

The One That Got Away

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The One That Got Away

by [PeaceLilies](#)

Summary

Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov haven't spoken in fifteen years. After an emotionally charged hookup at Ilya's penthouse in Boston, the two hockey phenoms stop talking. They meet again as coaches for the struggling Ottawa Centaurs, both of them still harboring feelings for one another, but can they overcome the hurt that was caused on that day in Boston to try again?

Notes

Oh man. This fic was such a trip. I love writing Older Hollanov so much and these old men stole my heart completely. I adore them and I hope you do, too.

For those of you who may read this fic and have only seen the show, wondering why Ilya is taller than Shane and has hazel eyes instead of blue, most of this fic was written with BOOK CANON in mind. I decided to use showverse Svetlana, so there's a bit of cross-over.

Thank you to [dntat](#) for the beta read and cheerleading! It means so much to me!! The encouragement fueled me all the way to the end! You are an absolute gem!

Anyway, I hope you enjoy this lil angsty (but mostly sweet) number about two old men getting a second chance at romance. MWAH! 🥰

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

Chapter 1: Prologue

Chapter Summary

November 2030 - NHL Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony - Toronto

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Shane Hollander stood at the bar in the Allen Lambert Galleria at the after party for the Hall of Fame induction class of 2030, ordering a light beer.

He was in a tailored suit, a dark navy that his stylist had said looked amazing on him, and he had taken his word for it.

He was surrounded by his peers and had never felt so alone in a crowded room.

Shane had only recently retired from the NHL and was still adjusting to his new status.

The transition had been a little bumpier than he had anticipated but he was trying to ride the wave, even if change made him anxious.

He'd been hoping to make it to thirty-nine or forty to retire but one too many injuries had put a stop to that.

The medical advice he'd been given was to have hip surgery now and retire, rather than to keep playing and risk worse injury later.

So here he was.

He had been considering his options for next steps and where he wanted to be. Turned out that staying at his cottage in Ontario, alone, wasn't really doing it for him.

He loved it there but he was getting a little... stir crazy.

There were some coaching opportunities that had come his way, possibly signing on to do commentary for SportsNet or ESPN.

He was a sought after commodity, being one of the best hockey players for one of the best franchises.

Shane had retired with seven Stanley Cup wins, the most in recent NHL history, and winning them all with the same franchise, which was an impressive feat in and of itself.

He'd played nineteen seasons with the Montreal Voyageurs and he was proud of what he had accomplished in that time.

He'd done pretty well for himself. He'd lived out his dream, he'd been successful. It had been a trip.

There had been some challenges on other levels, though it hadn't been all bad.

But Shane wasn't really thinking about his career or his retirement.

He was thinking about Ilya Rozanov.

Shane accepted his beer from the bartender and placed a tip into the tip jar on the bar, stepping away, and looked out at the sea of men and their (mostly) wives and girlfriends in the elegant event hall.

Shane took a sip of beer and scanned the room, honing in on the head of familiar golden-brown curls that belonged to the person who had occupied Shane's thoughts for the last fourteen years.

Shane's heart gave a little pang at the sight of Ilya.

He was hard to miss, one of the tallest men in the room, dressed elegantly in a burgundy suit that did wonders to his golden hair and skin, bringing out the gold in his hazel eyes.

Shane hadn't seen Ilya in person in, well, *years*.

He looked good. Healthy. Handsome. Not much about him had changed, in fact. He looked a little more distinguished perhaps, with a streak of silver running through his curls.

Shane swallowed, suddenly very nervous.

It had been a long time since they had spoken to one another but Shane knew that he needed to go over and congratulate him.

He deserved it and it was the right thing to do.

Ilya's career, while shorter than anyone had probably expected, had been stellar. He had been one of the few players who had always kept Shane on his toes, pushing him to be a better player himself.

The induction into the Hall of Fame was very well-deserved.

Shane took another sip of his beer and steeled himself.

He made his way through the crowd, greeting people here and there as he recognized them or they recognized him, until he had approached Ilya.

He was standing with a few other retired players; Scott Hunter and Eric Bennett with their respective husbands, Kip and Kyle. Next to Ilya was a beautiful woman with curly hair, his

wife, or ex-wife now, actually. Svetlana, Shane was pretty sure her name was.

He supposed that they were still on good terms...

“Hollander!” Scott greeted him enthusiastically, having spotted Shane first.

All eyes were on him and Shane could feel his cheeks heat.

“Hi,” he said lamely, raising a hand in greeting.

He glanced at Ilya, hazel eyes trained on Shane, his expression surprisingly neutral.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“Not at all,” Scott said, smiling warmly. “We were just talking about how wild it is to all be retired.”

“Yeah,” Shane nodded. “It is wild.”

He could feel Ilya’s gaze on him, making his skin warm and prickle. Shane was afraid to glance in his direction again.

He chatted for a bit with Scott and Eric, Ilya surprisingly quiet beside him, making the occasional noise of agreement, nodding his head, curls bouncing.

“I, uh, I just wanted to stop by and, um, offer my congratulations.”

Shane turned and looked at Ilya, holding out his hand.

Ilya looked at him impassively for a moment before he took Shane’s hand to shake it.

Shane felt a spark run down his arm at that touch, still familiar after all this time.

Ilya’s hand was large, warm, and calloused. His fingers strong and surprisingly elegant, just as they’d always been. He was wearing an extremely fancy watch, but no other jewelry.

“Thank you, Hollander,” he said.

“You’re welcome. Really well deserved, Ilya. You’ve had an amazing career.”

Ilya nodded. “Yes. Thank you.”

Shane offered a smile and a nod before Ilya released his hand, blinking.

Svetlana rested a hand on his arm and Ilya turned away from Shane, shifting his attention toward her as she spoke softly in what was probably Russian. Shane smiled at Eric and Scott and their husbands, excusing himself from the group.

He felt his eyes sting with tears, surprised at how emotional the interaction had made him.

It had been fourteen years since they had actually spoken. While the media had loved their rivalry, things had died down as other, newer players had come onto the scene with rivalries of their own.

Even when they had seen one another for games during the season and at All-Stars, Ilya had kept his distance, and Shane had done the same.

Shane maneuvered his way out of the hall and onto a balcony. It was cold outside compared to the venue itself but he welcomed the fresh, bitter air.

Ilya had retired after the 2025-2026 season, citing his readiness to leave the game while he was still in good shape, and a desire to take care of his mental health.

He'd been an advocate for mental health for a decent chunk of his career, starting a charity camp in honor of his mother who had taken her own life after struggling with depression for many years.

Shane hadn't known that and learning it had broken his heart. He'd written drafts of texts that he had never sent, though he had made an effort to donate to Ilya's charity and the camps every year.

He always got a thank you card in response, but from the foundation itself, never from Ilya directly.

After Ilya's retirement, he had disappeared from the public eye, and had only popped back up again in the last two years or so.

Apparently he'd gotten married, divorced, and had come out as bisexual. He was still running his charity camp and was doing some college coaching.

Shane had always kept track of Ilya, keeping tabs on his socials and things, and seeing him when he had played in the League.

They had had an... *intimate* acquaintanceship for about six years before Shane had broken things off between them.

Spanning from the summer before their rookie season into their sixth season, Shane and Ilya had been sleeping together. They saw one another when they were in the same city, stealing nothing more than an hour or two to have sex and then part.

One day, during that sixth season, Shane had gone to Ilya's penthouse the day before a game Montreal had against Boston.

He'd been in Ilya's penthouse. They'd had sex and Ilya had asked Shane to stay the night since they wouldn't have morning practice before the game the following day.

Shane had agreed to stay.

Things had been slowly building between them up to this point. Shane was caught between the pull of desire to be with Ilya, as more than just a hookup, and his own fears and

internalized homophobia.

The day had been quite wonderful. Ilya had made Shane a tuna melt. They'd sat on his couch and talked and ate together.

It had felt like *more*.

They'd had sex after they'd eaten and Ilya had said Shane's name.

At the time, only twenty-four years old, Shane had felt nothing but panic. The implications of everything they had just done and shared, Ilya saying his name when they'd never done that before, had freaked Shane out.

It had somehow broken the spell they'd been under in that short time together.

He'd fled Ilya's penthouse in a panic. They'd played against one another the following day, every check on the ice from Ilya felt like an accusation... or a demand.

He was upset. Refusing to look at Shane.

And that had been that. They hadn't seen or spoken to one another since.

Shane had started dating Rose Landry, the famous actress, shortly after. They'd met by accident, when Jean-Jacques Boiziau, one of his teammates and closest friends, had forced Shane to come out to a party at his friend's restaurant.

Shane thought he was in love, that he was safe. He'd finally met the *right* woman. But that wasn't the case at all. Rose was wonderful. Everything anyone could want in a partner only... she wasn't a man.

She'd been the one to confront Shane about his seemingly lack of romantic and sexual interest in her and he had admitted to her, and himself, that he wasn't interested in women. At all.

He loved Rose but it was simply platonic.

They were in a "relationship" for two years before Shane finally came out publicly. Rose had generously been his beard for that time as he'd grappled with and come to terms with what had been staring him in the face for years.

He and Rose were on great terms. She was one of his best friends and had been an enormous support for him as he'd accepted his sexuality.

He'd come out to his parents, his closest friends on the Voyageurs, J.J., and Hayden Pike, which included Hayden's wife, Jackie, and technically their four kids.

He'd told his agent and he'd made the decision to not come out until after he retired, even after Scott Hunter had come out.

So he'd waited, hiding a huge part of himself from the team. From the fans.

After retiring, he'd released a statement through his agent.

He'd been in touch with Scott Hunter, Eric Bennett, and Ryan Price, all retired, out NHL players. It has been nice to connect with them, to talk about the difficulties of being queer in this League.

Ilya had been included in that group, but they hadn't met up or reconnected or anything.

And now Shane was here, standing on this small balcony, looking out over Toronto.

This reminded him of the NHL Awards, when he and Ilya had been rookies. Things had been so heated and tense between them, both of them wanting one another, but still jealous and insecure.

Shane remembered finding Ilya on the roof deck of the hotel, where the awards had been held, how angry Ilya had seemed. They'd kissed and Shane had pushed Ilya away.

We can't.

See you next season.

Shane didn't think that Ilya was going to come find him now, though a small part of him wished he would.

With time and distance, Shane looked back at the years that he and Ilya had been hooking up with a mix of bittersweetness and regret.

That time was probably the closest he'd ever had to a real relationship. He had been completely himself in those stolen moments with Ilya. And Ilya had protected him. Kept him safe. Took care of him.

They had kept this secret, never betraying it.

Shane wished he could go back in time. He wished that he could stop himself from freaking out in Boston. He wished that he had talked to Ilya sooner, made amends.

He still carried a flame for him, wishing he could find a way in, to tell Ilya he was sorry, to start again.

Not a day had passed since November 2016 that Shane didn't think about Ilya; how he was doing, what he was up to, if he had found love in someone else.

Shane had made a few attempts to move on, especially after learning that Ilya had gotten married.

But none of his attempts had lasted.

None of the guys he'd been with had been bad. They had all been very nice people. They just... weren't Ilya.

Shane had talked to Rose about it. Ever the romantic, she always told Shane to never give up on love. And he didn't want to. Not really.

The only problem was what happened if the person you loved had given up on *you*?

Which was reasonable.

What reason would Ilya have to still feel any kind of feelings toward Shane?

Shane had run away. If he had been in Ilya's shoes, he would have been devastated. Hurt. Angry.

He would want to move on as quickly and thoroughly as possible.

Even though a decent chunk of time had passed since they'd last been together, Shane would have hoped that maybe time had healed that wound.

But maybe not.

Maybe Ilya had held onto more than Shane had thought. Maybe he was still angry. And what could Shane do about that if Ilya didn't want to talk to him?

Shane had debated several times about reaching out to Ilya and trying to talk but he always talked himself out of it, saying that he didn't want to open up old wounds.

You gotta make up your fucking mind, Hollander. Shit or get off the pot.

Shane downed the rest of his beer and shivered from the cold, looking at the empty glass in his hand.

Either he wanted to try again with Ilya or he wanted to let sleeping dogs lie. He certainly couldn't keep living in this limbo.

But seeing Ilya again, after all this time, all those feelings had just come rushing back.

He might not ever have an opportunity to fix things, so maybe he just needed to... give up.

The only problem was, Shane was the most stubborn person he knew.

He didn't know what he was going to do, only that he felt like he needed to do *something*.

Ilya was the one who had gotten away but Shane wanted to get him back.

He had no idea how he would do that but maybe it was time for him to try.

They were both out. Single (as far as Shane could tell). And they didn't have the fear of losing their careers hanging over their heads.

He'd need to come up with something, look out for better opportunities.

Shane knew that he would have to work hard to win Ilya back and it would be worth it. Even if it didn't work out in the end.

Resolved, Shane went back to the party to mingle for a bit, before going back to his room, his social battery empty.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Ilya in Ottawa

June 2031 - Ottawa

Ilya finished fussing with his curls and looked at himself in the mirror, running a hand over the stubble on his face. He'd shaved the beard he'd been sporting down to some ruggedly handsome stubble, his signature look, though now with a bit more silver.

He looked neatened up, if a bit tired, but he kind of always looked tired these days. He was pretty sure that was just genetics.

"You're getting old, Rozanov," he said to himself, in Russian, slapping his own cheeks, before grabbing his toothbrush.

He'd turned forty two days ago and he was pleasantly surprised to noticed that he *wasn't* feeling every year.

All things considered, he was in good shape.

He'd retired before his body had completely given out on him, which meant that he was in fairly decent physical condition. Hockey hadn't been kind to him exactly but with a few extra years of care and maintenance, he was keeping most body aches and pains at bay.

He was a little creakier than he used to be but that seemed to be expected.

He still exercised regularly and while he was certainly leaner than he used to be when he'd been actively playing hockey, he wasn't anything to sneeze at.

The extra smile lines around his mouth, the deepened crows feet, the streak of gray in his curls certainly spoke to his age but Sveta reminded him that it simply made him look distinguished. And he appreciated her saying that.

Ilya finished brushing his teeth and went out to his partially unpacked bedroom to finish getting dressed.

The transition from Boston to Ottawa had been big and exhausting but Ilya had been ready for the change.

He loved Boston. He had been there since he was nineteen, playing all fifteen seasons of his career there. It had been where he'd built himself back up, righted his ship, and found joy

again.

He would miss the familiarity of it, the comfort, but it had been time to stretch his legs and do something new. A change of scenery. Better, more exciting opportunities.

He liked his new condo, perfect for himself and his dog, Anya, who was currently napping in her bed in the corner of his room.

He'd be able to start fresh and it seemed fitting, given that he was newly in mid-life.

Better to make a reasonable transition than to have a crisis.

He'd already had one of those and he certainly wasn't looking for a repeat performance.

Today he would be on his way to the Ottawa Centaurs' offices to finish filling out some paperwork and to discuss his new role as Head Coach for the team.

Ilya had been working within the NCAA system as the head coach at Boston College when the offer to become the head coach of the Centaurs had passed across his desk.

The Centaurs were a notoriously horrible team. They had had a few good years in the 80's and 90's but since then had really struggled.

The owners had completely cleared house, getting rid of all the old staff, including trainers, and were bringing on all new people.

They had basically given the new general manager, Travis Dupree, carte blanche in player acquisition and making hiring decisions with staff. Ilya appreciated that Travis had come to him as the head coach to ask for his opinions.

Travis had been the one to suggest hiring Ilya, too. He'd been keeping tabs on his career post-retirement and had been impressed by his style at BC and seeing the success that he'd had there.

The higher ups loved you, Travis had told Ilya when Ilya had asked why Travis had reached out to him. *But the kids loved you even more and that was enough for me.*

So Ilya had taken the job, ready to start fresh, and hopefully help this struggling franchise.

Ilya had called in some consultation from Leah Campbell, the most winningest goalie for the Canadian Women's National Team. He'd gotten to know her and her husband, Max Riley, at his hockey camps and had rather enjoyed working with them.

Leah was pretty actively involved in the PWHL and she had recommended Max for player development. Ilya needed at least three assistant coaches, so Max was up for consideration. There was also Zane Boodram and Wyatt Hayes, both retired former players for the Centaurs, that Ilya was looking at as well.

Ilya remembered them both and had enjoyed playing against them.

Bood had had a great career as a player, one of the best left wingers in the League but had never won a Cup, spending his entire career in Ottawa.

Prior to Hazy's trade, he had been a Vezina winner and had two Cup wins under his belt, one with Colorado and one with Toronto, which wasn't nothing.

Ilya had been happy to pitch all three to management and they had been hired on, which was exciting.

Ilya grabbed a button down and a neat pair of slacks, both freshly dry cleaned, and changed into them. He opted out of a tie but only left one button on the shirt undone. This was work not play.

He slid into a pair of comfortable but stylish and business appropriate loafers, slid on a watch, and checked his hair one more time.

"Okay," he said to himself, pocketing his phone.

He went to the entryway, grabbing his keys, and wallet. Anya came running and he gave her some pets and kisses.

"I will be home in a few hours," he assured her, making sure he had his bag with his laptop and paperwork, before he left the condo, locking the door behind him.

