the same team, someday, wasn’t as unachievable as he was imagining.

It was food for thought.

*

Lily: *I’m home*

Shane had been tracking Ilya’s flights, of course, so he wasn’t surprised to receive a message as soon as Ilya turned off flight mode in Ottawa. But, still, seeing those words appear on the screen was better than the anonymous, automated Air Canada flight information that he had been following through the app.

Jane: *I’m glad*

Jane: *Mom and Dad are looking forward to seeing you*

Jane: *Dad is going to overload you with carbs for dinner*

Jane: *It’s how he shows love*

Lily: *I feel very grateful to all Hollanders*

Lily: *where are you?*

Though Shane was in Atlanta, waiting to shuffle on to yet another minibus, he pressed call. He wanted to hear Ilya's voice. "Hey," he said when Ilya picked up. "I'm at the airport. I'm sorry. I wish I could be there. I'll be back tomorrow night, and I'll drive to my parents to see you."

He saw Comeau's head swivel around, even though he was speaking in low tones and there were half a dozen teammates between them. He slumped until he was hiding behind O'Connor. Jesus. It was like the guy had a sixth sense.

"*Nyet*. I'll come to you."

"You don't have to do that," Shane whispered.

"I do, Shane, I really do. I have— Stewart says I can have more time off. Compassionate leave, he says." Ilya sounded derisive. As if, even though he planned to take advantage of this, he still doubted this concept of taking time to grieve his father.

At the name, Shane perked up. "Oh, hey, he's there now?" One good piece of news, at least from Ilya's perspective, was that his favorite assistant coach from Boston had applied for, and been accepted, as one of the assistant coaches for Ottawa. Shane didn't know how much sway Ilya had over the role – he knew he had mentioned something to the GM, and Stewart had still been under contract with Boston – but it was an encouraging sign. Ottawa's current head coach was pretty much a write-off and they had needed some fresh coaching blood to set a fire under the team. Someone who cared whether or not they made it to the playoffs.

"Yes, he arrived last week." Ilya laughed weakly, strung out. "Bood says he's terrifying."

"Jesus."

"Yeah, fuck, if they think Stewart is terrifying, they have no idea what a real coach is like. My old coach in KHL made *LeClair* look like a kitten."

"Well, that's—" Actually quite disturbing. LeClair and Theriault had been on a level so God only knew what Ilya had grown up with. "I'm sure he'll whip them into shape."

"*Da*. Somebody has to. Will be fun. You will send me your flight details?"

"I will. I'm so glad you're home."

Ilya sighed heavily. "Me, too."

Then, cradling his hand over the mouthpiece and ducking to the side, well out of Comeau's eyeline, Shane whispered, "I love you."

*

Ilya looked— well, if Shane was going to apply his limited imagination to how someone who had just flown across the world and made two international flight connections following the

death of a parent, Ilya looked it. Strained and unhappy.

Shane, pretty tired himself but not as emotionally strung out, flung his stuff down in his entranceway and opened his arms. Without hesitation, Ilya fell into him. It was really something to come home to him, even in these circumstances. A taste of the future.

“Maybe soon you could be the one to have big emotions instead and I could take care of you?” Ilya suggested into Shane’s neck.

He stroked Ilya’s hair lovingly. “You take care of me all the time.”

“Does not feel like it. I feel—” Shane heard him swallow. “I feel like a burden.”

Shane held him tighter. “You are not a burden to me. Not even close.”

Eventually, they untangled but didn’t make it further than the couch where Ilya had clearly been holed up for some time, streaming the highlights of the last few Ottawa games that he had missed. There was an empty pizza box on the table and a half-empty bottle of beer.

They slumped together to watch, Shane’s eyes drifting closed every few minutes. It was a relief to be home but it was more of a relief than he had expected to have Ilya back where he could touch him.

“Hungry?” Ilya asked. “I could make you something?”

Shane didn’t always feel particularly hungry after a flight, and it was late. “Maybe we just go to bed?”

Ilya kissed Shane’s temple. They trailed each other into the main bedroom and then bumped shoulders like drunk toddlers as they brushed their teeth. Shane didn’t even have the energy to shower off the airplane, he was *that* tired. Fuck. Montreal had made the playoffs again. It wasn’t going to get better. He stripped his clothes off, dumping everything into the hamper and allowed Ilya to gently shove him to the bed.

“You wanna tell me— stuff?” he suggested, yawning hugely. It looked like the bed had been slept in. He wondered when Ilya had arrived.

“Later, maybe,” Ilya said heavily. “Go to sleep, *dorogoy*.”

Shane didn’t argue, crawling naked into his side of the bed. They arranged themselves in their usual sleep positions – they had them! This was a thing that they had! – and Shane had a brief moment of savoring being home, being in his bed with Ilya, before he was out.

He woke up *minutes* later, it felt like, to warm breath over his morning wood, Ilya’s chin resting on his thigh, waiting for Shane to wake up. His hand tangled in Ilya’s hair before he was really conscious, hips rolling, encouraging. “Mmm, morning,” he murmured and then warm, wet heat surrounded his cock. “Oh fuuuuuuuck.”

Ilya coaxed him to orgasm slowly, sloppily, and then crawled up his body with a grin that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Thank you,” Shane said seriously. He tugged at Ilya’s curls to draw him into a kiss. “How are you?”

“Better for seeing you.”

“Yeah?” It was a weird kiss. Kind of half hug, half mouthing at each other like animals in need of comfort. In the weirdest possible way, Shane wanted to swallow Ilya whole. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.”

“How are you?” he asked again.

“Better. Better, Shane, I promise. It was awful. It’s over. I am okay.”

They made love. It was definitely *making love* which was a gross expression Shane would never willingly attribute to their sex life but missionary position and intense eye contact as their hips rolled together in perfect sync, Ilya buried deep inside him, really called for it. He came *moments* before Ilya did, their tongues tangled, whispering *I love yous*. They both had tears in their eyes, holy shit.

“I have a list of things to talk about,” Shane said, his come barely cooled on his stomach.

“Obviously,” sighed Ilya but he sounded pretty happy about it.

*

“Oh, your cars are in a garage in Ottawa.” Shane shoveled a mouthful of tofu and spinach scramble into his mouth. “This is really good, by the way. Thank you.”

Ilya beamed at him. “Almost like the real thing. I don’t hate it,” he added, though he poured more hot sauce on top. “What about my cars?”

“Your cars. I had them shipped to Ottawa. So, I don’t know, you can go and visit with them and do whatever you need to do. Stroke them or whatever.”

“Oh. This is— thank you. That was... kind.”

He studied him. “Why do you sound weird?”

“I, ah. Am thinking of maybe selling them.”

“Wow. Why?”

“I used to like going for drives in my spare time. Or at night. I haven’t wanted to do that for a while. And,” Ilya shrugged carelessly, took a sip of his coffee, “maybe they are not necessary for me anymore.”

Something about this struck Shane as being very wrong. Ilya Rozanov and supercars were like... Shane Hollander and ginger ale. It was part of who he was. “Maybe it’s just that you

didn't have access to them."

"Maybe. When we move, anyway, I will not be able to use them."

"The Chiron would make a real splash on the 417." Shane pushed a piece of tomato around. "But you know, maybe when we're out... maybe that'll be fine."

The timeline sat before them, drawn out on hotel paper and amended during this morning's conversation. It hadn't exactly been smooth sailing. Though Ilya's dad had died which took a load of pressure off Ilya, however conflicted he was about that, Russia and the increasingly loud conservative movement still loomed threateningly on the horizon. Ilya had less than two years left on his contract with Ottawa and it would still be a while before he could get permanent residency. It was precarious.

The sensible thing to do would be wait for that, wait until Ilya's safety could be secured. It left the timeline nebulous. Ever moving. Neither of them liked that.

"We could just get married," Shane suggested suddenly. It would solve the paperwork problem.

"I don't want to get married for this," Ilya grumbled after a slightly tense pause.

"It wouldn't *just* be for this, though."

Ilya tapped Shane's wrist with his finger. "I do not want to talk about marriage like this," he reiterated, very carefully. "Should not be a business discussion."

"You're such a romantic."

Ilya shook his head and pointed at the piece of paper with his fork, at Shane's careful annotations that he had teased him about. *The Cottage* and *summer training* and *Christmas vacation* and the little color coding that indicated where they could share that they were publicly spending time with each other. "That is you, Hollander."

"It's not romantic." Shane squirmed, not sure why he was so uncomfortable with being called romantic. "It's just practical. *Boring*."

"Boring is very romantic to me." And Ilya leaned over and gave Shane probably the chastest kiss of their relationship, right on his cheek, slightly sticky with hot sauce and tofu scramble.

And because Shane was a certified freak, that went straight to his dick. "Let's go back to bed."

*

Ilya turned into the drive in the family Volvo and Shane nearly about died. He was still laughing, bent over at the waist, when Ilya got out, scowling.

"Fuck. Did my mom suggest this?" he wheezed. It was too good. He bet Ilya wouldn't let him take a photo at the wheel to send to the family chat.

“It was sensible idea. Even the G-Wagon is noticeable.” Ilya sniffed and adjusted his hoodie, a non-descript grey, and stuck his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “Are we going to go in or are you going to keep being a dick?”

They were on their second day of viewing houses. The first day had been a depressing bust. A mix of things – they were learning what they each liked about houses, for one. They had plenty in common; they both loved big windows and high ceilings. But Shane preferred open-plan living and Ilya liked to have smaller rooms, which Shane had been surprised by given his Boston apartment had been very modern. It turned out that was *why* Ilya liked small rooms. “I bought it because it was different than what I grew up with. Turns out I prefer that. I like— cozy,” he said thoughtfully.

Ilya also thought wall-to-wall wood paneling was ‘cozy’ and Shane thought it looked like someone had vomited up a fucking Roots store or something.

Beyond that there were the practicalities. A couple of the houses had plots that were just too visible from all sides and would require extensive work to privacy-proof. One had a lingering smell of damp that had Shane travelling from room to room sniffing. Another was too close to a road which Ilya worried about for their non-existent dogs (and Shane for their also non-existent future children).

Ilya looked around the driveway of this house and wrinkled his nose. “Looks different than the pictures.”

Shane, who had been here early to meet his perplexed but professionally-silent realtor before sending him on to the next house, had already formed a pretty immediate opinion, agreed. “Let’s go in anyway.”

They walked around the house in silence. On paper, it was perfect. Five beds, three bathrooms, garage, pool. The dining area had vaulted ceilings and windows out onto a patio. The primary bedroom had little balcony. It was finished to a very high standard. All shiny modern cabinets and black fittings in the bathrooms and kitchen.

They walked around the extensive yard before Ilya framed his response. “It’s not very *friendly*.”

“Yes.” Ilya had hit the nail on the head. “Like. Soulless.”

Ilya nodded. “*Soulless*. Yes.”

“I can’t imagine living here.” Which was the advice his dad had given them. *Try to picture yourself making a cup of coffee in the morning. Or a protein shake.*

“On to the next one. Still got three more to look at,” Ilya said, trying to be positive.