Ilya had taken a few hours the night before with a spreadsheet, reviewing all the information he'd been provided about team and player stats, as well as trades, waivers, and draftees.

They'd had a few decent draft picks but no one that would sign on right away. They'd need a little time to adjust and develop in the ECHL before being moved up.

Luca Haas was one of the best players on the team who hadn't been traded or waived. He was twenty-nine, the current Captain, and more or less holding down the entire team. He was a center, an all-time point scorer. He needed support around him.

He was queer as well, having come out as gay a few years ago. He and Ilya had met in passing at some of the events sponsored by Scott Hunter's Queer Coalition, a group made up of queer hockey players, staff, and coaches across the NHL and PWHL.

Adrian Fortescue, Ivan Petrov, Duncan McMichaels, Carson Meadows, and Andrew Williams were all good players as well and had survived the cull. They were consistent, strong assets to the team.

Fortescue and Petrov were often on the same line as Haas and they had all shown good promise as a first line. McMichaels and Meadows were an excellent D-pairing together but Ilya wasn't sure why his predecessor had kept them apart.

Williams was a newer goalie. This would be his third season but his numbers looked good and perhaps with a slightly more experienced goalie behind him, he'd start building his confidence.

Ilya imagined a good goalie coach would make all the difference and he was feeling confident about Wyatt being able to deliver on that.

Overall, these six players were a good foundation, but it couldn't just be them.

Part of the meeting today was sitting down with Travis to discuss next steps with the team and what that was looking like. There were some things that could be done over the summer, moving players around.

Ilya had been assured that the expectation wasn't to win a Cup. The team was going to be in development and it was going to take time for them to build up competitively.

The owners wanted to truly invest in the team. They wanted the wins but they also wanted people to be excited about games. Even if it took the team a few years to make it to the playoffs, they wanted them to be competitive, exciting.

Ilya felt confident that he could at least give them that. He was a bit of a showman and he didn't doubt he could rub off a little on the guys, encourage them to embrace their flare. That didn't necessarily mean fighting or anything, just going out there and having fun.

Just being willing to put on a show made the game more exciting.

Gotta get butts in seats.

But besides that... Ilya liked the idea of helping to develop newer players.

He loved being able to help cultivate confidence and skill. He wanted his guys to feel welcomed, supported, to know that they could be themselves.

Not to mention that he would be the first openly bisexual coach in the NHL and also the youngest. Max would be the first trans man to be behind the bench as well. That in and of itself would bring in interest.

In fact, the whole coaching staff was quite young in comparison. They were all new, which could be a blessing and a curse. But only time would tell how that shook out.

Ilya didn't think he could single-handedly change every homophobic, racist, xenophobic thing about the NHL but coming out had made a difference, joining Scott Hunter's queer hockey coalition had, too.

Being closeted and the pressures of being a professional hockey player had cost Ilya dearly. He was still carrying around a broken heart fifteen years later because of it.

If things had been different way back in 2016, then maybe he and Shane Hollander would have had a shot.

As far as Ilya could tell, that time had come and gone ages ago, but he had the opportunity to help prevent that from happening to other players in the future.

Even if they didn't come out, Ilya hoped that his team would feel accepted and safe in his locker room, that they would be able to love whoever it was they wanted to love without fear of losing their careers or the trust of their teammates.

It was a healing thought. Something for his younger self, as well as for his team. He wanted to do right by them.

Hopefully he'd be able to make good on that promise.

For now, he needed to get to the offices and have a chat with upper management.

The drive from his condo to downtown Ottawa was only about ten minutes. Ilya parked his car in the lot and headed inside, up to the top floor.

He was greeted by Anne-Laure Beaumont, one of the three siblings that owned the Centaurs. She was a tall woman, with steel gray hair cut in a no-nonsense bob, dressed elegantly in a pants suit.

"Ilya!" she greeted in her bright Québécois accent, resting her hands on his upper arms, and bussing his cheeks. "So good to see you!"

"And you," Ilya replied, smiling.

Anne-Laure was the eldest of the sibling owners and had been one of the first to reach out to meet Ilya in person. They'd had lunch together and it had been lovely. She had been very warm and welcoming. She knew a ton about hockey, Ilya's career, and had expressed to him what she hoped for the team.

She and Ilya were very much aligned, which had been reassuring.

Anne-Laure led Ilya to a conference room where her two brothers, Martin and René, were waiting.

Ilya shook hands with the two brothers and sat down at the table. He was offered some refreshments and light snacks, accepting a glass of water as he set up his laptop and papers.

A few minutes later, Travis arrived, along with the President of the Club, Guy Poulin, and the meeting started.

They went through the new roster first.

Ilya enjoyed getting into the nitty gritty of things, even if it was just talking about stats.

They were looking at a long term investment in the team and which players would build and improve over time, to players that would help start them on the right path. The veteran players were the cornerstone, especially for a young team like this one, and Ilya wanted to make it clear that they needed to respect the veteran players and their experience.

After that, they reviewed all the new coaching staff, as well as the medical team and trainers.

Ilya looked at the paper in front of him, scrolling the names, and paused over one. He blinked, unsure if he was reading the name correctly.

His heart sank into his shoes.

“Shane Hollander is coming on as Assistant Coach?” he asked, trying to keep his voice level, curious, instead of panicked.

“Yes! He only recently accepted the job. We were going through potential applicants and I was going to ask if you had someone in mind, Ilya, but then Shane accepted. I know you two had a rivalry back in the day but having the two top players from the 2009 Draft behind the bench is quite the win for us,” Travis explained.

“Of course. Yes.”

Ilya nodded, drinking the rest of the water in his glass, trying to calm his heart rate.

This wasn’t a big deal. The things that had gone down with Hollander had happened more than a decade ago. It was over. It would always be over. There was no changing it. Things wouldn’t be different.

And Ilya had seen Hollander, at the Hall of Fame induction. That had been fine. He hadn’t died. Of course Sveta had been there to distract him but still. The world hadn’t ended.

Ilya took a surreptitious breath, letting it out slow.

It would be fine.

Besides all the *drama* with Shane Hollander, they had liked each other, to a certain degree. They’d gotten along. They probably would have been friends, if things had been completely different between them and with the League at the time... so it was possible they still could be now.

At minimum, all Ilya had to do was be professional. This was just a shock. He hadn’t been prepared to see Hollander’s name but now he knew. Now he could prepare. It would be fine.

And if it wasn’t... he could leave.

He didn’t want to have to think about that. Starting over was hard enough as it was but it was an option.

He’d cross that bridge if he ever got there. It wasn’t helpful to think about now.

They talked a little more about staffing, before the meeting finally wrapped up. Ilya chatted a bit longer with everyone before Guy took him to his office so Ilya could finish up one last piece of official paperwork.

“Welcome abroad, Ilya,” Guy said, shaking his hand. “We are so happy to have you.”

Ilya smiled. “It is an honor. Thank you.”

On the drive home, Ilya's thoughts were filled with Shane Hollander.

He tried to avoid thinking about him as much as possible. He'd blocked him on socials, avoiding documentaries and things about him, he had ignored him whenever they had played against each other before Ilya had retired.

It was impossible to ignore him completely but Ilya had done his best.

After things had dissolved between them, Ilya had tried his damndest to just... move on. He hooked up with more people, started partying again. That had gone on for about a year before Sveta had come to see him to stage a semi-intervention, warning him to get his shit together, *or else*.

Ilya had received a few warnings about his behavior, mostly for public intoxication. No real disciplinary action had been taken but the threat loomed and Sveta was trying to prevent him from falling off a cliff.

Ilya had told her about Shane and everything that had happened between them, from the summer before their rookie season, to when Shane left his penthouse that day in November, fifteen years ago.

That had helped for a bit, to just tell her, relieving the weight of the secret he'd been carrying for six years.

He hated keeping things from her and this had been the most painful. But he had been keeping a lot of it from himself, too, and he had had to just put it all out there.

It had been like throwing up. He'd felt better, at least for a little while.

He'd gotten his head on a little straighter and had thrown himself into philanthropy instead.

But nothing had helped.

Over the ensuing years he felt like his life had slowly begun to unravel. By the time he retired, he had been very depressed.

Everything with Shane had just become too much, on top of Ilya's grief and trauma from his childhood.

Not even Scott Hunter's coming out had helped. If anything, it had only made Ilya feel worse. Jealous.

He'd managed to hang on for a few more years, before retiring at thirty-five.

He'd gone to therapy and started medication.

Things had gotten better after that and he'd taken the time to get back on track. He'd decided to try his hand at school, took trainings on coaching, get certified. He graduated with a Bachelors Degree.

Sveta had helped him through all of it, supporting and encouraging him, always in his corner. They'd gotten married so Ilya could get his American citizenship. They'd stayed married for a few years and then divorced.

They were still very close friends but Ilya occasionally felt guilty for their arrangement, for being unable to love Sveta the way she deserved to be loved. She always refuted that and she had been nothing but a stalwart friend.

Ilya loved her dearly and he was immensely grateful for her. He made sure she never forgot that.

He was still in therapy, still on medication, and life had slowly improved. Ilya hadn't dated anyone seriously, instead focusing his time and energy on his charity, the camps, and coaching.

But that all just felt like a distraction.

As much as he tried to push Shane Hollander from his thoughts and often succeeding, any time he thought about him, it was an onslaught.

It was like Ilya couldn't forget anything about the six years they'd had sneaking around and hooking up. Once he opened that door, the cascade of memories and emotions followed.

What they had had wasn't enough to even come close to a relationship and yet...

Ilya had been in love with him. He had wanted more with him, even if he hadn't known how they could have it or even that that was what he was feeling. And Hollander had run away. It had devastated Ilya and in all honesty, Ilya had never really recovered.

It was like at that moment, everything he believed true about himself, that he was lazy, worthless, unlovable, that everyone he loved would abandon him, had come true.

In all his hours of therapy, Shane Hollander was the one thing he couldn't seem to move on from.

Even his mother's death felt easier to hold than Hollander running out of Ilya's penthouse.

He felt pathetic.

He *should* be over it by now.

And yet...

Shane Hollander had ruined Ilya for anyone else. Ilya was still in love with him. He had been hurt by Shane, possibly beyond repair, and that was just the reality of it.

He didn't know how to heal.

He thought that scrubbing as much of Shane Hollander from his life would work and it did, sometimes, and then we would see an ad, or accidentally catch him being interviewed, or

someone reposted something on socials, and it all came flooding back.

Once Ilya got home, he took Anya for a walk, and called Sveta.

“Hello stranger,” she hummed, in Russian, when she answered the phone. “How are you?”

“Hi,” Ilya replied, also in Russian, smiling, happy to hear her familiar voice. “I’m fine. How are you?”

“Also fine. Missing you but I’m keeping busy.”

Ilya chuckled. “I’m sure you are.”

“To what do I owe the pleasure of this phone call?”

“I had my meeting today and I promised to tell you all about it.”

“Oh! Yes! How did it go?!”

“It went well. You would’ve been proud of me, talking about statistics.”

Sveta laughed. “I’m sure it was something to behold!”

“It was good. A nice meeting. I like everyone, they’re all great to work with. It’s going to be an adventure here. I’m hoping I can settle in long term but... we’ll see.”

“How long is your contract for?”

“Five years, which is very generous since this is my first NHL job.”

“Extremely. Not too bad.”

“Not at all no.”

“I’m glad things went well!”

“Yes, with um, one small interesting tidbit.”

“And what’s that?”

Ilya sighed. “Shane Hollander is going to one of my assistant coaches.”

Sveta was quiet on the line. Ilya licked his lips, pressing them together.

“Really?” she finally said.

“Yes.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay. It shocked me at first but it’s fine. I can be professional. It should be fine.”

“They didn’t tell you ahead of time?”

“No. It seemed like they were going to but apparently Hollander decided to take the offer before they had the chance and they didn’t want to lose him so...”

“I do understand that. He is an *incredible* catch as an AC.”

“He is.”

“Do you want me to come there? During your meetings and things?”

“No, no. You don’t have to. I’ll be fine. If we’re going to be working together than I just have to put my big boy pants on and deal with it. I doubt it’ll matter. I don’t think there’s anything there any more anyway. Just gotta rip off the band-aid. I think it’s just the anticipation. I’ll feel better once we get that first meeting out of the way...”

“If you’re sure...” Sveta didn’t seem convinced.

“I’m sure but if something comes up, I’ll call you.”

“You better.”

“I will. Promise.”

“Good. I’m holding you to that.”

“I know.”

Sveta huffed a soft laugh. “How’s my niece?”

Ilya looked down at Anya who had stopped to sniff at the grass. “She’s perfect, as usual.”

They talked a bit about Anya and how Sveta was doing with work. She asked about Ottawa and how Ilya was settling in.

They talked for a little over an hour before finally ending the call since they both needed to make dinner.

“I love you. Keep me posted, okay?” Sveta said.

“I love you, too. I will.”

They said their goodbyes and ended the call.

Ilya made Anya her dinner and then started making dinner for himself.

His mind kept circling, thinking about Shane Hollander’s laugh, and freckles, and soft kisses. His heart constricted, his stomach knotted.

Ilya closed his eyes and shook his head. Just the memories alone were difficult, the ache for something he could never and would never have. It made him want to break something. Or

vomit.

He turned on a true crime podcast to distract himself.

He had therapy in a few days. He would talk to Galina, his therapist, about how to proceed. They would make a plan and he'd be fine.

Ilya was sure that all of this emotion was in his head and working with Hollander would probably shift that mindset entirely. He would see that none of it was a big deal at all, that Hollander had moved on, and so should Ilya.

Yeah. Exactly that.

It was still early in the summer. He would have a chance to meet all the staff and they would have orientation together, so it wasn't like Ilya would be locked in a room alone with Hollander.

They would have to work closely together but that would be okay. Ilya was a professional.

You've dealt with worse, Ilya reminded himself. *You'll be fine*.

He would simply harden his heart.

He wasn't even entirely sure why he was getting all twisted up about this. He doubted that Hollander even thought of him. He was sure that, while things had seemed enormous at the time, fifteen years certainly was plenty of time and distance from something that had ultimately been nothing.

Enough time had passed that Ilya was sure Hollander had moved on, dating some handsome personal trainer or broadcaster or something. He had probably long since put their dalliance behind him.

Whatever used to be between them was dead and gone and maybe being faced with Hollander's indifference would help Ilya finally move on, too.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Shane goes to the Centaurs' staff orientation

July

Shane arrived at the Bell Censplex, the main training facility for the Ottawa Centaurs, ahead of the orientation he was to attend with all the new staff for the team.

Shane was early, by about an hour. He'd been too nervous, unable to sleep, so he'd gotten up, done a workout, and gotten ready for the day.

He was always like this when it came to new things. He wanted to build in extra time, just in case he got lost, or something.

And maybe he was nervous about seeing Ilya...

He had found out about the assistant coaching job with the Centaurs through his agent, Farah Jalali. He'd been working with her on various job opportunities, trying to decide what he should try, and she had mentioned that the Cens had reached out.

He'd done some general commentating on SportsNet and had been on a few podcasts associated with some of the sport networks. He still had his professional endorsements.

Shane had learned that apparently he needed to be *doing* things. Keeping busy.

So he'd talked to Farah about opportunities, something more long term. They'd discussed consulting and then the coaching job had come through.

Shane had never had a coaching job before but this was something stable. It allowed him to work directly with players and to be an active part of the game, even if he wasn't playing any more.

He had always known that it wouldn't be easy for him to give up hockey, that he would want to continue to be connected to it in some way, shape, or form, and this was as direct as one could get.

Shane wasn't unaware of how much work the NHL still needed to do.

Strides had been made, for sure, but it was far from perfect.

He thought that maybe doing this, besides what it would bring to him, would help change things from the inside, for the better. It would be more visibility. He'd be the first openly gay assistant coach in NHL history, one of the youngest, and one of a handful of coaches of Asian descent, which would hopefully help fans see themselves reflected in the coaching staff.

In fact, the entire staff was very diverse.

If you see it, you can be it.

He'd be coming back to his hometown, too. He'd grown up a Centaurs fan and he knew that many fans wished he had played for them.

It seemed like a great opportunity.

And then there was Ilya Rozanov.

Learning that Ilya was going to be the head coach had been the thing that had clinched the decision for Shane. This was his opportunity.

He had been trying to figure out how to reach Ilya and *this was it*.

It forced them together, in a way, but Shane wasn't sure there was any other way to do it.

He had no idea what he would do exactly when he got there, only that he knew that he had to seize the chance.

And now he was here.

He had packed up his place in Montreal, though his full-time address was at his cottage by the lake. He'd kept the Montreal spot just in case and decided to sell it once he'd gotten the job in Ottawa.

The Ontario cottage would always be his home and while it was sad to say goodbye to Montreal, he knew he could always find something else there if he really wanted.

He was still in the process of finding a place in Ottawa, so he was staying (temporarily) with his parents.

Shane loved his parents but he was eager for a place of his own. It would be nice to be close to them but not where they were right on top of one another.

Shane sighed and checked his phone. Forty-five minutes.

He went through his texts, finding one from Rose.

Rose: good luck today!! Keep me posted!!

Shane: Thanks I will

Shane: I'm nervous

He wasn't expecting Rose to get back to him. She was filming over in the UK but she started typing right away. Shane watched the dancing ellipses.