The next two were worse. The first one they didn’t even go inside, just messaged each other from inside their respective cars. Shane *hated* the location. Three other properties were much, much closer than he had expected. Actual neighbors. Neighbors would be a problem. The

next house was pokey and dark, all the rooms too small and even Ilya agreed it was the opposite of cozy.

Afterwards, they sat outside in Shane's parents' car in low spirits. His dad had given Ilya a bag of trail mix and Shane was carefully picking out the dried fruit to eat. "We can look at more this summer," Shane said. After the playoffs. He offered the bag to Ilya. "Or, I don't know, you could look at some without me?"

Ilya shook his head and proceeded to pick out the chocolate drops. "Was not so hard to buy my place in Boston."

Shane agreed – or was about to agree when he remembered he had experienced a difference. "The apartment in Montreal is— just a place I sleep when I'm not playing hockey. I didn't even pick the art. But it took me ages to finalize the designs of my cottage, though. This is kind of like that. This is important. This is going to be our home."

Ilya gave Shane one of his meltingly soppy looks but said nothing. He didn't have to.

"I am looking forward to seeing the cottage this summer," was what he said instead.

"Me too. It's going to be awesome."

*

Shane wasn't anticipating liking the last house and he had been happy it had been last because he'd hoped they'd have found something they preferred and would have been able to cancel. From the digital brochure he'd scanned, it looked like something of a cross between a barn and Noah's Ark in the photos. Too much wood inside. And kind of bare.

But they'd made the appointment and he wanted to give it due diligence.

The road off the 417 was lined with dense trees and Shane kept craning his neck to see if he could see any other houses through them. He was so caught up in this that he missed the turning to the house – it was small and difficult to see – and had to find somewhere to turn around and message Ilya to give him a few more minutes.

The drive up to the house was curved, with a hedge either side that kept the house from view until you were literally in front of it. Shane drew up beside his realtor's car. Zac was leaning against the passenger side, on his cell, which was pretty much how he'd been every time Shane met him.

"Owners are out for the afternoon, so you're clear." He handed Shane the keys. His brown eyes were shrewd. "I feel good about this one."

"Mmm," said Shane, eyeing the cutsey wooden shutters that were set around every window with doubt. It really did look like a barn, with its red roof and grey siding. He couldn't imagine Ilya would like it.

What he would say, as his realtor left and he waited for Ilya to arrive, was that it was very private. Probably the most private of the houses they'd seen so far. The plot itself was

surrounded by more trees, outside of what looked like a manageable amount of landscaped back yard. He couldn't remember if this one had a pool or not. Maybe round the back.

Ilya turned up ten minutes later and Shane's mouth only twitched at the sight of his boyfriend behind the wheel of such a sensible car.

"Rural," said Ilya, slamming the door closed. Not negatively.

As they had done in all the other houses, they walked separately around the house in silence, met in the front hall and looked at each other. "Another lap?" Shane suggested. "Together?"

Ilya nodded.

There was *a lot* of wood. The kitchen cabinets were some kind of knotty pine. The floors maybe walnut. There was a stone fireplace in the main living room that Shane *hated*. The primary bedroom had an ensuite bathroom designed for exhibitionists. There was a vast basement space with no windows that the current owners apparently used as a playroom, possibly a dungeon, for their children.

Silently, they strode out into the front yard and around the house to the back yard. It did have a pool, though it was covered up and clearly in need of some care. The rest of the back yard was grass, with some knobby-looking trees dotted about, several random patio and decking areas. Maybe to catch the sun at different times a day.

He left Ilya studying the pool and returned back to the house, walking through the front door, wiping his feet on the rush mat. The front hall was a good size – ample, actually, stupidly large – and he pictured a built-in closet for their coats and boots. He imagined dropping his kit in this hallway and carrying on up the curved staircase to the main bedroom, tired from a long day or a late-night flight home. Or, if it was just a normal day, heading straight forward, into the big open plan kitchen and diner, with the floor to ceiling doors leading out into the back yard. They could paint the kitchen cabinets. Or replace them. There was another room off the kitchen, smaller, *cozier*, with a significantly less ugly fireplace and windows out onto a decking. It would look very cozy indeed with an overstuffed couch.

He pictured Ilya grilling on one of those patios outside. Or lazing out by the pool, after they'd replaced the broken patio tiles and had it re-lined.

Shane pictured a lot of things, actually, and it was easy. The pad of paws. The sound of little bare feet slapping against hardwood floor. Laughter. Tears. Music. Raised voices and the drone of Sportsnet on TV. Life. A real life.

Ilya – the Ilya now – stepped through the doors of the kitchen from the back yard. He was smiling. "We could get a jacuzzi."

"They are really unhygienic."

Ilya shrugged. "We get people to clean it. Do you think the pool is heated?"

“Of course it’s *heated*.” This was *Canada*. “It will probably have to be covered ten months of the year.”

“We should build one of those sliding things. Make it year-round,” Ilya said thoughtfully, wandering into the pantry off the kitchen and turning on the lights. “There are apple trees.”

“Oh?”

“We could make Sharlotka.”

Shane mouthed the word. Sharlotka. Charlotte? Apple Charlotte? That was a thing, right. One of the step-grandmothers had tried to bake for him. “Is that a Russian pie?”

“More like cake. My mama and I used to make it. You will like.”

“Maybe in the off-season,” Shane acknowledged, forcing down the automatic rejection to be kind in the face of very rare mentions of Ilya’s mother. He would eat Sharlotka in the offseason to honor Ilya’s mom. That was something he could do.

He shoved his hands into his pockets, suddenly, weirdly shy? “So... you like the house?”

Ilya came out of the pantry and leaned insouciantly in the doorway. His eyes raked Shane up and down, like they were in a club and not a farmhouse-style kitchen. “I think you like the house.”

Still feeling vulnerable, Shane nodded, “I do. I didn’t think I would—”

Ilya moved very slowly towards Shane. A finger curled into the belt loop of Shane’s jeans. “Mmm. All the wood.”

He gestured around them at the kitchen. It even had exposed wooden beams. And it was all different. Where was the cohesion? “So much wood.”

Smirking, Ilya tugged Shane closer and let the obvious joke disappear into the ether. Remarkably mature. “We can paint it. I want to keep the shutters, though.”

Shane’s eyebrows rose. “Seriously?”

“Yes. It gives it character.”

Well, who was Shane to question that. “Okay.” He narrowed his eyes. “But that fireplace has to go, right?”

“Yes, looks like Count Dracula’s fireplace.” Ilya started to smile. “Spooky.”

Shane snickered, relieved they were agreed on the fireplace front. He draped his arms over Ilya’s shoulders. “There isn’t a garage for your cars. Or even a covered carport, actually.”

Ilya’s growing smile was hypnotic. His hand moved down to the small of Shane’s back and pushed him closer so they were belly to belly. “We have plenty of space to build one. Or I

keep them in that private garage in Ottawa.”

Holy *shit*. They were going to buy a house.

“We’re really doing this,” Shane breathed.

“I think so, probably, yes,” Ilya said, and kissed him and it felt funny because they were both smiling too much but they didn’t stop smiling and they didn’t stop kissing.

Chapter End Notes

Right - I realise the 'they could buy a house between' has been hotly contested if not debunked on social media. Just... people who feel that way please suspend your disbelief, okay? Pretty please?

Anyway - that would have been the end but I allowed myself the absolute indulgence of doing a schmoopy epilogue from Ilya's POV.

Chapter 25: Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Ilya's self-worth was achievement-based, which was another thing he had learned about himself. He and Shane had this one in common, though. They had both agreed that there was nothing wrong with this, even when they used it to self-sabotage themselves. Like when Shane wasn't allowed to eat his Snickers after a bad game or when Ilya set unreasonable emotional targets for himself so the reward felt sweeter. You know. Stuff like that.

Yay, therapy.

Chapter Notes

And, lo, here is a very self-indulgent Ilya POV. I hope you enjoy. Ignore the typos.

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

Ilya knew he was the first to read the email from their project manager because he could see it was still unread in their joint inbox. He opened it and skim-read the contents, his mother's cross caught between his teeth. Then he went back and re-read it again, almost unable to believe his eyes.

It was done. The house was done. Or would be on Friday.

Fuck.

He leaned forward until his face was buried in the clothes hanging up in his cubby, concerned the look on his face was not the side of Ilya Rozanov he wanted the Cens to see.

It had been nearly eight months since he and Shane had closed on the house. They had spent a glorious four weeks commuting to and from a shared bed and then his boyfriend's architectural fetish had broken free and – yes, yes, with Ilya's agreement – about a thousand contractors had descended on the property to make 'improvements'.

Given no one was supposed to know they owned a house together – it had been bought through a trust they had set up, a complicated layer of financial security that Shane had applied to other properties he owned – it had not been feasible that they lived on site, not with workmen coming and going at all hours. There weren't enough NDAs in the world to lock that down.

Which had been fine because it had been the offseason – Shane out of the playoffs with a concussion and collarbone fracture thanks to an unfortunate check during a Boston game of all things – and they had simply retreated to the cottage for the summer. A glorious, glorious summer of healing and sex and sleeping and more sex and, yes, twice accidentally getting caught in compromising positions by each of Shane’s parents before they had set some firm boundaries about *calling ahead* and *knocking*.

But summer had ended and the building work did not and so it made sense that they returned to using their house and apartment in Ottawa and Montreal. Even if it had felt a little like severing a freshly grown limb.

They had still seen each other, making the longer commute when their schedules matched up, but there was a marked difference between that and sharing a *home* and a *bed* and a closet and a refrigerator and leaving each other little *I love you*’s on Post Its and *living together* even when they weren’t together but far apart. It was different. It was really different.

Oh. Yeah. He was going to cry again. Fuck, he hated being in touch with his fucking emotions what fucking bullshit.

He put his phone aside and finished getting dressed.

“You going to join us this evening, Cap?” Dillon asked from behind him. He sounded nervous which made Ilya sigh. He had perhaps been a little hard on him during practice.

Because he was diabolically lame. *Fuck*.

Shane was on a west coast roadie so Ilya had no compunction in saying ‘yes’. The time difference made their regular evening phone call impossible. LA was three hours behind them; it would be midnight before Shane would be able to talk after his game. Which meant he’d probably not be able to talk to Shane about the email until tomorrow. Which fucking sucked.

Bood shoulder-checked him as they meandered out of the lockers in the direction of their cars. “You okay?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Dark eyebrows rose.

Bood knew about Ilya. He knew about the antidepressants. He also knew Shane. He was the only Centaur who did. Shane had given Ilya permission to tell him after Ilya had – very mildly, completely reasonably, absolutely no shouting – complained about the lack of support he had compared to Shane. Whose entire friendship circle, and parents, knew about Ilya. Hell, even his hot *coach* knew about Ilya.

They had gone to the Boodrams for dinner together. Shane had been nervously charming, on his very best behavior, wearing his blue linen shirt and smart pants. Ilya’s joy about this occasion had translated into him being unremittingly horny. There had been a point during

the evening where Ilya had nearly convinced Shane into inappropriate sexual behavior in the Boodrams' guest bath. Ilya did not look back on this with any sense of pride.

"House is done," Ilya said shortly, his voice low.