Rose: Because of Ilya?

Shane: yeah

Rose: It'll be okay it was okay last time and it'll be okay this time, too

Rose: you'll be professional

Shane: idk... I'm pretty sure he hates me...

Rose: well you don't know that you just have to see! You'll figure it out

Shane: yeah... okay

Rose: I love you! You got this!

Shane: I love you too thanks

Shane sighed. He supposed Rose was right. He didn't have enough information to go off of but what he did know wasn't great.

Shane had no idea what fifteen years had done for Ilya. Maybe he had moved on. Maybe Shane was no more than just another person he had to interact with and he didn't feel one way or the other about him.

Shane wouldn't know until they met and even then, it wasn't going to be the best time to talk about their past. If the opportunity even presented itself.

"Ugh," he groaned, letting his forehead fall against the steering wheel. "Fuck."

He checked his phone again.

Thirty minutes.

Well. He might as well go in. Maybe he could help set up or something.

Shane got out of his car, grabbing his bag from the back with all his equipment. He locked up the Jeep and headed toward the complex.

Inside he was met by some admin who were there setting up and he was given a name tag and an orientation packet. One of the equipment guys took his bag for him and he was directed to a room that was usually used for player presentations and video review.

Shane put on the name tag, thanking the staff, and went to the video room, finding that he wasn't the only person here.

Sitting in one of the theater style chairs on the other side of the room was Wyatt Hayes. He looked up and smiled brightly at seeing Shane.

“Shane Hollander! What’s up, man?!”

Shane smiled. “Hi, Hazy.”

Shane had never played on the same team as Wyatt but he was very familiar with him. He was an excellent goalie and he had always had such a bright, infectious personality. He was tall, with a friendly smile, and bright blond curls.

They bro hugged in greeting.

“Assistant coach, eh? That’s pretty great!”

“Yeah. I’m very excited about the opportunity. You the goalie coach?”

“I sure am! It was a pretty perfect opportunity, honestly. Roz had reached out to me after he had accepted the head coaching position and the timing was perfect. My wife Lisa and I still live here, she’s a pediatrician, so I think she was excited to have me out of the house and busy.”

Shane laughed. “Retirement’s been good to you then, eh?”

Wyatt shrugged. “I can’t complain. A lot of video games, golfing. I was just a househusband for a while but I definitely needed something to keep me stimulated. I think this’ll be great. What about you? Sick of retirement already?”

“I mean, yeah, kind of. I’ve been at my cottage in Ontario and figured out that I really need to be *doing* things.”

They both laughed.

“I don’t think it’s possible for hockey players to stay away for long. Unless you have kids.”

Shane nodded in agreement. “I think that makes a lot of sense. I can imagine wanting to spend more time with them.”

"For sure."

Shane chatted a bit longer with Wyatt before other people started filing in. Shane met a bunch of the trainers, some of the other coaching staff.

Max Riley was here, who Shane was familiar with from women’s hockey prior to his transition. It was exciting to see him coming on as one of the other assistant coaches. Apparently he knew Wyatt pretty well because the three of them had all worked at Ilya’s hockey camps over the summers.

“Really nice to meet you, Shane. Excited to work with you,” Max said.

He was shorter than Wyatt and Shane, with brown hair in a neat mullet cut, and a tidy mustache.

“Likewise!”

Zane Boodram filed in shortly after, greeting everyone. He was tall, too, and handsome, his arms covered in tattoos. It was obvious he and Wyatt had a familiarity, doing a special handshake.

"What an incredible team we got," he said. "I'm excited to work with you all!"

It was nice to just chat with everyone. They all seemed pretty excited, which was cool, and Shane was sufficiently distracted because he hadn't even noticed that Ilya had arrived.

He was going from person to person, introducing himself, and saying hello.

Shane had forgotten how good Ilya was at working a room and being around people. He'd always been sociable and personable. He was an asshole but the lovable kind.

He looked good, with his messy curls, and his Adidas track suit, which amused Shane for some reason. So Slavic. So Ilya.

It made Shane wonder how much had changed, how much had stayed the same.

“Hollander,” Ilya greeted as he approached Shane, Wyatt, Bood, and Max. He shook Shane's hand and patted his shoulder, greeting the other coaches as well, before moving on. The touch had warmth trickling down Shane's spine, his palms starting to sweat.

Shane watched after Ilya, his heart pounding, mouth dry.

Oh man. What was he getting himself into?

“You okay?” Wyatt asked and Shane swallowed, turning to look at him.

“Oh yeah. I'm fine. Just, um, I haven't seen Ilya in a while.”

“Must be kind of weird, huh? Working as the right hand man for your old rival?” Max asked.

“Yeah. Kind of.”

Shane smiled, hoping he was playing off his nerves. He was fine and cool and chill and fine.

He glanced back, watching Ilya talking with some of the other staff, before turning back to Bood, Wyatt, and Max.

Orientation started not long after and Shane made sure to take notes.

Everyone was introduced to the owners, the president, the GM, each giving a small introduction to who they were, their place in the Centaurs organization, and a welcome.

Then Ilya stepped up to the podium. He had his own welcome, joking that he didn't need to say who he was, since pretty much everyone knew him. He did a short overview of what he had been up to since retirement, talked about his dog, Anya, who would probably make an

appearance at the rink once in a while, and welcomed everyone to the team, expressing his excitement to work with them all.

Shane's heart fluttered as he watched and listened.

Ilya was still Ilya. Charismatic and funny, his Russian accent curving elegantly around boxy English words. His English had improved so much in the intervening years.

He seemed relaxed and comfortable in front of a room of strangers, just like he always had been. Ilya had always been confident but there was a quieter kind of assuredness about him now that he hadn't had in his twenties.

Shane wasn't sure what he had expected. Just because time had passed didn't mean that Ilya was a completely different person. A lot of him was just as Shane remembered but a lot was different, too.

It made his heart ache.

Other heads of the organization were introduced as well, the Lead Trainer, Head of Athlete Medicine, Head Chef, and then the rest of the back of house staff: Marketing and Communications, People Ops (formerly Human Resources), and Business.

After that, the rest of the staff was introduced, Shane included, until everyone in the room was standing, and had had a chance to speak.

There was a quick introduction to People Ops and general rules and regulations for professionals, the organization's code of ethics, as well as the other services the department provided for employees.

Everyone was then led out of the video room to get a tour of the facilities.

The Censplex had been recently updated and everything looked new and modern, all state of the art stuff.

After the tour, they all had the opportunity to get onto the ice to skate a bit. Not everyone on staff knew how to skate, but most did.

Shane wasn't surprised to see all the former hockey players on the ice.

Shane watched Ilya laughing with Max, doing some crossovers, looking free and happy. He had always been an elegant skater, fast and powerful. It was easy to see that skill, the innate talent, even though Ilya had been retired for five years.

Shane was glad. He was happy to see Ilya smiling and laughing. He'd worried about him, especially when he'd disappeared after his retirement.

Ilya glanced up then, smiling fading as he caught Shane looking at him. Shane looked away, feeling his cheeks go hot as he tried to make himself look anywhere but at Ilya, as if his gaze had simply passed over Ilya while he'd looked at something else.

“Hollander!”

Shane looked up and Ilya motioned for him. Shane blinked and pointed at himself.

Ilya looked exasperated. “I do not think there is any other Hollander here.”

Shane’s entire face and ears and neck burned and he looked chagrined, skating over.

“Sorry,” he said.

“No worries, man,” Max chuckled.

“We are going to be seeing a lot of each other,” Ilya said to Shane. “We should catch up.”

“Yeah, definitely.”

Ilya held out a hand, motioning as if to tell Shane to continue.

“I, uh, I was telling Max before that I’ve just been at my cottage, in Ontario, and kind of got bored. This seemed like a really great opportunity and I was looking forward to working with you actually.”

Shane was proud of himself for saying that, looking Ilya in the eye. It was the truth and he hoped that Ilya saw that.

He watched Ilya’s brows twitch up a little, as if surprised, before he smiled, a bit teasing. “I’m flattered. The great Shane Hollander excited to work with me. Is an honor.”

Shane huffed. “Asshole. I’m being serious.”

Ilya chuckled. “Yes. Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“I’m sure the rookies are going to lose their mind,” Max added.

“Of course,” Ilya said. “Most good looking NHL player and *the* Shane Hollander.”

Shane snorted, relaxing a little at the teasing. He supposed Ilya wouldn’t be teasing if he hated Shane. Right? Right.

The three of them chatted for a bit and Shane was kind of glad Max was there, helping the conversation flow.

The group split off and they went to talk to other people and Shane felt a little deflated, though not as badly as he thought he would feel.

Ilya wasn’t exactly warm but he wasn’t cold either. He wasn’t icing Shane out or anything, which seemed positive.

Shane wished that he could get Ilya alone. He wasn’t sure what he would say exactly. He couldn’t just apologize and confess, it was way too soon for that. He needed to take Ilya’s temperature, see where they stood after all this time.

Even if that meant that Ilya just wanted things to be professional, Shane could be okay with that. At least he would know where they stood.

But the rest of the day passed and Shane never got his opportunity to meet with Ilya alone.

Shane said his goodbyes to his new coworkers, catching Ilya talking with the GM, and left without saying goodbye to him, not wanting to interrupt their conversation.

He went back to his car, chatting a bit with Wyatt, before he was on his way to his parents' place.

"Hi honey!" Mom called from the kitchen as Shane toed his shoes off at the door.

"Hey," he called back.

"How was your day, kiddo?" Dad asked, popping his head out from the kitchen doorway. Shane smiled. He felt like a teenager again, coming home from practice.

"It was good," Shane replied, thumbs tucked into his pockets as he shuffled his way to the kitchen, giving his dad a hug.

His mom was making chicken katsu with curry and it smelled amazing.

"Smells good, Mom."

"Thank you," she replied, looking over her shoulder and he kissed her cheek, before going to the fridge and grabbing a can of ginger ale.

"Tell us all about your day! How did everything go? Did you see Ilya?"

Dad gave Mom a look and Shane chuckled, opening his soda, and leaned back against the counter.

"It was a good day. I got to meet my coworkers. We have a great team. Max Riley and Zane Boodram are going to be the other assistant coaches, and Wyatt Hayes is our goalie coach. I got to talk to Ilya for a little bit, so, that was kind of good."

"Oh yeah? How did that go?" Mom asked, both his parents looking at him curiously.

Shane had talked to them about Ilya. He hadn't given them all the gory details but he had expressed regret about how things had gone between them.

When he'd taken the job in Ottawa, his parents had been wonderfully supportive, as always, and had gently inquired about the fact that Ilya would technically be his boss.

Shane knew his parents cared about him and loved him. He knew they wanted him to be happy and had liked Shane's previous partners, but they knew, just as well as Shane did, that they hadn't been the person Shane really wanted to be with.

“It was fine. Normal, I guess. He didn’t ice me out or anything but I wasn’t getting special treatment. Not that I was expecting that.” Shane rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t know. It was weird. But I think it might just be like that for a bit.”

“That’s understandable,” Dad said. “Especially since you haven’t talked in so long.”

Shane nodded, holding the can of ginger ale in both hands. “Yeah.”

“Maybe you should ask him to go to dinner,” Mom suggested. “The two of you can talk one-on-one. It doesn’t have to be romantic or anything. People have professional dinners all the time! But you two could talk. Clear the air, maybe. I’m sure he would appreciate the initiative.”

Shane took a sip of his soda, nodding. “Yeah. That could be a good idea...”

“Think about it.” Dad reached out, squeezing Shane’s shoulder. “There’s no rush. You gotta ease back into it.”

“You’re right.”

Shane helped his mom with the rest of dinner and sat with his parents to eat.

He felt lucky to have such a great relationship with his parents. It wasn’t always perfect but he loved and appreciated them.

They were both retired now, which was exciting, and Shane liked listening to the plans they had to travel. They were both very into pickleball, or at least, mom was and dad was just along for the ride.

After dinner, Shane cleaned dishes with his dad.

He had always felt like he was a lot like his mom; organized, kind of anxious, stubborn. He and Mom got along well but they almost always butted heads because they were so similar.

It was different with Dad, where they could wash dishes or do a puzzle or just generally hang out and not really have to fill the silence.

David Hollander had always been the calm in the household and Shane often sought that out, especially when he was anxious. Just to be in the quiet with someone who loved him. No pressure to talk. He could just be.

“Everything going okay?” Dad asked softly as Shane handed him a dish to dry.

“Yeah. It is. Just weird but we’ll sort it out. I hope.”

“You will. Just give it time.”

Shane huffed a laugh. “It’s been over a decade, Dad.”

“You know what I mean,” Dad chuckled. “Take it slow. Don’t rush in guns blazing. You’ll spook him.”

Shane smiled softly, washing a bowl. “That’s fair.”

"It's like befriending a stray cat. You have to be slow, careful, consistent. Keep showing up, give them space, let them come to you. With enough time and patience, they'll be eating out of your hand."

"Did you just compare Ilya Rozanov to a stray cat?"

Dad shrugged. "It's a good analogy! Or is it a metaphor? Doesn't matter. The point stands!"

Shane laughed and his dad joined in.

"I'll keep that in mind."

Shane and Dad finished washing dishes and Shane took off the rubber gloves he’d been wearing, placing them on the side of the sink to dry.

“Love you, son,” Dad said, kissing the side of Shane’s head.

“Love you, too, Dad. I’m gonna sit outside for a bit.”

“Okay. Don’t get all bit up.”

“I won’t,” Shane laughed.

He went outside, dressed in a sweatshirt, and sprayed his legs down with bug spray, before sitting out on the small back patio.

The backyard wasn’t much changed from when he was a kid. The old swing set had long since been removed, the fence replaced, but it was still the same.

Shane pulled out his phone and texted Rose.

He updated her about his day, interacting with Ilya, and his mom’s suggestion to ask if Ilya wanted to get dinner so they could talk.

Rose: I think that’s a great idea!

Shane: yeah?

Rose: Absolutely! I think it’ll really help to talk face to face and just see where things are at

Rose: an olive branch!

Rose: you two are going to have to work together so that’s a good place to start!

Shane: yeah, true

Rose: one thing at a time you got this

Shane: Thanks, Rose 

Shane sighed, placing his phone in his lap, and looked up at the moon. He missed being able to sit outside and see the stars.

He loved the cottage and he missed it but he also missed being busy. At least he knew how the cadence of a hockey season felt and he would be able to adjust.

And while he shouldn't get his hopes up about the Ilya situation, he was glad that he could at least do something about it.

He closed his eyes, thinking about his very general plan.

Ask Ilya to dinner.

Something small. Solid. Yeah. He could do that.

He just hoped Ilya wouldn't turn him down.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya talk

One week later

A week later, Shane was at the Centaurs' administrative offices, meeting with the coaching staff to discuss the roster and try-outs. They had some spots on the roster to fill and needed to see who might fit the bill for their particular gaps.

It was important for all of them to be on the same page and understand what was missing, and to think about how things might net out long term.

This was a marathon, not a sprint.

Ilya walked them through all the players that already had a spot on the team, most of them veterans.

Shane had studied the current roster as it was, familiar with all of the players listed, their strengths and weaknesses. He already had a general idea of areas he wanted some of the guys to work on and improve.

He'd also gone through the list of draft picks and guys in the ECHL who might be called up.

Ilya ran the meeting well. It was a strange experience for Shane to reconfigure the image of Ilya he had in his head, the young, cocky playboy with all the charm and sex appeal, with the image of Ilya that he was seeing now. Older, more tempered, still charming, and with *plenty* of sex appeal (maybe even more).

Ilya had always had a vast knowledge of hockey but it was pretty cool to see how his brain worked when it came to coaching it.

Ilya had always excelled at whatever he put his mind to, so it wasn't surprising that he had excelled at coaching. His track record at Boston College spoke for itself and he'd worked some consulting gigs with the Boston Fleet of the PWHL and the Bears.

Watching Ilya in action was impressive and Shane took lots of notes, appreciating perspectives Ilya had and approaches that he wanted to use.

Shane was used to old school styles of coaching. His coach with Montreal had always been kind of a prick but it had yielded results. He couldn't say he had much enjoyed the coaching style or how much of himself he had had to repress because of it.

Ilya had made it clear that he wanted his locker room to be open and supportive. He wanted the guys to lift one another up, hold each other accountable, and foster an environment where the guys could talk about whatever they needed to talk about.

He acknowledged that they had a diverse coaching staff, which required openness, and he made it clear that he had a no tolerance policy. Everyone was expected to be respectful and any inappropriate behavior in or out of the locker room would be dealt with swiftly and appropriately. No exceptions.

It was setting a high standard compared to the NHL but they all agreed it was necessary.

Ilya didn't expect everyone to go easy on the players but he wasn't looking for everyone to be an asshole. He wanted the boys to feel safe and supported, as well as encouraged and pushed to excel.

Ten years ago Shane would have scoffed at the idea of a "soft hand" in coaching, but now he found it quite appealing. He had no idea how Ilya would pull it off but if anyone could, it was him.

The meeting was useful overall, everyone all caught up and aligned in locker room expectations, what the goal was for try-outs, and the players they were looking for to make a strong starting roster for this rebuild.

Shane lingered at the end of the meeting as the other staff cleared out, saying their goodbyes, until it was just him and Ilya left in the room.