"Hell yes, brother," Bood said, a broad smile breaking across his handsome face. He slapped a hand on Ilya's shoulder and then squeezed. "That's awesome news. When are you moving back?"

Ilya winced. The house might be done Friday but Shane wouldn't be back until the following Tuesday. And he was getting in late, after an intensive roadie in a different timezone, so probably wouldn't want to do the hour's drive which was *completely reasonable* and not something Ilya was allowed to get mad about. Then Ilya had a game Wednesday and then Shane had one Thursday so that was an entire week lost.

"I don't know."

Sometimes, it felt like Ilya had been waiting for Shane forever.

*

Ilya had therapy Wednesday mornings. When they were at home, the Centaurs made an exception for this; he was permitted to be late for practice in a way that made Ilya feel like an absolute loser. But, fuck, he took it on the chin. He didn't really have a choice. It was so obviously *better* unpacking the myriad fucked up things in his head than not.

Besides, it was only an hour. More often than not he stayed late, after, anyway, unless Shane was visiting.

As always, Galina asked if there was anything on his mind and – really – it was refreshing to talk about something that wasn't his shitty childhood. Still, she got to the heart of the matter pretty quickly.

"And have you told Shane that it is important to you that you move back to the house?"

"No," he said shortly. Furiously.

"And why do you think that is?"

Ilya rolled his eyes. Because it was obvious. She knew it was obvious. He knew it was obvious. Telling Shane – no, *asking* Shane for something that Ilya needed was about as painful as setting himself on fire. Or humiliating. Or one of the other Bad Emotions that Ilya liked to pretend he didn't have. It was all part of his pattern of *dismissive-avoidant attachment*.

See. He knew this about himself. He could point to his behavior and go *that's what that is*.

And then what he did was he continued to ignore it.

"I can wait. Until we do this together."

“Is it important to you and Shane that you move back in together?”

“I don’t know.” He did know. When he wasn’t being really uptight, Shane was remarkably easy going about things like this. If he said to Shane *I need to go to the house now or I’ll die* Shane would *immediately* comply. Shane put Ilya’s needs before his all the time which was why this was agony.

Galina allowed Ilya’s discomfort to sit for a moment. This was one of her tactics. Or maybe it wasn’t a tactic. Maybe she was literally sitting there thinking about what to say next.

Either way, it was silent for a long moment and Ilya tried not to think about the question she had asked which inevitably meant he did think about it. They had talked about the house being ready a lot – on calls, over messages, in person. They hadn’t ever really explicitly talked about the logistics. It was unspoken. They would move back in and that would be great and they were both really looking for to it.

Ilya *wanted* to go to the house with Shane. He wanted to open the door together. He wanted to walk around hand-in-hand and Shane to talk him through all the improvements he’d made that he’d laboriously discussed with Ilya and Ilya had sometimes only pretended to listen to. He wanted to discover their home together, just like they had discovered it for the first time.

At the same time... he couldn’t wait. He felt sick with longing, which was ridiculous. How could he long for a house he’d barely lived in?

So, he would wait. The waiting would mean when he finally got what he wanted, he would truly deserve it. That was because Ilya’s self-worth was achievement-based, which was another thing he had learned about himself. He and Shane had this one in common, though. They had both agreed that there was nothing wrong with this, even when they used it to self-sabotage themselves. Like when Shane wasn’t allowed to eat his Snickers after a bad game or when Ilya set unreasonable emotional targets for himself so the reward felt sweeter. You know. Stuff like that.

Yay, therapy.

*

Shane ruined it, of course.

Jane: *Hey! Saw the email about the house. Can’t believe it!!!*

Jane: *I was thinking - do you want to head on up over the weekend? Maybe get settled in? I know you have a break but I can’t be there until Tuesday. Seems a shame to delay.*

Lily: ~~*don’t be stupid, we should go together*~~

Lily: ~~*I can wait for you*~~

Lily: ~~*I love you so much I don’t deserve you*~~

Lily: ~~Shane I'm not that needy~~

Lily: ~~I don't mind, whatever you want~~

Lily: ok

*

The Metros were having yet another implausibly brilliant season and Ilya had the TV on in the background while he packed up a small suitcase that was rapidly becoming overfilled and would soon need to be upgraded to the larger suitcase. He had stuffed the Hollander bears into the Louis Vuitton duffel Shane had bought him for Russian Christmas New Year and taken them out again, unsure whether he would prefer to keep them in the apartment where there was less evidence of Shane or have them join its counterpart in their shared bedroom. Tricky. Maybe he should separate them? That seemed... cruel.

Wiebe was being interviewed, which distracted him from this decision. "All right, what do you guys have for me?" he said genially with a white-toothed smile.

Shane's coach was a fetus. A cute one, as Ilya had been reminded when they'd had dinner with him and his wife last spring. And possibly not entirely straight judging from the considering look he'd given Shane and Ilya after a couple of glasses of wine. He didn't know what it was about his boyfriend, but he was a real magnet for queers.

Angus, from TNT, went first. "Another great win tonight, Coach. What pleased you most about the performance?"

Wiebe affected a thoughtful look that Ilya had often seen Shane use, as if he didn't already have all the questions answered in his head and was giving the journalist the respect of thinking it through. "Probably how patient we were. Vancouver came out hard, and for the first ten minutes we had to weather it a little bit. We didn't force anything. Once we settled in, I thought we controlled a lot of the game."

Ilya had heard this kind of rhetoric maybe a hundred times. The same words just rehashed. He didn't know why they bothered.

Angus nodded, all eager and puppyish. "Nine wins in eleven now. Is this about as confident as you've seen the team?"

Wiebe smiled. "We are confident, yes," he said humbly. He was less humble in the locker room apparently. "But I think more than that, they're comfortable with how we need to play. We're not relying on one line or one guy every night. We've a well-balanced team."

Then the asshole from Sportsnet chipped in with his annoying nasally voice. "You say you're not relying on one guy but Hollander had another three points tonight. He's got eighteen over this stretch. Isn't that pretty significant reliance?"

It was Ilya's view that this journalist had a real bone to pick with Shane. If Shane was too good, that was a problem – he'd talk about the Metros *over-relying* on him, about the

weakness of other lines, as if this was somehow Shane's fault. If Shane underperformed – which for Shane usually meant he was still outperforming everyone else – that was an even bigger problem that led to questions about *problems in the room* or *chemistry* or some suggestion that Shane was slipping.

“Shane is one of our best players. We expect him to perform well,” Wiebe said neutrally.

‘One of our best players’. Ilya snorted. Sure. ‘One of’. Who else on that team was even comparable?

“Sure,” Asshole continued, “but there's performing and then there's accounting for almost half your offense over eleven games.”

“He's playing great hockey.” Wiebe's smile was turning a little sharp. “I'm not going to apologize for that.”

“I'm not asking you to apologize, I'm asking whether this is sustainable.”

Motherfucker, Ilya thought, hugging a Hollander bear to his chest. No one ever asked these questions about Ilya, even when he had been tanking in his last year in Boston. He'd asked Shane once if he'd ever personally offended the guy, maybe pedantically corrected him in public or something, that was a thing Shane sometimes did, but Shane had just shrugged his shoulders and said something vague about always getting strong reactions from people.

Wiebe responded quickly, drily, “For Shane?”

“No, for the team.”

“We've had contributions throughout the lineup. Pike, Michaels and Boizeau—”

Asshole interrupted, “But if you take Hollander's points out?”

Now Wiebe was visibly annoyed at this totally ridiculous line of questioning. “Why would I take his points out?”

“As a hypothetical.”

“Okay. Then hypothetically,” Wiebe's sudden smile was shark-like, “take the other team's best player's points out too, and we'll redo the standings tomorrow morning.”

There was a smattering of laughter and *finally* someone asked a more normal question.

On his coffee table, Ilya's phone pinged with a message from the family chat.

Yuna: *Racist asshole.*

Oh, Ilya thought, the Hollander bear drooping in his hands. *Oh.*

New Year's Day, Ilya had woken up slowly with his arm stretched into the warm space Shane had recently left behind. For a moment, the memories of all the times Shane had left him in bed overwhelmed any present tense and his whole body clenched instinctively. Only then did the smell of good coffee permeate and a wave of happiness had swamped him. *Underserved happiness*, the small voice that sounded like his father said inside of him.

He pushed that small voice aside. When he was happy, it was easier to do so. And he was very happy right now.

Shane would be making that coffee for him. Like his dad made his mom coffee and brought it to her in bed, so did Shane, now, one of those sweet little domestic tasks that he had adopted from his nice, normal(ish) family, where people cared for each other in small ways.

But Shane didn't just care for Ilya in small ways. Shane made big, romantic gestures, usually under the guise of 'practicality', of *Ilya, it just makes sense* that slayed Ilya down to the core.

And Ilya took them.

Ilya took, and took, and took. A vampire that fed on Shane's goodness.

So, lying in bed, waiting for his love to bring him coffee, Ilya had made a plan. This year *he* was going to make the big gestures. He was going to overtly show Shane that he loved him, loudly, proudly – though, obviously, still secretly.

Rolling over, Ilya grabbed his cell phone and ignored the many messages wishing him a Happy New Year. He'd taken Shane to bed at precisely 11.30pm last night so they could fuck through midnight. Edging Shane into 2018 was the gift he had given himself, Shane's shouted, delirious pleas to let him come the only fireworks in his night.

He found the contact he was looking for and ignored the polite Russian greeting sent at midnight.

The Pervert: *С Новым годом*

Ilya asked, deliberately, in English: *Is that villa of yours available in June*

The Pervert: *After playoffs?*

Ilya: *How dare you*

Ilya: *Shane would be annoyed at you for jinxing it*

The Pervert: *So yes?*

Ilya: *Yes. Maybe third week in June to allow for recovery*

The Pervert: *I'll let the management team know. One week or two?*

Ilya: *Two*

The Pervert: *Done*

Was it a little manipulative using Mikhail Petrov to organize his romantic vacation with his boyfriend? Yes, yes, it was. And Ilya was more than happy to take advantage of Petrov's guilty lust for his boyfriend, now that all their secrets were on the table.

Shane bumbled into the bedroom then, carrying a little tray with two cups and a bowl of fruit. He hadn't bothered to do his hair and he was shirtless, his chest covered in the little marks of Ilya's devotion. Those marks were going to cause a real stir in the locker-room and he would hear about it endlessly in that annoyed-but-pleased way Shane had. "Hey, morning," Shane said croakily.

Ilya's smile, he knew, was too fond. Too *obvious*. "Happy New Year, *milyy*."

"Oh, yeah." Shane cleared his throat and from the exquisite look of embarrassment on his face, Ilya knew he was about to be treated to some Russian. "*S No-vym go-dom, s no-vym shchas-ti-em!*"

Ilya just about died. "Perfect," he said, trying not to cry.

His boyfriend was pouting and stern. "It wasn't really, was it? You've got to correct me."

Shane did so like to be corrected. Ilya felt his dick stir with interest. "Okay, put that down and come here, we practice," he said, beckoning Shane closer with an imperious finger.

"I know what happens when we practice Russian," Shane said, nevertheless doing exactly what he was told and looking fucking pleased about it. "The coffee will get cold."

He was right, it did.