Ilya looked up from sliding his laptop into his backpack. He looked around, trying to see if anyone else was there, before settling his eyes back on Shane.

Shane gave an awkward little wave.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," Ilya replied, zipping up his bag. "How can I help you?"

Shane swallowed and took a few steps closer to Ilya.

"I, uh, I had a question for you."

"Okay." Ilya shouldered his backpack, crossing his arms over his broad chest, waiting. Shane tried not to stare at his pecs or the way his biceps bulged against the sleeves of his t-shirt.

"I wanted to ask if you'd like to grab dinner sometime," Shane said in a rush. "I know it's been a while since we've talked and if we're going to be working so closely together I thought we should, um, talk."

Ilya looked at Shane. His expression was hard to read and Shane could feel himself break out into a cold sweat, his heart racing.

"Talk about what?" Ilya asked.

“Well... the last fifteen years, I guess.”

Ilya pursed his lips and nodded his head. He glanced away from Shane for a moment, then looked back at him. It felt like an eternity standing there, waiting, worrying.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yes, we can get dinner and talk.”

Shane smiled, surprised and relieved. “Yeah?”

“Yes.” Ilya licked his lips but it was still hard to read what it was that he was feeling or thinking. “My number hasn’t changed. Text me.”

“Oh. Okay. Sure. Yeah.”

Ilya nodded. “Okay.”

“Okay.”

Ilya unfolded his arms. “Have a good night, Hollander.”

“Thanks. Yeah. You, too.”

Ilya walked around the conference table and left the conference room without another word or a backwards glance.

Shane wasn’t sure how to feel, his initial relief replaced by uncertainty.

What had he been expecting exactly? For Ilya to fling himself into his arms? Of course things were going to be awkward. But at least he’d agreed to talk.

Shane packed up his own bag and left the conference room, going out to his car. He tossed his bag into the passenger seat and sat in the driver’s seat, taking out his phone.

He took a breath and scrolled through his contacts.

Lily.

It had been a few years since Shane had looked at this contact. For a while, right after things had ended between him and Ilya, he would go back and re-read their conversations. A lot of them were just about planning hookups and there wasn’t a lot of material... but they had bantered and joked.

Shane could remember the excitement of texting with Ilya. He had looked forward to seeing him. The sex was great and fun but it was also Ilya, too... getting to see him, spend time with him, even if only for a stolen hour or two.

He'd denied it then. Twisted himself into a pretzel convincing himself it wasn't anything more than a fucked up thing that would be different once he met the right woman.

Now, with fifteen years of distance, he wished things had been different. He wished he hadn't been so stuck in his own internalized homophobia, that he'd been more aware of his feelings.

He would still occasionally come back to that text chat, re-reading these old conversations, and grieving what could have been.

“Fuck,” Shane murmured.

He opened the contact and changed it.

Ilya Rozanov.

A small, tightly wound piece of Shane unraveled as he changed the contact name, revealing the true identity of the person he had once been teasing and sexting.

Shane felt a wave of sadness wash over him, eyes stinging, as he thought about the scared twenty-four year old kid he had been. Scared of his feelings, of admitting to himself how he truly felt.

That fear had dictated so much of his life. It had boxed him in and stolen happiness and opportunities from him.

Even with all of his achievements, Shane had a lot of regret.

He should have come out sooner. He should have stayed that night in Boston. He should have been brave enough to go after what he wanted.

He sighed, wiping at his eyes.

He didn't have a time machine, he couldn't go back and fix the past, but he could endeavor to do better now.

He went to the text chat he'd saved, the last text from 2014.

He started typing.

Shane: Hey, it's Shane

Shane: let me know if there are days and times that work for you and I can make a reservation somewhere local!

He wasn't expecting a response right away, Ilya was probably driving back to wherever his house or condo was.

At least he had agreed to talk. Whatever happened after would happen. All Shane could do was try and see where the conversation went.

He was glad for the opportunity.

He'd take the wins where he could get them.

He put his phone down, started the car, and headed back home.

Three days later

Shane stood outside one of the casual, local establishments in downtown Ottawa. He hadn't been sure what to wear and had called Rose for advice. She'd suggested a linen button down and a nice pair of slacks with loafers.

It was a little elevated but still fairly casual.

He'd grown his hair out a while ago and had kept it long, liking the style, and he had pulled it up into a half ponytail, some of it tucked behind his ears.

He was nervous.

He'd gotten to the restaurant almost twenty minutes before their reservation and knowing Ilya, he'd probably be a little late.

To Shane's surprise, he spotted Ilya, about five minutes early. He was waiting to cross the street, dressed in an olive green crew neck t-shirt with a pair of glasses hooked over the collar, a pair of cream colored jeans that fit his long legs perfectly, and a belt that matched his shoes.

He looked really, *really* good.

He crossed the street and spotted Shane, raising a hand in greeting. Shane smiled and raised his hand back.

"Were you waiting long?" Ilya asked and Shane shook his head.

"No. Not at all."

Ilya nodded.

"Shall we?" Shane asked and Ilya held out a hand.

"After you."

Shane stepped into the restaurant and gave his name at the host stand.

They were seated at a high top table towards a back corner of the restaurant, by a window. It was quiet, which was nice, not exactly private, but enough that a conversation wouldn't be overheard.

The restaurant was nice but not too nice. Small tea candles were on every table and the menus were electronic, accessed by a QR code.

They sat and scanned the code. Shane pulled out his glasses and Ilya slid on the pair that he had attached to the front of his shirt. They both glanced at one another and chuckled.

“Getting old,” Ilya noted, raising his brows, before looking at his phone, perusing the menu.

“Yeah...” Shane replied softly.

He watched Ilya for a moment. He looked older, which wasn’t surprising, but still very good-looking. The dark stubble on his face had a little silver in it but it was that one shocking strand of silver in his golden-brown curls that stood out. It didn’t detract from Ilya’s attractiveness at all. To Shane, it just made him more handsome.

And the glasses, too.

Get it together, Hollander.

Shane looked at his menu.

“Getting anything to drink?” Shane asked.

“Maybe. You?”

“Maybe.”

Shane sighed, trying to calm himself, reminding himself to take things slowly. He decided on a drink and placed his phone down.

Their server came, pouring water into their glasses and asked if they wanted anything to drink.

Shane ordered a glass of white wine and Ilya ordered a glass of red.

Once their server was gone, Shane looked at Ilya. Ilya looked back, taking off his glasses, hooking them back on the front of his shirt. Shane saw a glimpse of the familiar chain he always wore with the crucifix on it, tucked underneath.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi,” Ilya replied, threading his hands together, resting them on the table.

“It’s been a while.”

“Yes.”

“How are you?”

Ilya took a breath, letting it out slowly, tapping his thumbs together. “Big question. Fine, mostly.”

“That’s good.” Shane wanted to press for more but refrained. One thing at a time.

Ilya nodded. “Yes. And you?”

“Great. Good.”

They both kind of nodded and Shane’s stomach cramped a little with anxiety. In that moment, he felt the gulf of time and distance between them, how different they were, yet still somehow the same.

“I wanted to thank you,” Ilya said, after a moment. “For always donating to my foundation. You are always very generous and I appreciate that.”

“Of course,” Shane replied, meaning it. “I thought it was such an incredible thing for you to do. It’s really good, important work. And I’m so sorry about your mother.”

Ilya’s mouth pulled up in the corner, a small smile appearing. “Thank you.”

Shane swallowed. He wanted to reach out and touch Ilya. Reassure him somehow. He threaded his hands together between his knees under the table instead.

“Listen... Ilya...” Shane said, just as their server arrived.

Shit.

Shane pressed his lips together as the server placed wine glasses down and had them try their respective wines, before pouring them their glasses.

She asked if they were ready to order and they both said they needed more time.

Shane looked at the menu, needing to read things a few times, feeling scattered and distracted.

He felt like this was all going horribly.

He finally decided on something to eat and their server returned, taking their order.

He got the summer salad with salmon and Ilya ordered steak frites, done medium.

Shane looked back at Ilya.

“You were saying,” Ilya said.

Shane nodded. “Yes. Right, um, okay. I wanted to apologize.”

Shane swallowed, glancing away, trying not to let his words run away from him.

“I’m so sorry about how things went fifteen years ago. I’m sorry I never reached out. I’ve been thinking about, well, *everything*, and it was very important to me to just tell you how sorry I am for how I acted in Boston.”

Ilya was watching Shane from across the table. His face was fairly neutral as he listened, nodding his head slowly. Shane waited, holding his breath. It was relieving to say the words out loud and acknowledge them, but uncomfortable, too, waiting for Ilya's response.

Ilya looked down at the table, processing, before glancing up at Shane again.

"Okay," he said. "Thank you for that."

Shane smiled a little, feeling marginally better, but not as much as he'd hoped.

"Of course. I was really excited about this job and about working with you, honestly. I'm excited for the opportunity. And yeah, I just wanted to be sure that you knew how I felt."

"Yes. I understand."

Shane nodded, licking his lips anxiously. It wasn't all of what he wanted to say but it was a good first step.

"Okay. Good. So we're... cool?"

Ilya huffed a soft laugh. "Yes, Hollander. We are cool."

Shane smiled. "Great. I would, um, I would like to start over, I think. On a better foot."

Ilya licked his lips and took a sip of his wine, observing Shane. He sat his glass down and held out his hand.

"Ilya Rozanov," he said. "New head coach for the Ottawa Centaurs."

Shane laughed softly, reaching out to shake Ilya's hand. "Shane Hollander. New assistant coach for the Ottawa Centaurs."

"Very nice to meet you. I am looking forward to working with you."

"It's nice to meet you, too. So am I."

Ilya released his hand. "I am bisexual."

"I'm gay," Shane laughed, his cheeks heating a little, surprised by the non sequitur, but also relieved by it. They had never talked about this, back then. They'd both come out at separate times and it felt like clearing the air.

Ilya nodded. "We are going to have a very queer team."

"We are. A lot of history making."

"I think that is what we do, no?"

Shane nodded his head back and forth, sipping his own wine, easing into the conversation a bit more. Good. This was good.

“I guess you’re right. We did make a lot of history, didn’t we?”

“You more than me, but yes.”

Shane’s cheeks heated and he shrugged.

“So modest,” Ilya teased. “You haven’t changed at all.”

“No? I think I have, at least a little.”

Ilya chuckled. “We will see.”

“Is that a challenge?”

Ilya shrugged and Shane narrowed his eyes at him. This felt familiar and he was glad. Ilya smirked.

“I don’t think you’ve changed that much either.”

“Well, we have a lot to learn about one another then.”

“Yeah. I think so.”

“Is going to be a very interesting season.”

“I’m counting on it.”

Ilya smiled small and took another sip of wine.

Their server brought their food and they chatted a little while they ate. Shane felt better the deeper into dinner they got. He and Ilya laughed and reminisced. They didn’t talk about their history, which Shane kind of wished they would, but he wasn’t sure if now was the time.

He had extended his olive branch and Ilya had accepted it.

Shane could tell that Ilya was being cautious. They were having a nice conversation, talking about Ilya’s time coaching at BC, and Shane’s cottage, but nothing... deep.

Which was probably appropriate for a dinner. The deeper stuff was something that they would need to talk about in private. If they ever got there.

Shane reminded himself to be patient. They were sort of starting over and it would take time to build rapport, trust. He couldn’t expect Ilya to just turn around and want to resume things out of the blue.

Shane was sure there was more going on than he was aware of, that an apology didn’t just fix everything. He had to prove himself. He had to go slow.

Dinner ended, both of them skipping dessert, and they agreed to split the bill, though Shane tried arguing that he’d been the one to propose the idea so he should pay, but Ilya wasn’t having it.

They paid and left the restaurant, heading out to the sidewalk.

“Thank you for doing this,” Shane said, fidgeting with his fingers a little. “I really appreciate it.”

“We will be working together,” Ilya replied. “Seemed like a good idea to talk. Start again.”

Shane smiled and nodded. “Yeah. I agree. It means a lot to me. And this coaching opportunity, too. I’m looking forward to learning from you. Working with you.”

“Yes. Me, too.”

“I’m glad.”

Ilya nodded and Shane kind of shuffled awkwardly.

“Well, um, goodnight...” he briefly considered going in for a hug but decided that that was probably too much so he stuck his hand out for a handshake instead.

Ilya smiled, looking amused, and shook Shane’s hand.

“Goodnight, Hollander. Get home safe.”

“Goodnight. Thank you. You, too.”

Ilya let go of his hand and turned away, heading back the way he had come. Shane stood on the sidewalk for a bit, watching him go, until he turned down a side street, and disappeared.

He shoved his hands in his pockets, letting his head fall back as he sighed, closing his eyes.

Well, he’d survived.

Things hadn’t gone exactly the way he had expected or hoped but it hadn’t been bad either. He supposed his dad had had a point.

He needed to go slow. Take his time.

He hoped Ilya would maybe trust him. That maybe they could be friendly. Even friends. And maybe, *maybe*, Shane could see if he got his second chance.

Only time would tell. He maybe wasn’t the most patient person but he did love a challenge and he’d always been good at proving himself.

So that’s what he would do.

He opened his eyes and made his way down the street.

He was off to a good start.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Training camps start

August

Besides a few meetings leading up to training camps, Ilya didn't see much of Hollander or the rest of his staff.

It was kind of nice to have a little bit of a break, if only because Ilya had needed some time to process what he and Hollander had talked about at dinner.

Ilya hadn't gone in with any expectations. He had figured that he and Hollander would just figure things out between them as they got into their jobs but the invite to dinner had been unexpected.

Ilya hadn't anticipated an apology or for Hollander to even acknowledge the hurt that he had caused fifteen years ago.

Ilya felt like there was more to the conversation that perhaps had to happen or that maybe Hollander even wanted to happen, but Ilya wasn't even sure what *he* wanted.

He didn't know if he wanted to rehash everything that had happened between them just to free Hollander of whatever guilt it was that he was feeling or if this was Hollander somehow saying that he wanted to try again or some secret third thing.

Hollander wasn't a conniving kind of person, so it probably wasn't fair to think there were ulterior motives.

Ilya supposed he wouldn't really know unless he asked but he really didn't want to ask.

He already felt pretty fragile where Hollander was concerned and being wrong meant having to feel all that hurt all over again. The thought was extremely unpleasant.

Perhaps, more realistically, this had all just been a "water under the bridge" conversation. Things were cool between them, or as cool as they could be at this point in time.

They could and would work together, maybe even be friendly, on good terms as colleagues. And that would be that.

Ilya felt okay about that mindset. He appreciated the apology and while it didn't necessarily do much for the pining piece, he figured that that would get better with time.

Like exposure therapy.

The rest of July had been mostly uneventful besides the dinner with Hollander.

Ilya had finished moving in and settling into his condo. He was getting familiar with the neighborhood and his commute.

He'd found a dog hotel for Anya for when he was on the road during the season and a dog walker who could take care of her when he was at games or practices.

Sveta had come to visit, bringing a few gifts for him for his birthday and as a housewarming present, helping him with the finishing touches on the condo.

A few of the retired queer contingent of players had reached out, asking if he was going to have a housewarming party.

Troy Barrett, who was a former Centaur, and his husband Harris, had sent Ilya a gift basket.

Ilya had kept tabs on Troy Barrett right before he had retired. Ilya remembered not liking Troy much, mostly because of his association with Dallas Kent, and his horrible attitude on the ice. Ilya remembered reading up about him publicly calling out Kent for essentially being a rapist, ending their friendship, and resulting in Troy getting traded to Ottawa.

From there, he'd gone through a bit of a transformation. He started speaking up about sexual assault, he came out as gay, it was revealed that he had a boyfriend, who just so happened to be the social media manager for the Centaurs (and now his husband).

Ilya had been sick with jealousy at seeing Troy being so openly accepted, while Ilya had been suffering in silence. It had been a contributing factor to Ilya's retirement.

He'd ended up meeting Troy, in person, two years later, when Troy had joined Scott Hunter's queer hockey group.

He was a nice guy, trying to do his best to learn and grow. Apparently he'd always looked up to Ilya, admired his game, and appreciated that Ilya had come out, too, even if it had been after he had retired.

They were friends now, spending time together over the summer.

Harris had been the one to introduce Ilya to Anya. He and Troy had a dog of their own, named Chiron.

Troy had since been traded to Anaheim and Harris had moved with him, both of them planning to come back to Ottawa after Troy retired.

They were some of the first people to reach out when it had been revealed that Ilya was taking over as head coach.

It had been nice, having the outpouring of support.

Ilya was excited to take on the job and whip this team into shape.

He was going to be doing some press today, which would be interesting, and they would see how training camps went.

He'd put on his team issued track suit, amused by the entire ensemble, though he had to admit that it was comfortable. The whole outfit certainly hadn't been made for style but that was okay, Ilya thought he pulled it off pretty well.

He put the snapback he'd gotten with the Centaurs' logo on backwards, grabbed his wallet, phone, keys, and bag.

"Be a good girl," he said to Anya. "Don't give Rachel a hard time, okay? I will see you in a few hours."

He gave Anya some pets and kisses before finally heading out.

He got to the arena, greeting the staff as he made his way to the offices. He dropped off his things, checked his email, and messages, then went to the locker room to put on his skates and grab a stick and gloves.