*

As Ilya drove the eastbound route towards Montreal that he could now do blindfolded, he thought back to New Years, as he often did.

He had earmarked the two weeks in their joint calendar as 'surprise, will need passport' and had the pleasure of seeing Shane turn pink with excitement and curiosity, curiosity that Ilya would not give in to. Their summer was otherwise pretty busy. They would visit the cottage, a non-negotiable feature of their summer, but there was also a kids hockey camp that the teams who signed up to the Code sent their best and brightest to generate good PR, and then they had training, together, which would be one of their 'public' activities. Last year the photos of them sweating together in the gym under the watchful eye of their shared Terminator-esque instructor had both their Instagram followings nearly doubling and their highest engagement yet.

So, with all this accounted for, it didn't leave much room for other romantic gestures, which meant he would have to look to opportunities during the season.

This morning, Ilya had updated their shared calendar once more to reflect the days and nights they would overlap at the house, as well as the days he had decided he would be there

anyway. He had quickly learned that he missed Shane less when he was in their home, than when he was in his house in Ottawa. There were a handful of occasions, maybe once a month, when he might be able to spring something on Shane. He just needed to come up with something.

His cell phone lit up with an incoming call and, grunting, he hit answer.

“You’re driving?” came Svetlana’s snarky voice in Russian.

“How do you know?”

“You answered too quickly. Where are you going?”

“The house.”

“It’s done?”

“Yes. It’s done.”

“Ah, Ilyusha, you must be so happy.”

Ilya made a revolted noise. *“You are so American.”*

They chatted a little, bantered back and forth in their usual, easy way, before Svetlana got to her point. She had a new boyfriend – ugh, American, *again* – she wanted him to meet. Sveta claimed this was an important test, to see if he could survive Ilya, a prelude to surviving her father. The last two hadn’t and the one before that had gone back to Russia, disappointingly. He and Ilya still occasionally messaged, but only about hockey, of course.

The reality was Sveta used Ilya to make up her mind. If she had really loved any of them, she would have ignored Ilya’s views, he was sure of it. Certainly, Ilya wouldn’t have given a flying fuck what anyone had to say about Shane. *“Put in drinks after our next Boston game —”* He would have to tell Connors and Marly he couldn’t hang, not unless they met for an early breakfast or something, which Marly wouldn’t do which wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, *“—and I will assess him for you.”*

“Thank you. How is Shane?”

“Crushing the west coast.”

She made a clucking noise with her tongue, as if she hadn’t known this. *“So sexy.”*

Ilya could only agree but he didn’t like to encourage commentary on his boyfriend’s appeal from other people. The thirst for Shane Hollander was sometimes exhausting.

“What are your Valentine’s plans?”

He had been vaguely dreading this question. One of the overlaps in their calendar *was* Valentine’s, a complicated holiday for Ilya. It really didn’t exist in Russia – love being a somewhat private misery to his people shown through daily life rather than concentrated to

one day – but of course in America love was commercialized in the way America commercialized everything, so important it required balloons, chocolates, an entire aisle at CVS. A pink and red threat every February.

It was fitting, therefore, that Ilya had quite accidentally timed one of the finest examples of self-sabotage masked as self-preservation and fucking broken up with the love of his life on said holiday and probably ruined it for them forever. Just when he was coming to appreciate the opportunity to loudly declare his love with his hard-earned dollars.

So he sighed. “I don’t know,” he said in English.

“Well, you have a few weeks to plan.”

Ilya pulled a face. “What are you doing then?”

“Drinks and dinner at L’Espalier. I saw a Cartier bag hidden in his closet. I expect there will be roses,” she said blithely, a woman who had been wooed extensively all her adult life though not by Ilya. It hadn’t been necessary when they were fourteen and later it hadn’t been that kind of relationship.

He and Shane couldn’t go out for dinner on Valentine’s. Not even the carefully curated ‘bromance’ would allow for this. And Shane didn’t wear jewelry, except for his contractual Rolex. The only thing that Shane put on his body were clothes his stylist and his tailor chose for him.

Hmm.

*

It was dark by the time Ilya turned into the driveway of the house, the new security gate recognizing the gizmo in his car and opening automatically just as they were supposed to. Discrete lights lit up the curve of the driveway, turning on automatically with the gate. The lights lit up a hedge that had been neatly trimmed, the landscapers putting the final touches to the plans they had agreed. He would have to see what else had been done to the yard in the daylight. How their vision had been brought to life.

Ilya parked up under the new carport and admired yet again the little details. The automated lighting. The interlocking concrete pavers which would survive a Canadian winter. The security cameras. Shane had littered the place with them. *We’re away a lot*, he had said. *And this way we can also be alerted when each of us is home.*

Somewhere in LA, a little message had appeared on Shane’s phone saying that Ilya’s car had drawn up to their house.

He liked that. It was a little creepy— but then Shane was a little creepy. They both shared their locations now which he suspected he took more advantage of than Shane did, finding it soothing to look for Shane in the world and see that he was exactly where he was supposed to be, all the time.

He had not shared this detail with Galina, as he suspected it was unhealthy.

Walking in through the front hallway was like walking into an entirely different house. The entire format of the hallway had been changed so that bespoke cabinets lined the entrance, for the coats and jackets and footwear that their lifestyle required. He admired the shoe-racks that would take all his sneakers and Shane's barely worn Reeboks. The wooden floors that ran through the entire of the first floor had been sanded back and re-stained darker, something more rustic. Shane had wanted it light but on this point Ilya had put his foot down. He liked the rural charm of the house and between the two of them, Ilya had more decorative flair than Shane, though admittedly most of the heavy lifting had been done by their interior designer.

He ignored the two front rooms – one would be an office for them both, the other a more 'formal' reception room, and he suspected they would use those rooms little – and headed straight into the big, bright and airy kitchen.

This was the room that had really sold the house for Ilya. His mama always used to say the kitchen was the heart of the home, even if she had been – and he could be honest – absolutely lacking in the culinary arts. She hadn't needed to be. His father's position meant that Irina Rozanova had a housekeeper and a cook to order about, but she had often retreated into their space, anyway, taking up a seat at the small kitchen table to smoke and chatter on the phone and that would be where they would find her when they came home from school. They would do their homework at that table, surrounded by the conversation of women. A safe space, hidden away from their irascible father.

Kitchens had good memories for Ilya and he had wanted the kitchen of his first real home to feel the same way.

They had kept the bones of the kitchen layout but tweaked it slightly, adding a kitchen island with an overhang that fitted four stools. The cabinets had been painted in two tones – the lower a dark sage, the upper a soft cream. The countertops were, after negotiation, wood but had been stained to match the floor. They'd left the beams as they were, their interior designer complaining that otherwise it would be too 'matchy-matchy'.

Heart swelling, Ilya paused to admire the cubby that had been built into the side of the island. Shane's idea. A promise, wrought into the woodwork. The perfect size for a dog bed.

Someone had left a hamper for fruit on the counter and he read the card. *Wishing you a Happy Home!*

He wished it too.

Smiling, he opened the door to the pantry off the kitchen, almost identical to how the previous owners had it, just freshly painted. He would fill this pantry with goodies. Healthy and not-so-healthy treats. Cans of good tomatoes and preserves. All the grains Shane could name. Anything they wanted to cook would be in here outside of the regular meal prep. Real, substantial things that would nourish his body and Shane's.

Off the kitchen was a dining area with a table big enough to take maybe half the Ottawa roster. That terrible little voice inside whispered that no one could join them for a meal in

their secret house before it was pushed aside. Plenty of people could. Bood and Cassie, Stewie and his long-suffering wife, Shane's parents, Sveta, Pike and the lovely Jackie, J.J. and Wiebe and his wife. Connors if he ever came to visit. Actually, they could more than fill that table with people who knew about them. Who loved them (to varying degrees). If Ilya was honest with himself – a rarity – there were people in his life now who knew him at his truest.

That was a big deal. That was— something he should mention to Galina actually. It was a good thought. She encouraged him to relish his good thoughts.

Feeling weighted down with emotion, Ilya continued in his explorations upstairs.

He checked the guest suites first, all identical with king sized beds and fluffy rugs over shining floorboards. He admired the drapes, the linens, all the little touches that made a house look warm and inviting.

In the primary bedroom, Ilya stood stock still in the center and took a deep breath and exhaled. It had been a great, cavernous room when they had first lived here. The previous owners had big wooden wardrobes that they had taken with them, so the first order of business was to have a walk-in closet built. With the exception of the clothes that Shane had tailored for himself, they were of a size for most things and Ilya had always enjoyed the mixing and matching of their wardrobes, though they had to be careful with some of their team branded items. There had been one or two mishaps early in their relationship where Ilya had found himself in the Boston locker room pulling on a T-shirt with a discreet 'Metros' logo on the hem or Shane dragging a Cens hoodie from his kit bag. Would be a hell of a way to come out.

There were drawers for watches. For ties. For socks and racks for more shoes. They should get a chair, Ilya decided, so they could watch each other get ready. God, he was going to fuck Shane in every room of this house.

The rest of the bedroom wasn't too different from how they had left it, except for the window had been replaced with doors out on to a Juliet balcony, which Ilya opened now, letting out the heat but wanting to get the experience.

He leaned over the glass, looking out into view of layered darkness, clouds rolling over the moon and casting flickering silvered light over the trees. Their trees. In the summer, with the screen down, they could sleep like this with the doors open, listen to the sound of the night.

Perfect.

*

In the morning, Ilya made himself a coffee and plonked himself down in the plush sectional in the cozy room off the kitchen. The TV was on so he could watch the highlights from last night's games, but he found himself staring out of the French doors instead.

Apparently, they had deer. Two of them, nuzzling about at the grass around one of the apple trees in between clumps of snow. It was barely daylight, the sky a misty winter blue. The

whole scene looked like a postcard and Ilya realized he had been staring at this scene for more than twenty minutes, coffee cooling.

He awoke from this daze to snap a picture to send to Shane, who would be blissfully asleep, then also sent it to Sveta who would probably call him sentimental or something. But deer! They saw them sometimes at the cottage over the summer – but the cottage itself was a magical place already – just like this house was turning out to be.

Sveta would be right to call him sentimental.

He treated himself to a swim in their newly refurbished heated pool. The water was perfect and it felt surreal to be floating on his back, looking up a winter's sky through planes of glass, outdoors but not quite. The retractable pool enclosure dripped condensation down onto the pool, a constant, pleasant noise. He wondered if it would be a good place for tropical plants. A few parrots and it would be like a rainforest.

He got out when he was pruney and changed in the pool house that was equipped like a spa in a 5* hotel with a double-sinked bathroom and a room with benches and cubbies for towels and, of course, the sauna and steam room. God. Alexei would hate him for this. The built-in hairdryer with diffuser for Ilya's curls. The mirror that didn't fog up. His own sauna. The inherent *excess*. The *softness*. He had, this unpleasant voice in his mind, suggested to Shane that it wasn't necessary to have this little space. That they could just jog back to the house and one of the bathrooms in the downstairs of the house. Shane had looked so genuinely aghast at this idea – *But how will we use the pool in the winter? What about when we have friends over?* – that he had succumbed immediately.