He chatted with the equipment staff and headed out onto the ice, wanting to be there before the players arrived.

As Ilya walked out, he could see that he wasn't the first person to have arrived.

Shane Hollander was already out there.

Ilya shouldn't have been surprised to see that Hollander was the first on the ice. He was always so eager and prompt.

Ilya paused, just watching Hollander skate.

He was wearing his own team issued track suit which should have made him look like a nerd but didn't.

Hollander had grown his hair out a few years ago, after everything had ended between them, and Ilya had liked the look, though it had pained him at the time to acknowledge that.

He'd kept it long and it was pulled back into a half-up, half-down kind of style, like at their dinner, but instead of a ponytail, his hair was in a bun.

His cheeks were a little flushed, accentuating his freckles. He'd been out there for a while.

Ilya wasn't sure that Hollander had aged at all, except maybe some further crinkling around his eyes, some deepened smile lines. No gray hair though. Ilya was a little jealous but Hollander still looked just as beautiful and captivating as he remembered.

Even when they'd been at dinner, it had been hard to look at him and just as hard not to.

Hollander had always been striking; those earnest, intelligent eyes, the straight sloped nose, the sharp jaw, the pink, perfectly shaped mouth, the soft, glossy hair, and his most striking feature, the freckles sprinkled across his nose and cheeks.

Ilya dreamt about those freckles. He dreamt about warm smiles and soft pink lips and the way it felt to feel Hollander's heart beating under his palm.

Ilya shook his head and kept going, stepping onto the ice.

"Oh hey," Hollander greeted, smiling and flushed, breathing a little hard.

Ilya tried not to think about all the other ways he had seen Hollander like that.

"How long have you been here?" Ilya asked, stealing a puck.

"I don't know. Maybe an hour?"

Ilya shook his head, smirking.

"Who are you trying to impress?"

Hollander looked at him, his cheeks darkening, and Ilya relished in that look. Hollander was so expressive. He gave himself away so easily.

"Fuck off," he grumbled and Ilya laughed.

Just like old times.

At least that was comforting. Hiding behind the constant push and pull they'd had. The rivalry between them had mostly been thanks to the media but Ilya still loved to tease and pester Hollander. He was the king of rage-bait, especially with Hollander. He was just too easy.

This was familiar territory and Ilya preferred to stick with what he knew than to try and figure something else out. At least right now.

He had a brand new team to get to know and coach and help win. He didn't have the time or bandwidth to deal with whatever shit Hollander was still carrying around.

Nor did he have the capacity to deal with his *own* feelings.

They played around with pucks a bit and it was kind of nice to just mess around with Hollander. He had always been a great player. They'd played together at All-Stars a few times and while that had been painful in a lot of ways, Ilya had to admit that he and Hollander had always had good chemistry, on and off the ice.

That hadn't changed either.

Their little play session ended when the players started to arrive. Ilya waited until they were all on the ice, along with the rest of the staff before welcoming them.

“Welcome to training camp!” he said. “I think you all know who I am, but if you don’t, I’m Ilya Rozanov, your new head coach. You can call me Ilya or Roz. Don’t call me Coach unless I am upset with you.”

A ripple of chuckles went through the gathered group of men and Ilya let a little smile tease his lips.

“And these are the rest of your coaches and trainers. Assistant Coach Shane Hollander. Be careful, he is very competitive and very strict.”

Hollander raised a hand in greeting, giving Ilya a look.

“Your second assistant coach, Max Riley.”

“Sup fellas,” Max said.

"And your third assistant coach, Centaurs superstar, Zane Boodram."

While Shane and Max had received stick taps, Bood got a raucous cheer, which was well-deserved.

Ilya smiled as Bood bowed and waved graciously.

“Goalie coach, Wyatt Hayes.”

“Welcome gang!” Wyatt chimed in and got some stick taps, too.

Ilya introduced the rest of the staff and gave a run down of what to expect during training camp and what to expect from him.

Ilya let his eyes glide slowly around to each man, making eye contact with every player, making it clear what his expectations were for each one of them.

He expected honesty and integrity. He expected grit and effort. He expected everyone on the ice to be respectful and supportive of his teammates. They were here to bolster one another, not tear each other down.

Interpersonal issues were to be managed by the Captain and his alternates and in some cases, with coaching intervention.

Ilya talked about the Player Assistance Program and the NHLPA. These were important resources and ones that he himself had used more toward the end of his career. Everyone deserved support and guidance and the resources were available.

“Use them,” Ilya said firmly.

He went over the Centaurs’ Code of Conduct and his own expectations for the locker room, emphasizing his no tolerance policy, before asking if anyone had any questions, before moving on to allow Luca to introduce himself as Captain and his alternates.

“Okay, now, we will play a little game,” Ilya said.

He split the guys into two teams, basically just passing and shooting, a drill that they would have all done a million times since they were kids.

Every goal scorer had to say one thing that he had enjoyed about his summer. Then the lines would switch, so every guy got a chance to say something.

It was a silly ice breaker but that was the point.

Ilya wanted them loosened up a bit before the real drills began.

It was pretty fun listening to what the players had been up to. There were a lot of fishing and golfing trips. A few guys had enjoyed becoming dads, others had loved hanging out with their kids, or partners.

Apparently Luca had had some art of his displayed at an art gallery in Zurich.

Someone got a new dog, another got to see his parents, three were in a book club together.

Ilya enjoyed every tidbit. He’d have time to meet with each player individually, to talk about things he wanted to work on, areas he thought he was strong in, his goals and even anxieties about the season.

It was the part of the job that Ilya enjoyed the most, the people element.

But before all that, he had to see what everyone could do.

He had Hollander run the drills, mostly to see how he would do, and to scare the team a little. Ilya already knew that he was going to be the good cop to Hollander’s bad cop. The competitive streak that Hollander had was a mile wide and there was no way that that had faded with time.

The guy had the most Stanley Cup rings in recent NHL history and had played for the franchise with the most Cup wins in the entirety of the League.

Shane Hollander was *formidable* and Ilya had no doubt that he would put the boys to task.

It wouldn’t be the fear of god that would help keep everyone on the straight and narrow, eyes on the prize, it would be the fear of *Coach Hollander*.

The thought brought Ilya great amusement.

“What’s got you all smiley?” Bood asked as Ilya leaned on his stick, observing.

“Just thinking about how much of a hard ass Hollander is.”

Bood chuckled. “Yeah, that guy doesn’t do anything by halves does he?”

“Nope.”

“He’s like a drill sergeant.”

“Yes. That is why he is assistant coach.”

Ilya looked at Bood and winked, before skating off to be a little more hands on, and help dilute some of Hollander’s intensity.

Overall, the first day of training camp went well.

There was still plenty of time to build team cohesion and Ilya had a few ideas for team building exercises.

He made sure to let the guys know that he was available, approachable. He reviewed initial thoughts with his staff about the team, pleased that they were pretty much all on the same page, appreciating things they noticed that he had missed or overlooked, and vice-versa.

By the time Ilya got home, he felt good. Better than anticipated.

It was nice to have purpose, to be busy, working on something that felt worthwhile.

He wanted to be the change in the League that he hadn’t been able to have for himself. He wanted to build up and push his team to their best and he wanted to do it in a safe and supportive way.

He knew he couldn’t be too lenient and he didn’t intend to be but he felt like he had managed to strike the right balance over the years. Implementing that philosophy at this level didn’t really seem as difficult as he had originally thought.

He had noticed Hollander casting him surreptitious looks, though Ilya hadn’t taken long enough to try and decipher what those looks were. Probably just trying to make sure he was doing a good job.

They hadn’t had any problems. They’d worked together just fine and Hollander always had good insight.

So maybe things were going to be okay after all...

A week later

“Is this Anya?!” one of the social media admins, Adriana, asked as Ilya came down the hall with his dog and an iced coffee.

“Yes,” he chuckled, Anya pulling at her leash to get to Adriana.

Ilya let her go and she went bounding down the hall.

“Oh my god she’s so cute!”

Ilya laughed. “Yes. She is. And she knows it.”

“I can tell!”

Ilya smiled as he watched Adriana petting Anya before she looked up at him.

“Okay if we get some video with our VIP?!”

“Of course! She loves being on camera!”

Anya was a bit of an attention whore but Ilya couldn’t blame her. While fairly well trained and generally well behaved, Ilya spoiled the shit out of her and he wasn’t even a little sorry.

Adriana took some video of Ilya and Anya together and just Anya by herself, playing with a stuffed toy version of the Centaurs' mascot, Chuck the Beaver.

After doing some social media, Ilya went to get ready for practice.

Anya curled up under his desk in the bed he’d set up under there for her. He’d come in on a weekend with some things, just to get it all done so he could have the flexibility to bring her whenever.

He wouldn’t say that training camps were easy by any means. The guys had to get ready for the season and that meant being in the gym and getting back into routines and running drills.

Ilya was starting to think about line combinations. He and Hollander had run through a few combos, checking in with Bood and Max about what they were seeing.

Ilya wasn't exactly allowing himself a lot of alone time with Hollander. He preferred to have someone else around, as a buffer, at least for now.

He just wasn't sure if he was quite ready to deal with Hollander on his own; unsure of what would come up for him, if anything. Having someone else in the mix was working out okay, so he was sticking with that.

Ilya felt that the roster was pretty tight as they made final decisions on who was going to be sent down.

He and Hollander both agreed that the roster wasn’t Cup worthy but it had an immense amount of potential. And it was a fun team. A good combination of veterans and rookies, a few guys in their sophomore and junior seasons, some experience but still more to learn.

Ilya felt good about their chances at a wild card spot but only time would tell. He was trying not to put too much pressure on himself or the team. It was easy for a team like this to choke, being so new, and needing to figure out how to mesh.

But fans seemed excited, the bosses seemed happy. He just had to keep that going.

He left his office with Anya and met with his staff to talk about the day, though Anya was the star of the show.

“Oh hello baby!” Max greeted Anya happily, getting down on her level, and petting her face. “Aren’t you the prettiest girl!”

Wyatt and Bood joined and Anya was in all her glory, gobbling up the love and attention.

The only person who hadn’t come to say hello was Hollander, who was standing awkwardly off to the side, eying Anya as if unsure what she was about.

“She is friendly,” Ilya said, reassuringly.

Hollander glanced at him, then back at Anya.

“Yeah. She seems it.”

“Do you not like animals?”

Hollander shrugged, rubbing the back of his neck, one hand in his pocket. “I don’t know. Not really. I’ve just never been good with them...”

Ilya watched him curiously, he was frustratingly cute when he was nervous, and Ilya noticed how he seemed to brighten every time Ilya gave him attention.

Anya broke away from Max and Wyatt and came over to Hollander, sniffing at his shoes.

“Anya sit,” Ilya said, moving closer.

Anya sat, looking up at Hollander with her tongue lolling out of her mouth, and Ilya sidled up next to her.

Hollander smiled, offering a hand for Anya to sniff, before leaning down to stroke a hand over Anya’s head.

“She likes you,” Ilya murmured.

“She’s really soft.”

“She just had a bath.”

Hollander smoothed his fingers over Anya’s ear and Anya’s tail wagged eagerly, hopping up, paws on Hollander’s thigh.

“Anya. Down.”

“It’s okay,” Hollander said, looking at Ilya, cheeks pink, smiling. Ilya’s heart gave a painful pang at seeing that adorable, happy face.

Fuck.

Sometimes he felt like things were okay and he was managing this professional coworker thing great, and then other times he wanted to rip his own eyes out because he could hardly stand to look at that face.

“She’s adorable.”

“Thank you. She knows.”

Hollander laughed. “That’s very clear.”

Hollander spent a few more minutes petting Anya, who was absolutely shameless, rolling onto her back, paws in the air, begging for belly rubs.

“A rare honor,” Ilya noted, because it was true. Anya didn’t just offer her belly up to anyone. She was a very discerning lady.

Hollander seemed happy to oblige and Ilya knew he needed to start this meeting but he watched Hollander with Anya a little longer, beginning to wish for something he knew he would never had.

“Anya, come,” he said gently and Anya flipped over, coming over to Ilya. He pet her head and have her a treat. “Good girl. We have a meeting.”

Hollander chuckled. “She’s great.”

“Yes. She is.”

Getting back to business helped Ilya feel a little more on track but it was hard not to notice that Anya had inched her way over to Hollander, sitting under his chair, and Hollander’s attention was split between discussing the roster and today’s training, with giving Anya some love.

So much for not being very good with animals.

Ilya wrapped up the meeting, shaking his head, clipping Anya’s leash back onto her harness.

She looked up at him with her doggy smile and he couldn’t help but melt a little. She really was a good dog and he was glad everyone loved her.

Ilya brought her out on the ice for a little with the guys, who were all very excited to see her, watching her run around and slide on the ice in a hilarious sploot, stealing pucks and hearts. She was an adorable menace.

It was quite funny to watch the guys chase her around, corralling her, and Vanya scooped her up and bringing her back to Ilya while she licked his face.

Ilya passed her off to the admins and they all got back to work.

“What are you thinking?” Ilya asked, skating around Hollander as he worked with some of the forwards.

“Haas is exceptional,” he replied, looking out at the players, brows slightly furrowed.

“Keeping him with Fortescue and Petrov as first line would be smart. They’re both strong

wingers. I think Forty needs to be a little more confident but the skill is there. As for the rest...”

Ilya listened intently as Hollander told him about each player, what was working and what wasn't, who he was seeing clicking, who needed some extra attention.

“One sec,” Hollander said, skating over to one of the left wingers, Walsh. Ilya observed, watching Hollander give him some direction.

Ilya felt his eyes slide to Hollander's ass, watching the way his track pants pulled tight across the muscle as he leaned over, demonstrating something. He had to force himself to look away.

Get a hold of yourself, Rozanov. Christ.

Besides that one slip up, things went well.

Ilya left the arena with Anya, chatting with Max on his way out, wanting to avoid having to talk to Hollander.

“Bye, guys.”

Both Max and Ilya looked up. Hollander waved at them, looking a little like a kicked puppy. Ilya felt kind of bad.

“Hey! See ya, Shane! Have a good one!” Max replied.

“Bye, Hollander,” Ilya replied.

He turned to Max to say his goodbyes before he got Anya into the car and followed after her.

Okay, maybe he didn't have to box Hollander out completely. Maybe he could be a little more friendly.

He wasn't doing anything wrong. If anything, he was being a great assistant coach, which wasn't surprising. Of course he would be good at his job.

Ilya gripped his steering wheel, knocking his forehead against it a few times.

He took a few deep breaths, letting them out slowly.

He'd do better. He could be less of a prick.

Water under the bridge. It's all just water under the bridge.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

The team and coaches do a ropes course

September

As the season slowly inched closer, things started ramping up.

Practices were getting more dialed in. The roster was tightened up. They had their home opener all set, though their first official game to start the season was an away game against Montreal, which Shane was weirdly nervous about.

But he could worry about that later.

Right now, he was gearing up to do some press with Ilya, Bood, Max, and Wyatt ahead of the pre-season, which was in two weeks.

“How long has it been since you did media, Roz?” Bood asked as they were making their way to the media room.

“Not too long,” Ilya replied. “I did some during training camp and when I was at Boston College, but is different with college sports. You?”

“Mm, that makes sense. Man, I don’t remember. Probably after my last game, almost three years ago now.”

“Will be fine,” Ilya assured. “Abby is great at communications.”

Abigail Ross was the head of communications and media for the Centaurs and was an exceptional director and media coach. She was also funny as hell. Shane liked her.

They all sat down, the room almost completely full of reporters with phones and cameras. Shane felt pretty comfortable. He’d been in front of cameras and talking to media for most of his hockey career, even when he had played in juniors.

He was curious what questions would come their way but he imagined that Ilya would do most of the talking.

Sure enough, Ilya got a handful of questions as soon as the event started. He was asked about his readiness as head coach and his thoughts on the players and the franchise, what he thought he could bring to the table as a new coach.

Ilya's answers were thoughtful and well-spoken.

He was honest, saying that as a new coach, he had kinks to work out, finding his footing with the players, with his staff, and with management. He appreciated how supportive management had been and he felt lucky to have a great team of coaches, acknowledging Shane, Bood, Max, and Wyatt.

He spoke highly of the players and their potential but was honest that the team was in a rebuild. He felt confident that fans would be entertained but to manage expectations. They would get better over time.

As for what he could bring to the table...

"I'm me," he said simply and the whole room laughed.

"Shane, question for you. Tom Brink for *The Sun*."

Shane nodded his head in Tom's direction.

"How does it feel to have been rivals on the ice with Ilya and now working together as coaches?"

Shane glanced at Ilya for a moment, then glanced back at Tom. He felt a lot of things, none of which he could say in front of a media scrum, so he just relied on his training to answer for him.

"It feels great. Ilya has always been a great player and a great coach. He has a fantastic track record from BC and he knows this League and this caliber of player. Despite playing against one another our entire careers, Ilya and I have always been aligned in how we see hockey. If you've seen us at the All-Star games you know we can play well together so, I think that's what you'll also get from behind the bench."

"Ilya, same question."

Ilya chuckled softly. "What he said."

The room laughed and Shane had to resist the urge to tap his foot against Ilya's under the table. He tried his best to school his expression, hoping there was no wistfulness on his face at Ilya's words, an echo of their past.

"Shane Hollander is Shane Hollander," Ilya continued. "One of the best players to ever play the game. We are lucky to have him. I trust his judgment and his knowledge. We work well together and I think everyone will be happy with our results. But he is also not the only assistant coach. Zane, Max, and Wyatt were all exceptional players and are amazing leaders."

Shane smiled a little, pressing his thumbs together. He appreciated Ilya saying that and taking some of the attention away from their old rivalry. It hadn't existed for a long time and Shane wasn't sure that it had any place here.

This was all new territory and neither of them had any intention of working against one another, even if things were a bit stilted between them at times. Nothing unmanageable.

Ilya was just a hard nut to crack.

Which made sense.

Shane didn't know a ton about Ilya's life besides what little he'd gleaned over the years of knowing him, tidbits from interviews, and his Wikipedia page.

He didn't know all the details but he could imagine that Ilya had had a rough go of things. Life hadn't been the easiest for him.

Patience, patience, patience.

The media event continued with a few questions for Max about being the first trans man to be behind the bench in the NHL and a few for Bood and Wyatt about being back with the Cens organization and being coaches for the team they had once played for.

There were some questions asked about the players, how the team was looking. They rotated between who took which question, though Ilya fielded most of them, since everyone loved talking to the head coach.

Overall, the chat with the media had gone well and it was nice to just chill with the other coaches, since Abby had been nice enough to get them lunch.

"Roz, I know you wanted to do the ropes course for team bonding," Bood said over sandwiches. "We can use my house after. I can fire up the grill. Cassie gave the okay and the kids would be happy to see everyone."

"You are sure Cassie said okay?" Ilya asked, raising a brow at Bood.

"I triple checked."

Everyone at the table chuckled.

"Partners are more than welcome to join. We'll have plenty of food."

"Can we bring anything?" Shane asked.

"You don't have to, but I don't think any of the guys would complain if there was more food. Those boys can put it away."

Shane smiled. "That's true."

He was always amazed by the culinary staff, making food to feed twenty-three players, where the average age was about twenty-seven, plus coaches, plus staff. They were literally feeding an army. It was wild.

They talked some more about logistics for the team bonding activity Ilya had been planning.

Three hours worth of climbing activities that gave everyone, the team and coaches a chance to support and encourage one another while doing something fun and athletic.

Shane loved outdoorsy things and was actually very excited about the ropes course. He'd done a few before with the Pike family and had loved it.

"You move into your new place yet, Hollander?" Wyatt asked.

Shane had finally settled into a nice condo that wasn't too far from the arena. It was in the same neighborhood as Ilya's but they didn't live in the same building.

Shane sort of hoped that they might run into one another more but they hadn't so far, which made sense.

It was a relief to have found a place though. He loved his parents but having his own space was great.

"I did! Yeah. A few days ago. It's great but I'm still unpacking and setting things up."

"You must be exhausted," Max said.

"It's not so bad."

"You could hire people," Ilya suggested. Shane glanced at him, smiling, and shrugging.

"I guess. I don't know. I don't mind doing the work."

Ilya smiled a little but said nothing else.

These small interactions still got Shane all fluttery inside. He had noticed Ilya trying to do more to include him in things, talking to him. Never one-on-one but it felt better than the kind of coolness he'd been given, even after their dinner.

He would take what he could get. This was all new territory and Ilya had a lot on his plate. The last thing he was probably thinking about was Shane.

And Shane was starting to think that maybe nothing would happen. He had thought his apology might open the door to... *things*.

Shane was beginning to think that his expectations had been too high. Maybe all Ilya could tolerate was their cordial, professional relationship. That they couldn't even be friends.

Perhaps trying to make all of this happen while they were both new coaches on a team in desperate need of wins wasn't exactly the best way to make romance happen.

They wrapped up lunch and headed off to a short practice for the day.

"You okay, Holly?" Max asked as they headed toward the ice. "You seem kind of down."

Shane offered a smile. "I'm okay. Just... a lot to think about."

“Listen, if you need help at your new place, Leah and I aren’t very far. We’d be happy to help.”

“That’s really nice, Max. Thank you. I’ll let you know.”

“You got it,” Max replied, nudging Shane’s arm.

Even if things with Ilya were kind of difficult, at least he was getting along with everyone.

Max, Bood, and Wyatt were all great. He very much liked them as people and he felt very lucky to have them as coworkers.

With all their resources and knowledge and how eager this team was, Shane was feeling hopeful.

They weren’t Cup worthy but the potential was pretty good and that was exciting. It was nice to have something to focus on for the long term and build toward.

Practice went well. The team was truly starting to click and it was pretty clear which lines were working the best, with a few variations.

It was obvious how much the guys liked and respected Ilya. They practically hung on his every word.

Sometimes they reminded Shane of excited puppies or ducklings. Even with him sometimes, acting all awestruck, especially the younger guys.

Shane tried to make it clear that he wasn’t looking for that kind of admiration. He was just their coach. He appreciated the respect and that they listened but they didn’t need to fall all over themselves.

They were starting to loosen up though and he imagined that the ropes course would help a little with that.

Everyone seemed pretty jazzed about it, too, which was nice.

They ended practice, everyone going their separate ways.

Ilya wished Shane a good night, heading over to his Mercedes, a very sensible car, given that Ilya used to have a bunch of fancy sports cars.

Shane wondered what had ever happened to his collection. If he’d sold or kept them.

He might never know, which made him weirdly sad.

Back at home, Shane called Rose while he unpacked. He couldn’t wait to finish unpacking and get back to his usual routine.

Rose was a saint for listening to him complain.

“You could always hire someone,” she teased.

“That’s what Ilya said...”

“Oh did he?”

“At lunch. It wasn’t anything special.”

“Aww Shane.”

“It’s fine. I’m just resolving myself to this turning out to be nothing, anyway.”

“Hey, you don’t know that. You haven’t been at the job very long. You gotta give the guy some time to warm up. Aren’t you doing the team bonding thing this week?”

“Yeah, on Friday.”

“That might be good! It sounds promising!”

“I do think it’ll be fun. I like that kind of stuff.”

Rose laughed. “Oh I know. It’s right up your alley.”

Shane chuckled. “I’m looking forward to it. All the guys are great. The other coaches. The boys.”

“Mm, tell me all about it.”

“I don’t want to bore you.”

“It’s not boring! It’s so interesting! I love inside baseball! Except, y’know, hockey.”

Shane laughed.

He continued unpacking and putting away various items in his bathroom, telling Rose about his fellow coaches and all the players and where things were at a few weeks before pre-season started.

When they’d been “together,” after Shane had come out to only the people close to him, they’d talked a lot about hockey. Rose, originally from Michigan, had grown up in a hockey family, and enjoyed it herself.

Shane had appreciated those conversations, feeling like he had had someone in his corner. He’d felt understood and heard and not judged.

But those moments had made him miss Ilya more. Wishing that Rose was him. Not that Shane didn’t love her or want to spend time with her. It was just different and he had been much more raw at the time, coming to terms with a lot, and recognizing that Ilya had gotten away.

“Anyway, enough about sports. What’s up with you? Where are you in the world now?”

They talked about Rose's current movie and how things were in Scotland.

She was married now, to a wonderful man named Franco. He was a baker that she had met when she'd been on location in Italy for the movie that had ultimately gotten her her long awaited Oscar.

Shane had been in Rose's wedding party and had met her son, Nico, who was three now.

Shane enjoyed hearing about her family and how happy she was.

"Thanks for keeping me company while I unpack," Shane said, breaking down another box and adding it to the pile of broken down boxes he needed to take out to recycling.

"Anytime! I love catching up!"

"Tell the boys I said hi."

"I will! Love you! Talk soon!"

"Love you, too. Bye."

They ended the call and Shane sighed, placing his phone down. He couldn't believe how life had seemed to go by so fast. Sometimes he felt like he was stuck in time, unable to let go of the past, while everyone else moved on with life.

But he was a stubborn person and once he put his mind to something, he was going to follow through. He was going to give this his all, even if Ilya rejected him in the end. At least he could say that he tried.

Friday

It was a warm, sunny day, the last vestiges of summer holding on before fall fully set in. The team had all met up at the arena and had them been bused over to *Tree Top Adventures*.

Ilya did a head count before they got all checked in and it reminded Shane of a school field trip.

They were met by their instructor, Liv, and her assistants, Meg, and Andy.

"Hello Centaurs! Welcome to Tree Top Adventures! We're so happy to have you and to take you on our course today! We're going to run you through a tutorial on how to use your harnesses, our safety locking system, and what the courses entail."

Liv, Meg, and Andy walked everyone through the tutorial of how to harness up properly, and utilize the equipment for the ropes course.

Shane helped some of the guys out, since he had some familiarity with the harnesses already.

“You’ve done this before?” Ilya asked as Shane helped him with his harness, trying to focus more on what he was doing and less on being all up in Ilya’s business.

The guy was dressed in workout gear and a backwards snapback and he still managed to smell incredibly good, which should have been odd given the setting but wasn't because it was Ilya.

How did he even do that?

“Yeah, a few times. With Hayden Pike and his family.”

Ilya just hummed in acknowledgment.

Shane tried to just focus on his task, unable to help his eyes from wandering all over Ilya. He looked insanely good in the harness, the straps seeming to accentuate how muscular he still was.

Shane was having a hard time not staring.

“Thank you, Hollander,” he said when Shane had finished helping.

“No problem.”

The instructors showed the team each individual part of the course and what the individual challenges were for each part of the course, with the very last part being a zip line down to the final platform.

The point of the course was to work together as a team, helping support one another to get through it.

The boys were split into groups of four, with one group of three plus Wyatt, who had volunteered to join them. And the rest of the coaches were on a team of their own.

It was pretty obvious that Ilya had stayed in shape, even during his retirement. Not that Shane hadn’t noticed that before, it just seemed more obvious as Ilya climbed up onto the course ahead of Shane and his ass was right in Shane’s face. An ass he had once been very familiar with, now perfectly framed by the harness he was wearing.

Despite Ilya’s attractiveness once again being distracting, Shane found himself having a great time.

It was fun to watch the guys working together, encouraging and supporting one another, laughing together. Random hoots and hollers and words of encouragement for their teammates actually made Shane feel all gooey inside.

He had missed that kind of camaraderie and closeness with his teammates after he had retired and it was nice to see it in this team.

Ilya had done a brilliant job of making them all feel accepted and supported, wanting to create a locker room that was open and nonjudgmental. It was the kind of locker room that

Shane wished he had had and he knew that Ilya felt the same way, even if they hadn't spoken of it.

The coaches were the last to go through the course and it was pretty fun having to work together. They rotated who was starting off the next part of the trail as they moved from platform to platform.

"Come on, Hollander. You can move faster than that. You are old but not *that* old."

"Shut up, Rozanov! I'm only thirty-six days older than you and forty isn't old at all."

"Tell that to the rookies."

Shane glanced back, glaring, and Ilya grinned at him as they worked their way across a bridge that was made up of curved wooden steps attached to cable that wobbled as you walked on them. It was unstable and tricky to navigate at first, until you figured out how to maneuver yourself across. It was not an easy trek and it was pretty high up.

"I know you can do it, old man."

"Fuck *off*."

Ilya cackled behind Shane and Shane couldn't help but smile, shaking his head.

He made it to the other side, followed by Ilya, Bood, and Max.

"Nice job," Ilya said, patting Shane on top of his own snapback.

Shane smiled at him, his cheeks warming. "Thanks. You, too."

"Okay, Max! You are next!" Ilya said.

It was fun to work together, problem solve, and encourage one another as a team. Everyone was laughing and joking with one another. Ilya kept telling Shane to lighten up, it wasn't a competition, and Shane kept telling him that he wasn't being competitive.

They sniped back and forth the way they used to and the familiarity of it was bittersweet. Shane was enjoying it but it also reminded him how much distance there still was between them.

Where he used to find the teasing annoying... now he was kind of glad to be on the receiving end of it. At least Ilya was warming up to him a bit.

Overall, the course was challenging but not as difficult as Shane would have expected.

They swung themselves across two platforms, having to grab onto ropes with hanging triangular foot holds in them, climbed up tiny wire ropes, and finally, zip lined down to the end of the course to raucous applause.

“I think it worked,” Bood said to Ilya as they all observed the team together, like they were a group of old friends.

It wasn’t perfect but things were starting to come together.

Shane just hoped that it would transfer well on the ice.

They got back on the bus and headed back to the training facility so everyone could pick up their cars.

The plan was to meet at Bood’s place in a few hours to end the day with barbecue and beers.

Shane’s plan was to shower, change, and grab the buffalo chicken dip he’d made. Two trays worth, which he hoped would be enough, plus the bags of chips to go along with it.

“See you in a bit, Hollander!” Bood called as they got into their cars.

“See you!”

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

The team and coaches meet at the Boodram Household

A few hours later

Shane arrived at the Boodram household at the same time as Wyatt and his wife, Lisa.

“What did you bring?” Wyatt asked, laughing.

“Buffalo chicken dip,” Shane replied, balancing two trays of the dip and two reusable shopping bags full of chips.

“Let me take this,” Lisa laughed, taking one of the trays.

“Oh, thank you,” Shane stammered.

Wyatt was already holding three boxes in his hands.

“Donuts!” he explained.

They headed to the door, which was opened by Luca Haas, who smiled and welcomed them inside.

“Bood is outside doing barbecue,” he explained in his Swiss-German accent.

“Thanks, Haasy,” Wyatt said, ruffling Luca’s blond hair.

“Coach,” he greeted Shane with a smile. He was wearing glasses which made him look much younger than he was.

“Hey, Haas.”

“Can I help?”

“Nah, I got it.”

They headed through the spacious Boodram household, out onto a patio that overlooked a large backyard with a pool, swing set, and trampoline.

It was a child’s paradise, which made sense for Bood’s kids, Milo, who was nine, and Zara, who was six.

“Hey guys!” Bood greeted, standing at the grill with a few of the boys helping him out.

“Welcome!” Cassie said, giving Lisa and Wyatt a hug, asking what they had brought, before turning to Shane.

“Shane Hollander, it is a pleasure to meet you,” she said warmly.

“Hi Cassie. It’s really nice to meet you, too. Thanks so much for having us.”

“It’s my pleasure. What did you bring?”

“Buffalo chicken dip.”

“Sounds delicious! You can put everything down right over here.”

Shane placed the tray he was carrying down next to the one that Lisa had set on the table, then laid out the chips, peeling back the foil on one of the trays. He folded up his shopping bags, looking around.

He heard Ilya before he saw him, laughing, out on the lawn with Duncan McMichaels and Carson Meadows, playing with the kids.

He was wearing a pink tank top with a faded kind of floral design on it, with black shorts, and sneakers. He looked casually handsome and perfectly sun-kissed, running around after the kids, looking like he was having as much fun as they were.

Shane had never seen Ilya with kids, besides a behind-the-scenes video here or there from the Bears or his foundation. He was good with them. He would probably make a great dad...

But going down that path wasn’t going to be very helpful and would just have Shane full of more regret and longing that wouldn’t be useful to him at a party.

Most of the other guys were gathered around on patio furniture or inside, many of them sitting with girlfriends or wives.

Shane hadn’t seen Luca with anyone and while he was out, Shane hadn’t heard about a boyfriend...

“Can I get you anything, Shane?” Cassie asked.

“Oh! Yeah! Sure! Um, a beer?”

Cassie giggled and listed off what they had.

“A Corona is fine.”

“With lime?”

“If it’s not too much trouble.”

Cassie smiled. “It’s no trouble at all.”

She asked Wyatt and Lisa what they wanted and went to one of the coolers by the grill, grabbing drinks. Cassie opened the bottles and popped a pre-cut lime into Shane's.

She came back with them and Shane thanked her, asking if there was anything he could do to help.

"You're so sweet," she said, touching his arm. "Take a load off and have fun."

"That's asking an awful lot of him," Wyatt teased and Shane huffed, shaking his head.

"I can relax sometimes."

"I'll believe it when I see it."

Cassie and Lisa laughed softly.

"Feel free to help yourselves," Cassie said and moved on to one of the gathered group of veteran players.

"I'm guessing you're the workhorse of the group?" Lisa asked.

"Apparently so."

"Holly hasn't changed much, even after retirement."

"So everyone keeps telling me."

"You're really intense, man."

Shane shrugged and sipped his beer. "I like to win."

Wyatt smiled. "And that's why you're behind the bench."

"Well besides hockey," Lisa said. "What have you been up to since you retired, Shane?"

Wyatt excused himself to go play with the kids and so Shane was left with Lisa, chatting with her for a bit about what he'd been up to in retirement.

"Wyatt talks about your pretty often," Shane said. "I know you're a pediatrician and you specialize in pediatric heart conditions. You like running marathons and pottery. And you're a great plant mom."

Lisa laughed, her cheeks turning pink. "Oh my god. He *does* talk about me a lot."

"It's sweet," Shane chuckled and it was true.

He admired Wyatt and Lisa's relationship and how much Wyatt obviously loved her. He was always talking about how proud he was of her and her work.

It made Shane a little jealous. He wanted that kind of relationship. Being able to talk about the person he loved and how proud he was of him. To just show how much he adored him.