Ilya trotted back to the house along the red-brick pathway, used to the clashing sense of past and present, the rejection of a cultural authority he didn't actually always completely reject. He was still technically a Russian citizen, still building a case for permanent residency. Farah had begun the negotiations for the extension of his contract with Ottawa, and he would be relieved when the ink was dry on that. He did not want to go back. Could not.

Marriage was the back-up, of course. The lifeboat that hung about his neck. Shane would marry him. Shane had all but asked. But Ilya did not want his marriage to Shane to be anything other than simply a desire to tie their lives together in a symbol of love respected by the world. His parents' unhappy marriage had been a business arrangement. An unplanned pregnancy made legitimate with paperwork, a piece of information that his mother – at her lowest – made plain to both of her sons. A burden Alexei carried bitterly.

They *would* get married. And Ilya would ask him – he would get down on one knee surrounded by candles, at the cottage maybe, out on the deck. But he would probably have to wait to do it when he was a permanent resident. When they were out and safe, when they could have an engagement party with their friends and loved ones. That would be the best thing to do.

Fuck, and it would be a big wedding – it would have to be with the entirety of the Metros and Cens in attendance. Maybe Yuna would want it professionally photographed for one of those magazines. Or maybe that was tasteless, he didn't know. Shane wouldn't like it, he knew that,

but he often did things for his mother that he didn't like. Maybe Ilya would have to put his foot down for him.

This was a far-off problem. Nevertheless, Ilya turned at the side porch to study the large back yard with its fresh, blank borders waiting for spring to arrive. One of the scattered patios had an arbor now, where white rambling roses had been planted either side. Having never had a single thought about his wedding in his life, Ilya decided they could exchange vows under that. They could have one of those big gazebos for the dinner. Flowers and those little twinkly lights. A summer wedding. Kids would love it – they could play in the pool. And with the dogs.

Yes.

*

Shane called as soon as he woke up. "Take me on a tour, then," he said, all rumpled and sleepy in his hotel bed. Ilya took a screengrab. He often did. More than ninety percent of them were embarrassingly domestic photos like this, of the Shane no one but him saw. Shane the man. Not the hockey player. Not the Captain of the Montreal Metros. Not the good son and responsible friend. His pretty Shane.

Ilya took him on a tour, pausing patiently when Shane wanted to look at the tiny details like the placement of sockets and for Ilya to test the water pressure in the guest baths. He showed him the yard through the kitchen windows. It was snowing lightly. "I haven't been down to the dungeon yet."

Shane giggled. He was *delightful*. It was unfortunate that Ilya was not so delightful first thing in the morning – much more likely to pull a pillow over his head and complain about the early hour – and thus usually missed delightful Shane in person. "Skipping training hmm?"

"I swam instead."

His face lit up. "How was it? Did it feel good on your knee?"

Ilya had a very, very minor collision early in the season, from which he had an equally *minor* MCL sprain. It had healed. He'd barely skipped a game; the Cens medical staff were frustratingly oversensitive to something the Raiders would have all-but ignored. Shane would not stop talking about it. To Ilya, it felt vaguely competitive, as if he was emphasizing his current health, but it was also possible – Galina said – that Shane was trying to express 'care'. Whatever. "Is fine, Hollander."

"Okay, but swimming is supposed to be really—"

"I know, I know," Ilya interrupted before this could turn into the usual thing. He also didn't want to admit that he had gone for a swim *explicitly* for this reason rather than use the treadmill or any of the cardio machines. "Do you want to see the gym or not?"

He did. They had decided the best use of the dungeon space was to turn it into a fully equipped gym. They had two of everything. Two treadmills, two Stairmasters, two Pelotons,

two rowing machines, two benches, doubles of all weights. And then there was the trophy room, of course.

“Is it light enough?”

The old dungeon— sorry, *playroom*, had two sets of hopper windows. Their architect had designed, and their contractor had excavated, the room so that one end of the gym now had floor to ceiling doors leading out into a patio. It let in more light and made it less like a room where punishment happened, even if cardio did feel like a punishment. “It’s nice,” Ilya said. It was more than nice. “In the spring and summer maybe even more so. We need a TV.”

Shane did not approve of televisions in gyms. He thought it distracted from the work. Ilya thought it distracted enough to make the work tolerable. Then again, now he had Shane to distract him so maybe he didn’t need the TV. Watching his ass move on a Stairmaster was a thing of beauty.

He told Shane this. Shane blushed. “Well, you too,” he said in that adorably embarrassed way he did when he voiced a compliment.

“Oh, yes?” Ilya teased, though he was pitifully hungry for more. “How so?”

“Your ass. Thighs. Your arms. Just— all of you.” Shane shifted suspiciously in bed, no longer looking quite so soft and sleepy. “Umm...”

“Wow, cannot believe we are christening the gym so soon,” Ilya said, sticking his hand in his pants to palm his hardening dick. He could absolutely believe it, actually. “Take your clothes off.”

*

The Pervert: *I’m thinking of sending Shane flowers for Valentine’s*

Ilya knew this was a joke. It was part of the game they played.

Even still.

Ilya: *The fuck you are*

The Pervert: 😊

The Pervert: *Fine. A text it is.*

Ilya: *also no*

The Pervert: *I’ve emailed you the details of that designer*

The Pervert: *they are very discreet.*

Ilya: *Good.*

Ilya: *Thank you.*

The Pervert: *пожалуйста*

The Pervert: *do you know his ring finger size?*

Fuck. Ilya did not. When Shane wore his Championship ring, it went on his middle finger, not his ring finger. Now what? Getting the ring the right size was probably a pretty basic requirement for an engagement ring.

The Pervert: *piece of string, tie it around his finger when he's asleep*

Ilya: *how do you know this?*

The Pervert: *how do you think?*

Ilya wasn't going to participate with this topic any further. He didn't want Petrov to think they were becoming friends.

*

Shane sent Ilya a message as soon as he landed, as he always did.

Jane: *Landed. Hayden snored the entire flight.*

Jane: *Need to get new noise cancelling headphones.*

From the comfort of their bed where he had been dozing waiting for Shane's message, Ilya opened up Google, searched 'best noise canceling headphones', read half a dozen reviews and ordered the most expensive pair to arrive next day.

Lily: *Welcome home, lyubimyy*

Jane: *think I'll drive home tonight*

Lily: *Is very late*

Jane: *I know but I don't feel too tired. The Ducks were a walk in the park and I want to wake up with you*

Shane killed him, he really did. Ilya didn't have the words, or he did but the English translation sounded literally like he was an insane person, but he did have emojis.

Lily: 

Jane: 

*

Ilya intended to stay awake, he really did. But he'd had an intensive practice and the bed had 600-thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets, a mattress that cradled his body like a lover, and the

room smelled of the ecologically friendly cleaner that Shane preferred and therefore he preferred. He was home.

He was unconscious in minutes which was, actually, a miracle. He was not a person who slept well.

Ilya woke to warmth and the scent-knowledge that his favorite person in the world was pressed up against his back. He had an instant reaction to this and not the good one.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” Shane whispered to his neck, his cold nose pressed to Ilya’s skin.

“Fuck you,” Ilya whispered, crying. Fucking *fuck*.

“Mmm, yes, okay, asshole.” Shane’s mouth pressed against him, arms weaving around Ilya, creating a cocoon of safety. “It’s okay, it’s okay.”

It was *not* okay. He couldn’t even convince himself that these were angry tears. He hated everyone. Himself. Shane. Antidepressants. Fucking therapy that had opened the door to *this*. Whatever. *Why was he crying?* He was *happy*.

Eventually, thankfully, humiliatingly, the tears stopped and Ilya was able to take a normal breath. “I want you to ignore that,” he told Shane, trying not to sniff and consequently sounding stuffy.

“Sure,” Shane said, lying through his fucking perfect teeth. He nuzzled the back of Ilya’s head. “Are you, like, sad or—?”

Ilya wasn’t. He didn’t think. When he was depressed, when the great fog descended, he was *sad* but not like tears sad. It was different. A different kind of feeling. “I don’t think so,” he said, exhaling heavily. “I think, maybe, this is—” Galina called it something. *Emotionally overwhelmed*. Which sounded weak to Ilya. “Just— a lot.”

Shane squeezed him. “Yeah, it’s a big deal. Being home again.”

“Yes,” said Ilya, the word hissing through his teeth. It *was* a big deal. It felt like a big deal. He rolled over in Shane’s arms. “Let me suck your dick,” he said, because that was what he knew.

“Okay,” said Shane, because he wasn’t insane.

When they kissed it tasted salty. Shane politely ignored this and moaned so prettily when Ilya deep throatied him.

*

Ilya woke in Shane’s arms, and it was *perfect*. His alarm going off because he needed to head back to Ottawa for training was not perfect. He groaned.

Shane kicked him out of bed. Almost literally. “Go shower. Go, go,” he muttered, pulling the duvet over his head. It was 5.30am. He didn’t have to be up for another hour for his normal

morning routine.

“Fuck,” Ilya muttered, feeling hungover.

“Shower,” Shane told him, rustling behind him, rolling himself up in their duvet.

The bathroom was still vaguely unfamiliar, with the walk-in shower and all the complicated nozzles. He blasted himself with hot water, face-first, and then soaped himself up quickly. This bathroom had heated floors and a towel warmer thing which was a fucking godsend because Shane liked a *cool house* and the thermostat was set to some abominable temperature. He would look at that properly when he had time to himself again. Maybe he could sneak up the temperature by a degree or two.

He dressed in the walk-in closet, half of his things still in boxes, and then stood over Shane whilst he brushed his teeth. He couldn't see anything, just a lump under the covers and a shock of dark hair against the pillows. It still made him smile.

He returned to the bathroom and rinsed. “Will you be here when I come home?”

“You have that birthday thing.”

“Fuck,” said Ilya. He did. “I’ll only have one drink.”

“You should socialize.”

Coming from Shane, Prince of the Introverts, this was truly something. “I’ll do that when you’re away.”

“Okay, I’ll be here anyway,” Shane exhaled. “Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

*

This very much set the tone for the next few weeks. They’d see each other in bed, have sleepy sex – usually a hand-job or maybe a sloppy blow-job – and then kick each other out, lovingly, the next morning. They managed one morning together, spent in the gym and then on the floor of the gym, Ilya holding Shane’s hands above his head as he fucked him slowly, holding eye contact the whole time, and then they made protein shakes before each of them headed off to the airport.

“I know we have a couple of days together around the, ah, 14th.”

“Yes,” said Ilya, drawing it out, nervously watching Shane’s face.

“It’s Valentine’s.”

Duh. “Yes.”

“I don’t want to do anything,” Shane said, frowning.

“Okay.”

“I don’t want it to be a big deal.”

Ilya was a little irritated. “I said okay?”

“I know but—” Shane poured the contents of the blender into Ilya’s shaker, then his own. Ilya basically hated every protein shake that Shane had ever made him but drank them because he was in love but also possibly because they were very good for him. “Some people think it’s a big deal.”

Ilya took a small sip of his shake and tried not to shudder. It was so green it was like algae was coating the inside of his mouth. “People like Hayden.”

“Well. Yeah. He’s the only person I know who is in a long-term relationship. Him and Jackie do all the things. Dinner and shit.”

What Shane meant was that the Pikes were the only ones he talked to about relationships – and even then it was probably mostly to Jackie. Jackie Pike was a surprisingly sensible woman, considering she had married a numbskull. “Do your parents do Valentine’s?”

“Oh, God, no,” said Shane quickly, shaking his head, sending black strands flying. It was almost long enough to tie back now, Ilya thought. He enjoyed grabbing handfuls of it. “My mom thinks its bullshit. My dad will get her flowers, though.”

This didn’t sound particularly equitable to Ilya but he knew better than to comment on the vagaries of Shane’s parent’s marriage which was for the most part the best example of the institution Ilya had ever witnessed.

“Do you,” Ilya chose his words carefully, “still not want to do something because it also the anniversary of when we— I,” he amended, when Shane twitched, “broke us up?”

Reluctantly, Shane looked at him. “I guess. I know it’s been a while. Is that really pathetic?”

Was it pathetic? That Ilya had broken both their hearts so badly that two years later they still danced around this day like a bonfire of their hearts? No. Obviously not. He still remembered Shane’s face, the angry pain etched into the corners of his mouth, the wet well of despair in his eyes. And then the bloody freefall of his own heart as the door had closed behind him and the car had taken Shane away.

“No, Shane,” Ilya said quietly, reaching for him. Shane came easily and they held each other in the middle of their beautiful kitchen. “I wish I had never.”

“I wish that, too. Though— I know why you did it. I understand it better now.”

“Oh, good, maybe you could explain it to me,” Ilya joked poorly.

“Hey, we were both pretending.” Shane squeezed him. “I’m as culpable as you. And maybe we needed it. To get to where we are now.”

“Maybe,” said Ilya, unsure. He had not liked who he was, the months they had been apart. Shane would not have liked him, that was for certain. He had been vicious and sleepless. He had nearly broken Sveta. Stewie had taken him aside several times to ask him, beg him, to calm down.

He pressed his nose into the juncture between Shane’s neck and shoulder and regulated himself with the smell and the feel of him. But there wasn’t much time for cuddling and they untangled eventually, grabbed their suitcases and towed everything to their cars. Their *identical* cars. They kissed, a delightful almost perfunctory married kiss that Ilya relished particularly because it was so perfunctory and then, because Shane’s flight was slightly earlier than his own, he watched him leave and waited fifteen minutes in his warming car before he followed, going in the opposite direction.

*

The Centaurs rookies were a delight and were a reflection of a team that Ilya was coming to realize was intrinsically significantly more open-minded than the Metros were, for all the Metros had this shining rainbow reputation now. His own rookies back in his Raiders days had been little shits – curfew-cutting, drinking, whoring around. Nothing that Ilya hadn’t done himself, of course, and he too had been the bane of his captain’s existence.

The Cens rookies liked to play video games in their hotel rooms. If there was drinking, it was mild and frequently zero alcohol. The worst he had to do was knock on their doors before curfew and chivvy them back to their rooms. No one had even thrown up in his presence yet.

Stewie, too, thought it was bizarre. “Was it Mario Kart again?” he asked, when Ilya joined him back at the bar.

“Yup.” Pretty sure that had an E rating.

“Remember when you and Marly got locked out on the roof of that Hylton—”

“Hyatt,” Ilya corrected, fondly. A good night. What he could remember of it until he was found by LeClair and subject to a screaming rant he had never before witnessed, red faced with spittle flying from his mouth. Later, much later, he had realized LeClair had probably been afraid.

“Oh, yeah, Detroit. We almost called the cops. Thought you guys had been murdered.” Stewie snorted and took another swig of his beer. “Did you ever hear from that girl again?”

“Ah, no. I think she swore off hockey players after that night.”

“Shame. She was hot.”

Ilya’s memory of this girl was vague. Blonde, maybe? He had tried to ensure they were blonde after a few months when he’d subconsciously found himself chasing down dark-haired, freckled girls before realizing he was an embarrassment and actively trying to spread his largesse. He’d like to think he was an equal opportunities lover.

On the bar in front of them, Ilya and Stewie had been drawing out different lines. The Cens had six coaches. Their Head Coach, Tobart, was sixty-six and he had been the Cen's coach for nearly ten years. Similar to Theriault, who had been the Metros coach for the same amount of time before he had been 'let go', Tobart had never been successful. He came off as an affable guy but in reality was a stubborn meathead, who had consistently led the team to mediocracy, which if Ilya was being kind might also have been a reflection of the quality of the players.

Now he had spent more time with him, he knew that Tobart's main strength was that he had somehow ensured that the very nice but not hockey knowledgeable owners viewed him with great fondness and therein lay his real success. In reality, his plays were passive shit, and his understanding of team chemistry was poor. In Boston, he would have been fired after a season or maybe two.

Tobart had two assistant coaches who were his devoted followers and followed his bidding like he was God's gift to the MLH. No doubt they were aware of their own mediocracy and based their continued employment on Tobart.

Of the remaining six – not including the goalie coach, whom Ilya paid little attention to – there was Landry, who was their development coach, thirty-five, wet behind the ears, Hawksy, who was forty, a former MLH player himself and reasonably decent as a defense coach or would be if they had an actual defensive line, and Stewie. Who Ilya had begged to move to Ottawa with his wife and their young son. Begged.

It had not been his proudest moment. At the same time, if he hadn't they would not be here, rewriting plays for Stewie to work his magic on Tobart. Stewie had managed LeClair, after all. Stewie knew all the tricks.

Would need more than Stewie to fix their defense, of course, but that would have to wait. He and Stewie already had a date to watch the Prospect cup together, keep their eyes on some options.

*

Ilya shoved Shane against the nearest wall and crushed their mouths together because that was tradition. And seconds later Shane dropped to his knees because that, too, was tradition – though probably Shane dropped to his knees just because he needed to, a fact that Ilya thanked God for on a near daily basis.

He pressed his forehead against the patterned wallpaper of the hotel and watched his boyfriend suck his dick. The hottest, hottest sight in the universe right up until Ilya remembered the other hottest sight in the universe and he grabbed Shane by the arms and pulled him up towards the bed, his wet dick bobbing angrily.

Shane's bereft, teary face looked at him askance, like Ilya had taken his favorite toy away, *bozhe moy*. "On your hands and knees, Hollander," Ilya instructed, swallowing spit.

Shane's expression cleared beautifully and he stripped and crawled onto the bed, dragging a pillow towards himself so he could cling to it.

Ilya had to take a moment, fingers tight around the base of his dick. Shane's body was sheer artistry. His muscled thighs and tight ass, the curvature of his spine, all beautifully defined... and waiting for Ilya's attention.

He stepped forward and lightly bit one buttock, grazing his teeth against firm flesh. Because he could. "You are so beautiful," he told the dimples on Shane's lower back, pressing his thumbs and fingers into Shane's plush thighs.

"Please fuck me," Shane asked sweetly, arching just a little bit more.

Ilya parted Shane's ass to admire the little pucker of his asshole. So sweet and tightly furled. It was a little damp from the no doubt very thorough shower. He ran the edge of his thumb over it, watched it clench, then gave in and gave it a little lick.

Shane moaned into the pillow.

Ilya had eaten out a few assholes in his life. Male and female. No one had ever been so wholly responsive as Shane. From the first time, even plainly shocked that Ilya would want to stick his tongue in the most intimate part of Shane's body, Shane had thrown himself whole-heartedly into the act. It was a heady, heady thing and he often found himself caught up in it as he jabbed his tongue inside him, eking out those helpless little noises, getting that little hole looser and looser, ready to take his cock.

"Okay, okay, enough, asshole," Shane groaned, reaching behind to ineffectively swat at Ilya.

"But I am making love to you," Ilya protested helplessly, resting a knee on the edge of the bed and fisting his rock-hard dick.

"You know I hate that expression."

"You are wrong to. Is beautiful expression." Still, Ilya grabbed a packet of lube and tore it open with his teeth, drizzled some on the needy hole and eased a finger inside. "I get to make love to you for four nights."

"Fucking love All Stars, oh *holy fuck*," shouted Shane into his pillow as Ilya added a second and angled both to brush his prostate.

*

Unlike Shane, whose mama part-timed as his publicist, Ilya had an actual publicist who had been recommended to him by Farah. Mike Colson was barely five-foot eight, had a voice like a foghorn and had spent the last two years lining up a series of sponsorships for the kind of brands that would have made Ilya's father spontaneously combust.

On set for Dior, Ilya sent Shane a photo one of the shots of him, captured on the monitor. He was lounging, strategically naked with his abs and hair oiled-up, on the hood of a car, surrounded by palms and ferns and other greenery. There was a greenscreen behind him which from the concepts he'd seen would have more tropical scenery. It was supposed to

evoke the tropical smell of the aftershave. Which, if one considered the sportscar, he could only assume included top-notes of diesel.

Jane: *Is that oil or water?*

Lily: *Oil*

Jane: *is it uncomfortable?*

This was such a predictable response from Shane that Ilya couldn't even be offended. He hid his smile behind the plastic cup of water he had been given. It was maybe one-hundred degrees in this studio, and he was wearing a fluffy robe over the layers of oil and, probably, sweat. He was going to need to exfoliate to get this off.

Finally, Shane came through with the appropriate response.

Jane: *can you get copies*

Lily: *this is better*

Jane: *You are ridiculously hot.*

Jane: *sorry should have said that first*

Jane: *remember when you fucked me on your Aston Martin*

"We'll just be a few more minutes, Ilya," one of the assistants cooed at him whilst Ilya's blood pressure soared. Shane was probably at training. And just casually bringing up scorching memories of their sexual past, no big deal. *Yes*, Shane, he did remember fucking him on his favorite car. It had featured in his spank back for years. He would never sell that car because of it. "Can I get you anything else?"

From the way this woman was looking at him, Ilya guessed she was hoping he was going to suggest a private room. Having a reputation was really unfortunate these days.

He smiled blandly. "Thank you, no, I'm good." He lifted his phone to suggest that he was very occupied, thank you. Then looked down pointedly.

Oh, look. He had another devastating message from Shane, though he'd pivoted, of course, because his boyfriend's brain was from Mars and Ilya's was from Venus.

Jane: *should we just change our names now?*

Lily: ???

Jane: *I'm going to change your name to your real one*

Jane: *this is ridiculous*

Jane: *[Image]*

The corners of Ilya's mouth turned down with unexpected tenderness. Shane had changed his name on his phone. *Ilya Rozanov (Captain, Centaurs 🏹)*. Of course.

Ilya: *Do you have your notifications turned off?*

Jane: *just the preview part*

Jane: *it's fine if you text me now. We're friends.*

Shaking his head at this unusual boldness of his boyfriend, though secretly delighted, Ilya clicked through to Shane's contact and changed his name. But, because he was not an insane person, he just wrote *Shane*. And then added a 🍑, which was what he really wanted to accompany Shane's name. It was perfectly normal to add a shit-ton of ridiculous emojis to the names of male friends. He'd had four eggplant emojis after Marly's name for years. Boody's was the panting emoji. Hazy was a hockey net because obviously.