Shane sipped from his beer bottle and looked toward the yard where Ilya, Duncan, and Wyatt were sitting in the grass, talking with the kids.

After chatting with Lisa for a bit, she was pulled away, talking with Cassie, and Shane made his rounds, saying hi to the guys and their partners.

It was funny, listening to some of the guys brag to their partners about him as their coach and how impressive he had been as a player.

The attention was nice but unnecessary and he tried to play it off, turning the attention to the ladies, and asking about their hobbies or careers or school or children.

Max and Leah arrived and Shane ended up sitting and talking with them for a while before Wyatt joined them, fresh beers in hand.

Ilya was talking with Bood and Shane turned his attention back to the conversation at hand about the PWWL.

Bood announced that food was ready and Shane was impressed by the way Luca, Adrian, and Ivan organized the team into lines.

The food was delicious and the company was very enjoyable.

It was nice seeing all of the guys having fun, playing with the kids, everyone getting along.

“Having fun, Hollander?” Ilya asked, joining Shane by the cooler as Shane fished out a bottle of water.

“Oh. Yeah. This is great,” he replied. “You?”

Ilya looked at Shane’s water bottle curiously, then went into the cooler and pulled out a beer for himself, opening it.

“Yes. Of course.”

“You didn’t bring Anya?”

“Not today. Another time.” Ilya smiled a little. “Is like having a kid.”

Shane chuckled. “I bet. You wanted to just... relax?”

Ilya nodded. “Yes. But I won’t be out late.”

“Reasonable.”

“Mm. Yes. I am more responsible now.”

Ilya sipped his beer and Shane smiled a little, toeing at the deck. It was nice that Ilya was talking to him, even if it was awkward. Shane wished he was a better conversationalist.

“That’s good.”

Ilya chuckled. “Cassie told me you made the buffalo dip?”

“I did, yeah.”

“It was very good. I liked it.”

“Thank you. It’s been a fan favorite so I figured I would make it.”

“You should send me the recipe.”

“Yeah?” Shane perked up. “Sure! I’d be happy to!”

Ilya looked at him, smiling softly.

“Thanks,” he said, patting Shane’s shoulder and walked away.

Shane watched after him for a moment, shaking his head.

Well, that had been pretty good. Almost normal. Maybe they were making some progress.

Shane took out his phone, found the recipe in his bookmarks, and sent it to Ilya.

As the evening wore on, the coaches were all sitting together in front of a fire pit. Ilya, Bood, and Wyatt were smoking cigars. Shane and Max had declined.

“Do you guys think you can pull this off?” Cassie asked.

Bood looked at Ilya, who looked entirely too sexy as he blew a stream of smoke from his mouth, away from the group.

“I don’t know,” he replied honestly. “Is a good team on paper. Good coaches. But we are all new.” He tapped the ash at the end of his cigar into an ashtray, shrugging one shoulder. “Is worth a shot.”

“I think we have potential,” Bood said. “But Roz is right. We’re not battle tested. Any of us. Pre-season is going to give us a good idea of what to expect. But anything could happen.”

“Everyone is getting along great now, lines are clicking, the guys are in the groove but there’s all of the season ahead of us at this point. We just have to wait and see,” Shane added.

His fellow coaches nodded their heads and made noises of agreement.

This wasn’t the first time they’d had this conversation as a group. It was exciting to be working together, to help mold this team, but Bood was right. None of them had NHL coaching experience.

Even if the guys were the best players to ever play hockey, poor coaching could ruin a team.

There were some nights where Shane worried that he would fail them, that his inexperience would fuck them all over. It sort of helped that all the other guys were feeling similarly.

“We have to expect growing pains,” Max chimed in. “Things are probably going to be rough at first. We have to pay attention to what areas need direction. We can’t get too frustrated.”

“You’re right, Max,” Wyatt agreed.

Shane shifted his eyes back to Ilya, watching him smoke. Shane had no idea if he’d quit smoking cigarettes. He used to give Ilya shit about it, back in their twenties, and he knew that Ilya had started smoking less at the time.

Shane wondered if he’d quit... he wish he knew.

“One game at a time. We will see how things go in pre-season and revisit if we have to. I trust all of you. We make a good team. Even if we fail more than we succeed, we will learn.”

“Wise words, Captain,” Bood chuckled.

Ilya chuckled and shook his head a little.

It was nice just talking with everyone about this, knowing that they were all on the same page.

Only time would tell how things would play out but the pre-season would be a good test.

They hung out a little while longer, Ilya being the first to part ways.

“I have to get home to Anya,” he said as he stretched his arms above his head, revealing a sliver of skin that showed off the cut of his hip and a bit of stomach.

He wished everyone a goodnight and Shane was surprised when he clasped his hand and hugged him, patting his back.

“Goodnight, Hollander.”

“Goodnight.”

Shane left not too long after with Max and Leah, heading back home.

Back at home, Shane brought in his reusable shopping bags. He toed his shoes off at the door and went into his kitchen, stashing the bags away. He smelled like cigar smoke and bug spray and sweat.

He went down the hall to his bedroom, thinking about the day, his mind replaying the way Ilya had looked in the climbing harness, in his tank top playing in the grass, sitting in a patio chair smoking a cigar.

Shane’s heart raced for absolutely no reason.

Okay, not no reason, exactly.

Even with things still being sort of weird between them, but improving, Ilya was fucking hot as hell.

He just *was*. There was no way for Shane to deny that or beat around the bush about it.

The man had aged like a fine wine and it wasn't like Shane could ever forget about what he looked like naked or how it felt to have his cock inside him.

Sex with Ilya had literally been the best sex of Shane's life and that wasn't something that just left you, no matter how much time had passed.

He dropped his wallet, phone, and keys on top of his dresser and went into the bathroom, starting the shower, and striped out of his clothes, dropping them into a pile on the floor.

The bathroom started to steam up and Shane stepped into the shower, under the hot spray.

It had been a few years since the last time Shane had slept with anyone.

He was far less self-conscious when it came to sex than he used to be, investing in a few toys that he liked to use that worked just fine for him while he was single.

And any time Shane got off, he was thinking about Ilya.

Before they had ever met, Shane had never imagined anyone when it came to fantasizing about sex. It was always more about sensation and the *idea* of someone sucking his dick, rather than a specific individual.

It wasn't until Ilya that Shane imagined being with another person and it was always Ilya. That hadn't changed at all.

Even when Shane had been with other men, he'd just been left... *wanting*.

"Fuck," he murmured to himself, pressing his forehead against the wet tile of the shower as he slid a hand down his chest, wrapping around his mostly hard dick and stroked.

Shane could vividly remember his first time with Ilya. They'd been newly nineteen, still just kids.

Shane had never been with a man before and Ilya had been so patient. Gentle. He'd asked what Shane wanted, what felt good for him.

He remembered kissing Ilya and how surprised he'd been at how hot it was as Ilya's tongue slid into his mouth.

Being together that first time hadn't been anything other than blowjobs and a partial handjob but it had cracked something open in Shane.

It had been the start of something he couldn't let go of.

He remembered how hot and sexy it had been, how much more he had enjoyed himself compared to when he'd been with girls.

And he remembered that, despite Ilya's teasing, he had made Shane feel safe.

Shane thought about the feeling of Ilya's mouth around him, so sure and confident, warm and wet. He'd used his tongue and a little teeth, squeezing Shane's pec in his hand, one strong arm wrapped around Shane's thigh.

Shane bit his lip, stroking himself faster at the memory, reaching his free hand behind him, teasing a finger against his rim. He'd wished he'd brought lube...

He'd always loved Ilya's mouth, how good he was with his tongue. His fingers, too, always confident, opening Shane up expertly, like he was the only one who knew how to do it properly, before entering him, filling him up.

Shane gasped softly into the empty bathroom, remembering all the times Ilya had had his mouth on him, had opened him up, teased him, until he was inside Shane, fucking him hard and fast, strong fingers curled around Shane's hips.

Shane's hand flew over his cock as he thought about Ilya fucking him until he was coming in hot, desperate bursts all over his hand and the shower wall.

He sagged, breathing hard, floating on pleasure for a moment, before he felt embarrassment creep into his cheeks.

"Jesus Christ, Hollander," he huffed at himself.

Shane stayed there for a few moments, eyes closed, cheeks burning, collecting himself, before he pushed off the wall and took a shower for real.

He stepped out once he'd finished, drying off, wrapping a towel around his waist. He didn't want to look at himself in the mirror. He found his pajamas, and went about getting dressed.

When he'd finished, he sat down on the edge of the bed, hands in his hair.

He felt so pathetic.

He wished that he could have flirted with Ilya and taken him home. He wished that they could have had sex and laughed and kissed.

Shane wished for a great many things and also knew that he couldn't have them. At least not yet.

He and Ilya were only barely on good terms. The fragile truce and friendliness between them could so easily be broken by a misstep.

They had done well together so far, talking things through, coordinating strategies. Ilya had let Shane take point on certain plays, listened to Shane's thoughts and opinions.

It had felt good, standing side by side, working together toward a common goal, seeing positive results.

And Shane felt like his heart was treacherous. He feared he would say something or do something far too soon and it would all come crashing down.

He had to get a hold of himself.

He needed to be patient.

Focus on the team, building trust. You need more time. Don't fuck this up.

He ran his hands over his face and flopped back onto his bed, staring up at the ceiling that hadn't quite become familiar yet.

Shane felt like he was grasping at straws, continually stuck in this limbo, unsure of what to do or where to go from here.

He tried reminding himself of what his father had said, that he just needed to be consistent, that Ilya needed to know that he was someone who could be trusted.

That in and of itself would be a challenging feat, given that Shane had broken that trust once already.

But there was no way to fix any of that if he didn't try.

It was just that his heart wanted what it wanted.

A second chance. The opportunity to love Ilya properly, the way that he deserved, the way that Shane should have loved him fifteen years ago.

He swallowed.

He had to get his head in the game. He couldn't let himself be so completely consumed by Ilya that he forgot that he had an actual job to do.

Pre-season games were coming up and they needed to be ready. If he expected the team to be at their best, then he needed to, too.

He could get this desire out of his system and focus on being the best assistant coach he could be. Kill two birds with one stone.

Coach well and win Ilya's heart.

Easy, right? Yeah. Totally.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Ilya and Shane keep running into each other outside of work

Monday

“Anya!” Ilya called.

Anya looked up at him from her spot on the floor where she’d been chewing on a Lambchop toy. She tilted her head, her ears perked up.

“Outside?”

Anya sprang to her feet, tongue lolling out of her mouth as she hopped happily on the carpet at hearing her favorite word, besides 'treat.'

No matter how many times they did this, Ilya was continually amused. He laughed softly, coming over to pet her, and calm her down a bit.

“Okay, okay, yes. We are going outside.”

He grabbed her collar and clipped it on, then her harness, and then her leash.

He popped in his airpods and turned on the SportsNet app, listening to whatever show was currently airing.

The commentator was talking about baseball and Ilya mostly tuned it out, locking his door behind him as he headed down the hall with Anya, heading outside to start their walk.

They did the same route every day, wandering around the neighborhood.

The waning days of summer were still upon them and Ilya was enjoying the warm weather. He had never lived anywhere warm year round, like Florida or California, so it wasn’t like the cold bothered him, but he did enjoy the sun.

Anya sniffed around at bushes and trotted along a little head of Ilya, stopping here and there to do her business, and Ilya would stop to clean up after her.

The commentators switched over to talking about hockey and Ilya tuned back in.

“In the hockey world we’re watching the Ottawa Centaurs very closely. The team has been very open about a rebuild this year, starting fresh with all new coaching staff and a handful of

brand new players with a solid core of veterans. The biggest question on everyone's mind... can the former bad boy of hockey, Ilya Rozanov, save a franchise?"

Ilya huffed a laugh at the mention of being the *former bad boy of hockey*. His reputation had always preceded him but he was a far cry from that boy in his twenties who didn't know jack about shit.

He listened as the commentators spoke about his history as a player, all his accomplishments, his reputation when he'd been a player, and how things had seemed to change after he'd retired, come out, and spent some time away out of the public eye.

He was surprised at the generosity of that, a surprising amount of grace being given, especially for a bisexual Russian immigrant.

There were interviews with the coaches and even some of the players from Boston College who had nothing but wonderful things to say about Ilya, and that made Ilya smile.

He was described as fun and outgoing and that he didn't take himself too seriously, but that he was knowledgeable, level-headed, and fair, always going to bat for the guys, but pushing them to learn from their mistakes, and continue working to excel.

It was surprisingly heartwarming to hear such glowing remarks about him. It had taken a long time for him to internalize that he was good at what he did. That he wasn't lazy or not good enough.

He made a mental note to reach out to the people who had spoken for the segment, wanting to thank them for being so kind and generous.

The segment mentioned Hollander, Bood, Max, and Wyatt as well, and discussed the diversity amongst them, highlighting the fact that this was the youngest coaching staff in the history of the NHL, the median age being 39.

Ilya was pleased that the talk about them was overall, positive. There was some speculation about whether or not the team or the coaches could "pull things off" but the pre-season would give them an idea of what to expect.

No pressure or anything.

Ilya was hoping to build the guys' confidence and help them feel more connected as a team.

The pre-season games were basically exhibition games and it certainly wasn't when players were firing on all cylinders, so Ilya wasn't expecting other teams to be at their competitive best.

It was literally just a warm up for the main show, but Ilya was cautiously optimistic. He knew that Hollander was being very cautious but he had always been like that.

There was certainly potential but once the season actually started, nerves might act up. There was a lot to keep an eye on but Ilya was pleased with what they were seeing so far and the boys were receptive to feedback, which was all they could ask for.

Ilya was proud of them. They had some continued growing and work to do but it was a promising start.

Anya tugged at her leash and Ilya looked up, having been distracted as he focused on the commentary. He furrowed his brows, confused as to what had caught her attention, when he saw Shane Hollander.

Ilya wasn't exactly surprised to see him. They lived in the same neighborhood and they had run into each other on several occasions since Hollander had moved in.

Apparently Anya had decided that Hollander was one of her favorite people now and was eager to say hello. Ilya sighed, taking out his airpods, as Hollander noticed them. It looked like he had picked up some groceries, reusable grocery bags slung over both shoulders.

"Hey," he greeted. "Fancy seeing you here."

"Hi," Ilya replied as Anya came to a stop, whining at Hollander. "Anya..."

"Oh, hi Anya. I'm sorry I don't have any treats for you," Hollander said, placing down his bags to pet her properly.

Anya flopped immediately onto her back, begging for belly rubs, and Hollander obliged.

"You just starting or ending your walk?" Hollander asked.

"In the middle," Ilya replied.

Hollander nodded. "Nice."

"Did you go food shopping?"

"Yeah, just to pick up a few things. Still getting settled and I keep realizing that I need stuff."

Ilya chuckled. "It always goes that way."

"Yeah. It does."

After a few more minutes of petting, Hollander stood up, grabbing his bags.

"Enjoy the rest of your walk!"

Ilya smiled at him and paused.

"We are going that way, if you want to walk together."

"Oh, I mean, I don't want to mess up your routine or anything..."

"Is fine. Our condos are so close."

Hollander smiled. "Yeah. Okay."

It wasn't the first time Ilya had suggested they walk together. They were often going in the same direction and it would be kind of silly to walk that way but not together.

And... maybe Ilya kind of liked being able to just chat with Hollander.

Ilya enjoyed picking his brain about things and seeing what his thoughts were on what the media was saying and how he saw things going.

Hollander was fairly conservative in his estimations and critical, too, in a way that Ilya wasn't, and Ilya appreciated the different perspective.

Maybe Ilya kind of enjoyed the company, too. Not that he would tell Hollander any of that.

He knew that Hollander was trying very hard to be friendly and a good coach and to make sure that things were okay between them.

Ilya did appreciate his apology and that he truly was trying so hard to be a good coach and a good coworker.

Ilya knew he could cut him some slack.

He thought that things were improving. They were getting more comfortable with one another and it felt a bit more like he was remembering what he had liked about Hollander in the first place, besides just his good looks.

He was still exceptionally beautiful but also still very funny and smart and kind.

They walked for a few blocks before they had to go in different directions, stopping at the corner.

"Thanks for walking with me," Shane said.

"Of course. Get home safe."

"You guys, too. Enjoy the rest of your walk. Goodnight!"

"Goodnight, Hollander."

They parted ways, heading down the street back toward home.

Anya looked up at Ilya and Ilya looked down at her.

"What? Is just a walk."

Ilya could have sworn Anya gave him a look that suggested she knew something else was going on.

He sighed to himself, shaking his head.

Yes, okay, he was a little lonely.

Over the years Ilya had gotten more comfortable with being in his own company, with not feeling like he constantly had to keep his body busy.

It wasn't a bad thing by any stretch. He felt calmer, more assured within himself, not feeling like he had to keep outrunning his demons as they snapped at his heels.

He had a much greater sense of inner peace than he ever had before and he was thankful for that. He'd worked hard to get here and he wasn't looking to have that disrupted.

But he missed regular sex and intimacy. He wanted a relationship with someone. He wanted to feel loved and cared for and safe.

He just felt frustrated that he wanted that with Hollander, while also carrying around the hurt that his old rival had caused.