But Shane would worry about this. So, sighing, Ilya deleted the 🍑. Then added a 🐼 because that felt like something jokey 'rivals' might have. Then, because on reflection he hated that, even as a joke, he deleted the 🐼. Instead Ilya smirked and added a 😾 because if anyone asked there was plenty of online material of Shane's angry kitten face, usually when he was yelling at another player. Or Ilya. In bed.

He sent a screengrab to Shane and awaited the anticipated meltdown.

Shane 😾: *[Image]*

Shane had changed his name to *Ilya* 🐼. Ilya's bottom lip trembled perilously.

Ilya 🐼: *Perfect. I love it.*

So there it was. Shane and Ilya. Finally, after all this time. This was momentous and he was in New York and Shane was in fucking Colorado. And, once again, Shane had outdone him on the romance stakes.

Fuck.

Ilya 🐼: *Facetime tonight?*

Shane 😾: *definitely*

Shane 😾: *can you take some of the oil stuff with you*

Shane 😾: *it's really doing it for me lol*

*

They crept relentlessly towards February 14th and Ilya, helpless, ordered flowers late one night – not roses, he didn't think Shane would like that, but white, red and purple ranunculus

and he specified an odd number, which was a Russian thing that clearly confused the florist he spoke to, and he would have to explain to Shane.

“I’ll be home on the 13th,” Shane said to him, yawning on the phone. “Late afternoon, I think.”

“Mmm, okay, I’ll be—” Ilya squinted at the flight booking Jenny, their travel coordinator had sent out, as he continued his cool down on the stationary bike, “We land at 5pm.”

“Okay. I think I get in at 4pm. So, we can make dinner or something. I’ll have a think.”

Perplexed, Ilya frowned at his sweaty reflection in the mirror of the hotel gym. “Not... generic protein and rice?”

“No,” said Shane, sounding off. “Maybe something nice. Steak?”

“*Steak?*”

Red meat? Who was this person?

“Yeah,” Shane-the-pod-person continued, “I could do some skin on fries in the air fryer. Jackie has a recipe with low cal spray; apparently, they taste like the real thing.”

“Sweetheart, are you all right?” Ilya asked, genuinely concerned.

“I just— it might be nice. We can have a nice meal together.”

Oh fuck, Ilya thought, struck by a hideous realization. It was a Valentine’s meal. A pre-Valentine’s meal. Shane was winning at romance *again*.

“It *would* be nice. It *will* be. Why don’t you let me organize that?” His feet ground to a halt. This would mean finding a good butcher short notice because a Valentine’s meal needed to be *special*. Fillet steak. Argentinian or something.

It wasn’t like he could ring up Shane’s nutritionist, who had their meals delivered to the house. *Hi Ali, we’ve not met but you unquestioningly agreed to double all of Shane’s meals and send them to two separate locations – could you include two very specific steaks in this week’s delivery?*

“It’s okay. I can get my mom to drop stuff off for us.”

Ilya cringed. “Oh yes. How convenient.” Just what every adult man wanted: his mother-in-law involved in his romance.

Shane seemed to take this as a concession and moved on because the decision had been made. “Hey, saw you swapped around the lines last night, how’s that working out? You nearly won!”

“Oh, fuck off, Shane.”

*

“I need to fly back earlier,” Ilya whispered to Jenny from Ops. He was standing outside the guest locker room, periodically smiling vaguely to anyone who passed.

“We have a block booking, Ilya.”

“I realize that. Can I just— buy my own ticket? I will make my own way to the airport.”

“That’s not— I mean you can,” she said, sighing as if Ilya was making her life particularly difficult. “But it’s not really—”

“Jenny,” he interrupted her. Jenny was a real stickler, he had learned. Back in Boston he had pretty much been able to get away with anything thanks to the correct application of charm. Jenny was regimental and found his attempts to work the system very tedious. “I need to be back.”

“Is this for an appointment? Does Tobart know?”

“It is. It’s for a very important appointment.”

“And Tobart has signed off on this?”

Tobart couldn’t give less of a shit. “No, he fucking hasn’t, Jenny, I have to get home to my boyfriend before Valentine’s, as a *surprise*, and I need to be back *earlier* so I can pull off a fucking miracle.”

“Oh.”

“Yes. *Oh.*”

“Oh, wow. Yes. Okay,” Jenny said. He heard keyboard keys clattering. “I can get you on the 9am?”

Ilya sighed. “Yes. Perfect.”

*

Yuna: *Okay, I have two fillet steaks*

Yuna: *The ingredients for that low-cal peppercorn sauce recipe*

Yuna: *Potatoes and watercress salad*

Yuna: *and David has got you a good bottle of red*

Yuna: *I’ll drop by yours in the morning and put it all in the fridge*

Yuna: *not the wine obviously*

Ilya: *Thank you* 🍷

Ilya: appreciate it so much

Yuna: I can't believe Shane is eating steak during the season

Yuna: are you sure about dessert? Could get you a tiramisu

Ilya: I'm not going to push my luck

*

The bouquet of flowers was waiting in the parcel box that Shane had arranged with its special code that allowed the courier to drop them off inside the property without having to actually come up to the house. An extra layer of security along with the fake name they'd agreed to address all their mail to.

Ilya was amused that, like Shane, he'd decided to make his romantic gesture the day before Valentine's Day, so he placed the bouquet on the kitchen island and made sure the little card was prominent. He'd never sent anyone flowers before.

There was another parcel in the box, too, with a post-mark from New York, but that was not for today. That Ilya would hide – somewhere – until the time was right.

The house had been cleaned. They had a very complicated, rigid timetable for all their staff, mindful of the matrix that was their combined schedules. All of the staff were arranged by a firm who organized such things for the uber wealthy and all under NDAs, of course. He never saw them which rubbed him a little the wrong way, ever aware as he was of the close relationships his mama had with her staff. Back in Boston, Masha had looked after his house for him. A terrifying Russian woman he'd inherited from Popov, their back-up goalie in Ilya's first season. He'd pretty much bullied Ilya into taking her on after he'd retired and they had subsequently exchanged a handful of words when she had worked for him, usually her requests for obscure Russian cleaning supplies. Ilya had given her a bonus when he left Boston that had let her retire in comfort.

Ilya took a quick shower to wash off the plane and then had a nap and then, vainly, a second, more intensive shower followed by a little extra prep. A close, meticulous shave. A little grooming of his pubic hair, nothing too much, just a tidy. Followed by his curl routine for his hair and then whilst they dried to an appropriate degree for styling, he sat and clipped his toenails, filed his nails and buffed them.

For clothes he didn't go overboard. A thin, tight light-grey cashmere silk Tom Ford sweater, a pair of black jeans he'd had since he was a rookie and were a shade too tight now and a Gucci belt.

He spritzed himself with some aftershave that he knew Shane liked because he always huffed him appreciatively when he wore it. A glance in the mirror confirmed what he would know; Shane was going to flatline.

Heh.

Downstairs, he prepared. He put a little music on, low, something Shane could easily ignore. He laid the dining table, arranging candles and plates and folded napkins into a pleasing arrangement he found on YouTube. Dinner itself wasn't too complicated. He took the steaks out to come to room temperature, covered them. He reread the ingredients for the peppercorn sauce – the heavy cream in the traditional recipe swapped for a light roux with skim milk. Do-able. He took out the Snickers from the freezer. It would be easier to melt them if they weren't rock-hard. The strawberries would be better room temperature, too. He left the watercress in the fridge but whipped up a quick dressing which he'd put on the side. With the sauce, it would probably be too much for Shane, but Ilya had never met a cold green vegetable that wasn't improved by a vinaigrette.

His phone chirped just before 6.30. *Shane is at the gate*, the app told him. He had an inexplicable rush of first-date nerves, as if this wasn't the boy— the *man* he had been involved with since he was a teenager.

Still. Checking his hair, and that the curl that he had arranged to fall over his forehead was behaving itself, he hurried to meet Shane at the door, pulling it open just as he reached it. And then he posed.

Shane blinked at him as the shard of light from the front entrance cut through the dark. His brown eyes swept Ilya from head to toe. His cheeks flushed pink. "Wow," he said.

"Hello," said Ilya, very pleased with this reaction.

"Um. Wow?" Shane said again. He was dazed. The tops of his ears, revealed behind the backwards cap he habitually wore post-game, turned red and not with cold.

Ilya was *delighted*. "Would you like to come in?" he suggested, stepping back.

"Uhhh, yeah, yeah," Shane said, hurrying inside, barely taking his eyes from Ilya. His suitcase dragged along the floor, almost forgotten. "I... I need to shower," he said, his voice low. He was staring at Ilya's pecs which were, admittedly, very prominent in this sweater.

He flexed, just a little.

"Oh?" Ilya's cheeks hurt from smiling. "Take your time."

"Um. Yeah." Shane experienced a narrow miss with a wall, too busy staring at Ilya.

Ilya decided to torment him further. "Hello kiss?"

Shane narrowed his eyes. He wasn't an idiot. "Do you *want* to fuck in the front hall?"

"Always, Shane, always."

"Fuck," Shane muttered, pulling up his suitcase like a safety blanket and scurrying away and up the stairs.

Forty-five minutes later, Ilya's boyfriend descended. His hair was clean and shiny and smooth – he'd used Ilya's Dyson hairdryer, then – his face scrubbed, he was wearing a tight white T-shirt and black jeans and, of course, white sports socks. Ilya was instantly *so hard* it was diabolical. Pathological.

They should have fucked in the front hallway. It would have taken the edge off.

"Wine?" Ilya offered, trying to breathe normally.

"Um, yeah," Shane accepted dumbly, even though it was mid-season. His eyes drifted down Ilya's body, visibly dilated. He knew how he felt. He could see Shane's nipples through that shirt. Could practically feel them on his tongue.

Ilya poured him a glass. The *glug glug glug* was oddly obscene? He then pushed a bottle of water to him as well. He wasn't a total asshole.

Shane took a sip of wine and licked his lips. "Ilya?"

"Yes?"

"You look amazing."

It was ridiculous. Ilya had been flattered, complimented, *hit on*, by hundreds, if not thousands of people, in his life. He was briefly unable to respond to this compliment from his boyfriend. "Thank you. You are very beautiful," he managed, shyly.

Shane put the glass down. Hard. "Ilya?" he whispered, almost a whine.

He didn't recall moving. He really didn't. Between one breath and the next, they were christening the kitchen floor. Violently, barely taking their clothes off, just their dicks out and their hands all over each other, though Ilya managed to shove Shane's T-shirt up so he could suck on a nipple, desperately. Ilya hadn't come so quickly since he was an actual teenager. Actually, since their first time. Jesus Christ.

It seemed to do the trick, though. Significantly more relaxed, they cleaned themselves up with kitchen towel and, giggling, relaxed, slotted onto the kitchen stools whereupon Shane noticed the flowers for the first time.

"Are these... for me?"

Ilya hooked his foot around Shane's ankle. "Yes, Hollander."

"Oh." He seemed to melt. "No one's ever got me flowers before." Then, embarrassed, corrected himself. "I guess guys don't really get flowers, do they?"

This was of course devastating, and also Ilya's fault. He resolved to correct this egregious error. There would be flowers. Weekly. "Guys can get flowers. Flowers are gender neutral." This was something their new social media guy said all the time. *Gender neutral*.

“Sure,” said Shane, though he clearly doubted this. “I mean. I guess they can be. These are pretty. What are they? They’re kind of like roses.”

“Ranunculus. And—” Slowly, Ilya explained the deliberate color choices. Red for love and passion, of course. White for purity. Purple for success. It was kind of a wish for their relationship. He didn’t say that part out loud.

“And they’re an odd number. That’s what you do in Russia,” Shane pre-empted, surprising him.

“How did you know that?” he asked sharply. Somewhat predictably, Ilya thought of the other Russian man Shane knew. And his threat to send Shane flowers. He felt his blood pressure creeping up. If that asshole—

“I think Sveta mentioned it,” Shane said vaguely, a little frown line appearing between his brows.

Oh.

Ilya hid his guilty wince behind his wine glass. “Why would you be talking to Svet about flowers?”

“She was telling me about her Valentine’s plans.”

“Ah,” said Ilya, understanding immediately that she had been meddling. At a guess, she was where the romantic dinner idea had come from. It had honestly never occurred to him that he could weaponize Svet for the purposes of romancing Shane. “Yes, with the boyfriend she is not sure about.”

“Marcus. Yeah, he sounds like he has more money than sense. He got her some expensive bracelet, you know. Too expensive.”

“You have also been gossiping about her boyfriend.” Ilya was both confused and delighted. He thought Shane and Svet only exchanged messages about hockey. He didn’t realize there was actual conversation. This was momentous.

Shane shrugged. “Not gossip.” It was definitely gossip, but possibly Hollander didn’t know it was. “She just mentioned a couple of things. I think she could do better.”

This did not bode well for his drinks. “I am meeting him after the next Boston game.”

“Yeah, she said,” Shane said and Ilya noted, because he paid attention to these things, that there was nothing in Shane’s tone that suggested discomfort. He had not always been very comfortable with Svet’s existence. Though he tried, sweetly, stubbornly, to be so. “Maybe we could set her up with someone.”

“Not a hockey player,” Ilya grunted. “I have tried.”

“Oh, God, no. She’s much too smart for a hockey player.”

“Your best friend is a hockey player.” Wait. “*I am a hockey player.*”

“Yes, but you are an exception,” Shane said, giving Ilya a warm look, his palm on Ilya’s thigh.

Ilya smirked. “I notice you said nothing about Pike.”

“Shall we make dinner?”

*

The steak and skin-on fries were genuinely delicious. And the fake peppercorn was a success, though Shane was sparing with it. The melted Snickers over strawberries was the *real* winner, though, and their fingers grew sticky as they goofily fed each other across the table, an act that grew increasingly messy as it devolved into very tongue-forward kissing.

“I have to wash my hands. I’m going to get chocolate over your nice sweater,” Shane demanded, pulling back with spit-slicked pink lips. There was chocolate on his nose. “I’ll bet it’s dry clean only.”

Ilya chased his mouth, helplessly. “I’ll come with you.”

“All the way to the kitchen sink? Sure,” Shane snickered and, hands held up in the air, they continued to kiss and sort of lick each other, bumping into walls and doorways and stools and cabinets as they went.

Ilya ‘helped’ Shane wash his hands, then ‘helped’ him take off his T-shirt and Shane ‘helped’ take off Ilya’s and, look, they were on the floor again. “Can’t believe you wore a fucking chastity belt,” Shane muttered furiously as he wrestled with the admittedly complicated buckle for the second time that evening. He still had chocolate on his nose. Ilya was saving it to lick off later.

“It’s Gucci,” Ilya complained, laughing. Before Shane he hadn’t really known it was possible to be both impossibly horny and also hysterical with laughter.

Ilya’s hand slapped at the sliding cabinet of the kitchen island, pushing the door open. There was a little bowl in which he had shoved a handful of lube packets.

Shane, eyes dilated with lust, gasped. “Did you— hide lube all over our house?”

“I did, yes, see how sensible it was.” Ilya was moments away from slicking up his fingers before he thought again. “Wait. I want to fuck you in our bed.”

“You can do that.”

“Nooooo, Hollander.” He’d had a plan. Wine. Fancy dinner. Strawberries. Then slow fucking in their expensive sheets with candles. “Like— *romantically.*”

Shane took hold of Ilya’s hair and yanked. “Fucking fuck me now, Rozanov, and you can fuck me however you want later,” he instructed through his teeth.

“Wow,” said Ilya, his dick spurting pre-come like a teenager, “Holy shit, Shane.”

*

They finished off the strawberries and the wine, in their underwear, and talked sensibly about their last couple of games. Shane admired the bruise on Ilya’s thigh. Ilya showed him a clip of a particularly neat little goal of his that a fan had taken that was from a better angle than the professionals. Then he carried the candles upstairs and Shane took the flowers and arranged them on the antique dresser in their bedroom so he could see them when he woke up.

(Weekly flowers. *Weekly*.)

Then, *then*, he got to make love to his boyfriend – *romantically* – Shane riding him like some candle-lit fucking god, Jesus Christ, Ilya couldn’t blink because he was worried he’d miss something. He reached out to touch golden skin, trace the lines of Shane’s tensed abdominals as Shane’s hips stroked Ilya in his tight heat.

“Will you come like this?” Shane asked him in his dreamy low bedroom voice.

Ilya nodded. He could feel it building in his pelvis.

“Want you to come first,” Shane told him. He gasped a little, dark eyelashes fluttering as he found a particularly pleasurable angle, “Can you do that?”

Typically, Ilya preferred it if he took care of Shane first but there was some syrupy command in Shane’s voice that had Ilya transfixed, obedient. He took hold of Shane’s firm ass, helping him ride, helping him bury Ilya deeper. Up, up, and up boiled Ilya’s climax and then he was jerking his hips, astonished as always to be taken so hard by his orgasm, jets of heat shooting up his dick. “Fuck, Shane, fuck,” he shouted, hand slipping to Shane’s hard-on, wet with his pre-come, *always* so wet. He jerked him and Shane clenched around him – “Fuck!” – and came, half bent forward, close enough for Ilya to lean up and kiss him as ropes of his come splattered against Ilya’s abdomen.

They groaned, shakily, after, Ilya carefully rolling them onto the towel spread out to protect their new bedsheets. He wanted to curl up with Shane after sex, not remake the bed.

“That was so good,” Shane murmured, as they made good use of the towel for clean-up and then rolled themselves together in a sweaty, pretzel-esque tangle of limbs.

“I love you,” Ilya replied, kissing him, his favorite person in all the world.

“*Ya tebya lyublyu*,” said Shane earnestly, the words rolling off his tongue easily. He practiced them a lot and it never failed to make Ilya’s heart swoop. Apart from Svet, no one had said *I love you* since his mother had died. If he thought too hard about it – which he didn’t – he would never have imagined *anyone* would say the words to him the way he knew Shane meant them. Wholly.

The romantic moment fell to pieces then when Shane yawned and then groaned. “Okay, I have to get up, your come is trickling out of my ass.”

Grinning, Ilya rolled onto his side to watch Shane walk gingerly towards the bathroom, the candlelight making the streaks of come on his thighs glimmer. Ilya’s brain presented him with many thoughts simultaneously. That the clock had ticked over to Valentine’s Day now and maybe the wounds of their past were healing. Of the rings hidden in his bedside table, waiting for the right time. That he should probably blow out the candles in case they forgot and this night turned into a Russian tragedy, and – as the water started in their beautiful new bathroom – whether he had another orgasm in him. He suspected he probably did.

“Do you need a hand?” he called, stretching deliciously.

“Always,” said Shane.

Chapter End Notes

And we're DONE. And thus the longest piece of fanfiction I've ever written is complete (which, to be honest, probably means it needs a really good edit).

Thank you so much to everyone who has read, liked, commented and shared with friends. I appreciate it so much and I have loved reading your comments and thoughts and suspicions (omg you guys are so suspicious). It's been a real joy to me.

I have nothing else really to add here in terms of authors notes. OR DO I.

On the 'bromance' - Ilya invites his good friend Shane Hollander to lots of the Cens occasions. 'Hollander was in town to see his parents,' becomes his frequent refrain and Bood has to stare fixedly at the ceiling as if he has no idea. The rest of the Cens are hockey bros so they think nothing of it. Well. Harris thinks PLENTY of it but he stays completely silent on the subject until one day he heads upstairs to use the other bathroom at Bood's and walks in on Ilya and Shane making out. He is dragged into the Hollanov Fan Club. He, in fact, becomes its treasurer.

The Metros become super peeved to see Shane at all these social occasions so in return invite Ilya to their things. This causes Hayden and J.J. no end of stress because in the comfort of his own team, Shane is more relaxed and liable to have a drink or two and suddenly can't keep his hands off Ilya which Ilya does NOTHING to help.

On the woking of the MLH - The Code gets a big heaping help when Dallas Kent is revealed to be a rapist. Toronto HAVE to clean up their act so they pull out all the stops, including voluntarily enforcing The Code (Jesus why did I call it this) so then it's Montreal, Ottawa, Vancouver and Toronto all one big inclusive family. And naturally, when Scott Hunter comes out by kissing Kip on the Ice, New York join and all the other

New York teams and now its reached the US and not just being a weird Canada thing and Crowell is REALLY pissed. Now he has to take it seriously so through gritted teeth he adopts the whoooole thing for MLH to try and make a good news story. Except who is front page for all of this? That's right. It's Shane and Alex and Petrov who were the 'inspiration'. Suck it Crowell.

On the Cens - Troy and Luca still go to Ottawa, don't worry, the Metros don't poach everybody. And Harris is there. Eventually, Ilya's shitty head coach retires and Stewie takes the job. They win their first cup.

On Ilya/Shane - Ilya proposes on a random Tuesday in the summer whilst they're at the lake. He uses electric candles because have you ever tried to keep candles lit with a slight breeze? Hard work.

When do Shane and Ilya come out as a couple? Valentine's Day 2019, after Ilya gets his PR. No one is surprised. Comeau wins the betting pool and cries at the wedding. They have the candles at their wedding on the tables. There are chairs.

On Petrov - Ah, Petrov. Mishka. I did try to get them to fuck. I actually began this story with the intention but, alas, it didn't work. It was Wrong. Every time I wrote something, Shane would literally wheedle out of it? And Petrov was so besotted with Shane he just wanted to do right by him? Painful. Not Sexy. Much better as gay mentor, which is the role he takes on happily. He's notably absent in this epilogue because - being a workaholic - he doesn't just stay in Europe for 6 months, it becomes a year, and his relationship with his ex is rekindled.

Btw, some headcanon, Petrov 7 is actually Petrov and his six close friends from boarding school, which includes Alex. They had formed a little clique at school - rich kids who didn't fit the 'norm'. Also Petrov doesn't smile because he got hate-crimes in his twenties and it broke his jaw in several places. He's never been happy with his smile since. I know. The trauma. He has a lot of therapy. Weird to have head-canon that you don't actually write into a story but hey ho.

No idea what I'll do with my spare time after this. Guess I'll have to write something else.

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