The part of Ilya that still carried a torch for Hollander, wanted to let Hollander in. To give them that chance. For them to be more friendly, to get closer, to maybe try again.

This other part of him, however, was fearful that Hollander would run again. That Ilya's emotions would be too much for him and he would bolt. It had happened once already, who was to say it wouldn't happen again?

Galina had offered perspective in Ilya's last therapy session.

Their positions as coworkers, Ilya technically being Shane's boss, made things complicated, but apparently they both liked complicated, given their past. So that was just something to keep in mind.

They were both out and single and had history.

The risk every human took when it came to relationships of any kind, platonic or romantic, was that you may be rejected or left.

That was always there, no matter what, no matter who.

It was just having to decide if it was worth the risk.

At this point in time, Ilya needed more time. More information.

He could appreciate Hollander's efforts but only time would tell at this point if it would be worth the risk.

Ilya had loved danger and risk in his younger days but things had shifted as he'd gotten older.

And besides all that, they had a team to coach.

Ilya wasn't interested in letting his romantic life (or lack thereof) interfere with his ability to coach this team.

Pre-season was right around the corner and that was the focus.

Thursday

Ilya was not an early riser.

He preferred to sleep in and take his time in the mornings.

He was much more a night owl, staying up into the wee hours of the morning.

His ideal schedule was 10am to 3am but unfortunately the world didn't work that way and years in hockey had gotten him into the habit of waking early.

So he was up Thursday morning, changing into a set of workout clothes, leaving Anya to sleep as he went out for a run.

He had his airpods in, listening to the workout playlist he'd had since he'd gained access to Spotify back in 2006.

He'd swapped out some songs but had mostly just kept adding to it. The playlist was hundreds of hours long and it covered a wide variety of musical genres and artists.

Ilya put on some Bad Bunny and after some stretching, he was off.

He was about a little over one and a half kilometers into his run when he quite literally ran into Shane Hollander.

"Whoa!"

He didn't see who it was at first. They'd collided and Ilya automatically wrapped his arms around the person to try and prevent them from falling but they were all tangled up. They were falling sideways, kind of stumbling, and Ilya turned so he would land on his back on a grassy patch next to the sidewalk, the person on top of him, knocking the wind out of him.

"Oh my god," Hollander gasped. "Ilya! Oh my god. Are you okay?"

Ilya finally registered who it was that he'd fallen with, though he couldn't even really process the feeling of Hollander's body pressed against his own, worried brown eyes looking down at him, dark brows furrowed.

Hollander had moved off of him, his hands fluttering as if he was trying to figure out where to touch Ilya, if at all.

Ilya was just trying to get air back into his lungs after having a two hundred pound man land on his chest.

He was making a weird, strained, groaning noise. This wasn't the first time he'd had the wind knocked out of him (thanks, hockey!) and he started flexing his hips and knees to try and relieve the difficulty in breathing.

He finally managed to take a breath, trying not to gasp.

Hollander was sitting beside him on the grass, looking panicked.

“Holy shit. Are you okay?”

“Fine,” Ilya groaned and sat up. He brushed grass off of himself and from his hair, fixing the headband he had been wearing to keep his hair out of his face. He rested his arms on his knees, head down, annoyed.

He *did not* want to be dealing with Hollander right now. They spent enough time together as it was...

“I am so sorry. I didn’t even see you coming. I should have been paying better attention,” Hollander said, sounding very apologetic.

Ilya looked around for his airpods, managing to find them, glad that they were intact.

“Is okay. It happens.”

He looked at Hollander, who looked extremely distraught, his wide, earnest eyes filled with concern and fuck... Ilya couldn’t even stay annoyed looking at that face. Hollander truly looked stricken and worried.

Ilya reached out, resting a hand on his knee, wanting to reassure him.

“Shane,” he said, firmly. Hollander blinked, looking at him, as if he was coming back to reality. “I’m fine.”

Hollander nodded. “Right. Yeah. Okay.”

Ilya offered him a reassuring smile and got to his feet. He offered his hands and Hollander accepted them, letting Ilya pull him to his feet.

“Is not like I am so fragile,” Ilya chuckled.

“Right,” Shane huffed, looking self-conscious but smiling.

“I’m fine, Hollander.”

“I know. I just feel bad.”

“Is okay.” Ilya looked around, then back at Shane. “Do you want to run together?” Ilya asked because they were here.

“Are you sure?”

Ilya shrugged. “Why not?”

“Okay.”

Ilya nodded and then looked Hollander up and down.

“Where are your headphones?”

“I’m not wearing any.”

Ilya blinked. “You run without music?”

“Um... yes?”

Ilya peered incredulously at Hollander. “Who doesn’t listen to music when they work out? Are you a psychopath?”

“What? No!” Hollander spluttered, brows furrows, face all scrunched up in confusion.

Ilya couldn’t help but laugh. He shook his head and held out one of his airpods.

Shane looked at it, then at Ilya, then back at the airpod, and took it, putting it in his ear.

“What are you listening to?”

“Bad Bunny,” Ilya replied. “Come. How many kilometers are you running?”

“Probably eight-ish?”

Ilya nodded. “Okay.”

He and Hollander ran together in silence, listening to Ilya’s playlist. And it was fine. Normal. Maybe even a little nice.

They did a long loop around their neighborhood, by the water, before coming back, and Ilya dropped Hollander off at his place.

“Maybe we can do this more often,” Hollander suggested as they stood on the sidewalk outside his building. “Not the, uh, running into each other but, just, running, I guess.”

Ilya watched Hollander curiously. He always seemed so self-conscious in moments like this. He was more confident at work, when they were talking shop, but Ilya could see the echoes of that shy, kind of awkward twenty-something that Ilya had once known.

And he could feel the way Hollander pulled at him, like a magnet. Being around him like this made Ilya *want*. It made his heart ache and his stomach knot up and his heart rate increase.

“Okay,” he heard himself say before he could even realize he was saying it. “Sure.”

Hollander brightened, lighting up like a thousand watt bulb, and Ilya’s heart clenched.

“Really? Great!”

Ilya couldn’t help but chuckle, Hollander’s enthusiasm was... adorable. He checked his Garmin.

“We can talk more later. I should go.”

“Yeah. Of course. I’ll see you at the arena!”

Ilya nodded and gave a little wave before jogging off, wondering what the hell he was even doing.

Following your heart, Sveta’s voice echoed in his mind but he brushed the thought away.

He needed to use his head more than his heart at the moment. He didn’t have time for entanglements but it seemed that Hollander was determined to make things messy.

But Ilya knew that was uncharitable.

Hollander was just trying to be friendly. And Ilya maybe just needed to loosen up a little. He used to be good at that. Being chill and going with the flow.

He could do that again.

At least a little.

Maybe even offer Hollander a ride so they could commute together. It was the neighborly thing to do. Better for the environment as well. It was kind of silly to take two cars when they lived so close.

Ilya sighed, opening the door to his condo, greeted by Anya.

He could worry about all of this later. For now, he needed to get ready for practice.

Practice went well. Ilya had the guys scrimmaging, wanting them to start to get the feeling for working together, feeling out their lines.

He’d mixed and matched a bit, just to see what would happen, and that had been helpful to see who was more versatile and who wasn’t.

At the end of practice, he stood at center ice, surrounded by the team, all the players taking a knee, coaches standing right outside the circle.

“Pre-season is a chance for everyone to get more comfortable with the pace of the game,” he said. “Not everyone will be giving one hundred percent. People are coming back from the summer, vacation, but this is a good taste of what games will be like. There is some pressure, but less, than when the season starts. So have fun but pay attention.”

He looked up at his staff. “Anyone have anything else to add?”

“What’s the worst thing in hockey, Roz?” Wyatt asked.

Ilya smiled and chuckled. “Sad goalie.”

“Sad goalie!” Wyatt repeated. “Don’t let your goalie be sad, boys.”

“No sad goalie!” the team all shouted in unison and the coaches tapped their sticks on the ice.

“Okay. Everyone go shower, you stink,” Ilya sighed, some of the guys chuckling, everyone making their way off the ice.

The coaches lingered on the ice to debrief.

“Thoughts?” Ilya asked, leaning casually against the boards.

Hollander, unsurprisingly, chimed in with a slew of notes he had about turnovers, passing, and unnecessary penalties. Ilya listened because while Hollander did always have something to say, it was usually very valuable.

“I don’t want to say they’re being mindless on the ice,” Hollander explained. “But there needs to be more awareness of themselves and where they are, who’s around them. I know we have some newer guys and rookies but something we should keep an eye on. We’re looking at penalties for silly mistakes.”

Hollander was right. It was something Ilya had noticed and that they were trying to incorporate into practices. You needed to be aware of your own body and be in control of your stick, otherwise there could be a call for something, even if it was unintentional, just because you weren’t being mindful enough.

Hazy gave them some insight into the goalies and Max and Bood offered some additional feedback about the boys.

Ilya appreciated the collaborative approach. He liked getting different perspectives and knowing that his own instincts about things were correct.

They made a plan for addressing the concerns before everyone headed back to the dressing room.

Ilya stayed on the ice, cleaning up pucks.

“Need some help?”

Ilya looked up, seeing Hollander standing a few feet away.

“If you like.” Ilya shrugged.

Hollander smiled a little and started helping clean up the pucks.

Once they were all in the bucket, Ilya picked it up by the handle and skated off the ice, Hollander following behind him.

Ilya looked over his shoulder.

“Hollander.”

“Hm?”

“What is English word for people driving to work together?”

Hollander looked at him, thinking. “Carpool?”

“Carpool,” Ilya repeated, nodding a little. “Do you want to carpool?”

“What? You and me?”

“Yes. We live in same neighborhood. Seems silly to take two cars. You are less than five minutes from me.”

Ilya couldn’t help but smile to himself at seeing the surprised expression on Hollander’s face, like he hadn’t expecting Ilya to do something like this.

Which, well, was fair given his track record so far.

“Yeah. Okay. If you’re sure.”

“Of course.”

“Cool. Yeah. Thanks, Ilya.”

“No problem. I can be nice guy.”

He looked at Hollander and winked. Hollander looked away, his cheeks turning pink, and Ilya was genuinely surprised at the immediate bodily reaction he had to that. Heat pooling in his belly.

Get a fucking grip, Rozanov.

“I’ll text you.”

“Sounds good.”

They got back to the dressing room, parting ways so Ilya could drop off the pucks.

What was he getting himself into?

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Pre-season has started

Two days before pre-season

“So, what's going on with you and Ilya?” Rose asked as she and Shane had their weekly Facetime. “You’re running and commuting together?”

Shane was leaning on his counter, his phone propped up against the napkin holder his mom had bought him so he could see Rose as he ate his nonfat, plain Greek yogurt with honey, granola, and blueberries.

“Yeah,” Shane replied, stirring a blueberry absently around in the yogurt. “We run together every other morning and we carpool. We switch who drives each time.”

“And this was Ilya’s idea.”

“Yup.”

“Huh. And you suggested running together.”

Shane ate a spoonful of yogurt and nodded. “Mhm.”

“Fascinating.”

Shane sighed. “I don’t know. I mean... things have been good, I think. Normal.”

Rose smiled softly at him on the screen and Shane shrugged, his cheeks heating as he thought about everything. Coaching with Ilya and now running and commuting together.

“I’m hopeful. Not even about anything, like, romantic happening or anything. I just want to be *friends* with him. I hate when people are upset with me or don’t like me but I know that what I did was awful to him and I just... I don’t know. Even if we aren’t together, at least we can be friends.”

“Yeah. Of course. I think that’s more important, don’t you? Having that foundation.”

Shane nodded, eating another spoonful of yogurt.

“I want to do a good job. I don’t want to fuck things up with the team or Ilya. But I think things are going okay.”

“That’s great! And I’m glad. But don’t you... want the romance?”

“Of course I do. I just want to be realistic. He’s not going to just fall back into my arms.”

Rose chuckled. “Yeah. That’s true.”

“I’m doing my best.”

“I know you are. And you’re crushing it! How is everyone feeling now that pre-season is right around the corner?”

“Everyone’s been good, feeling positive. We have work to do and I think it’ll take some time for everyone to find their feet but there’s a lot of promise here. I just hope the fans can hold on for a bit while the guys develop.”

“Only time will tell but I can imagine the fans will hang on if they know there’s hope.”

“That’s what we’re banking on.”

“It helps that they have Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander at the helm.”

Shane smiled. “Max, Wyatt, and Bood are good draws, too. Max is a Canadian hockey darling, especially having won several golds at the Olympics, and Wyatt and Bood are Centaurs royalty.”

“How’re people handling things?”

“Well, I think. The media’s been kind. The social media admins and communications director have told us that they’re seeing a lot of positive interactions on posts and stuff. A lot of queer and trans fans are feeling seen, which is great, we want that. Everyone’s been really open and I think that’s all you can ask for.”

“How are *you* feeling?”

Shane thought about that question. He was feeling a lot of things. Mostly he was just in it, doing his job, very much a head down and get to work kind of mentality. He liked being around Ilya. He liked being around the other coaches. He liked the boys. They were a solid bunch.

“I’m happy,” Shane finally said. “I love the job, the team, the staff. You know, it’s funny, I haven’t heard one homophobic joke. Like, the guys tease each other and joke around all the time but it’s... different. There’s no shame or fear. It’s kind of healing, in a way. Refreshing.”

Shane looked at Rose. She was watching him, still smiling softly.

“That’s great, Shane.”

Shane nodded, eyes prickling a little. He swallowed. “I don’t think I’ve been happy for a while. At least not with hockey.”

“I think that’s the understatement of the century, babe.”

Shane laughed. “I guess so.”

Rose wasn’t wrong. Shane had always loved hockey. It was his passion. It was everything. But towards the end, it had felt like a duty. A burden. It was something he had to push through and do, to see to its natural conclusion.

The fun and color had been sucked out of it all... especially after Ilya had retired. Even when they weren’t talking or anything, he had always had a lot of joy on the ice.

But even Shane had seen that start to fade.

Shane had felt small, keeping a huge chunk of himself bundled up and hidden away.

He had always loved his privacy, where he didn’t have to worry about being constantly scrutinized in the public eye.

And while being a coach didn’t necessarily take any of that away, he wasn’t doing it alone.

Shane took a breath. “It’s good.”

“Good.”

He smiled at Rose and had some more yogurt.

“You gonna watch the pre-season games?”

“As many as I can! I can’t wait to see you in your cute little suits behind the bench!”

Shane laughed. “I’ve already talked to Christian.”

Christian was Shane’s stylist.

“Oh, I know. He texted me.”

“Of course he did.”

They both laughed. “I’m very excited for you.”

“Thanks.”

“So things are going well and you’re happy.”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“Then that’s all you can ask for.”

Shane nodded. “How’re things with you?”

“Oh just dandy. I’m exhausted to be honest. This film can’t wrap soon enough. But the highlands are beautiful. I’m trying to enjoy the scenery as much as I can.”

They talked for a bit longer about Rose’s remaining filming schedule and when she’d be back stateside. She had promised to bring the boys to the game Ottawa would play in LA and Shane had made sure to reserve tickets for that.

They said their good nights and goodbyes because Rose needed to sleep and Shane needed to get ready for tomorrow.

One last practice before the pre-season started.

He wasn’t operating under any delusions that his team alone would change the NHL from the inside out but in general, he did feel more hopeful.

Crowell had stepped down as Commissioner two years ago due to ailing health and the newest Commissioner, Adelaide Masters, seemed like she might be a decent replacement.

The first woman to ever be named Commissioner of the NHL.

She was a former Olympic hockey player and had experience working at the executive level for several franchises.

She was married with a husband and two adult children. Her daughter was married to a woman.

So... there was hope.

Time would tell how everything would play out but all Shane could do was his best.

He just hoped it was good enough.

Pre-Season Game #3 - Ottawa at Detroit

“This is going better than I thought,” Hollander said, leaning over to speak to Ilya.

Ilya leaned to the side, offering his ear, glancing at Hollander, and smiling a little, nodding as he listened.

“It is only the middle of the second. A lot of game left.”

“Fair enough.”

Ilya chuckled, going back to standing, hands clasped in front of him, watching the game.

All things considered, they were doing well. For a young, untested team, winning one of the two games they’d played so far wasn’t bad.

They were currently winning against Detroit but Ilya wasn’t holding his breath.

He was, however, pleased that they weren't getting any silly penalties. There were a few calls no one had loved and Ilya had had no problem contesting them, giving the officials a bit of a hard time, but it wasn't unwarranted.

The guys just needed to hold the line and keep up what they were doing.

Ilya had some mental notes of improvements needed, but overall, things were going well.

It was a good boost for the guys to start feeling comfortable and confident.

And it was nice for the coaches, too. They were in it just like the players were. They were all building cohesion and things were starting to come together.

It was a long season though and they hadn't even started for real yet, so they just had to keep their hand on the pulse of the team.

"Noooo, don't do that," Ilya lamented as one of their rookie defenseman attempted to make a pass that was never going to connect.

Hollander chuckled beside him.

Apparently he enjoyed Ilya's running commentary as he watched the game, occasionally pausing to speak to the players, giving them feedback, or discussing things with his fellow coaches.

Hollander would sometimes chime in to add his own thoughts, which Ilya appreciated. Hollander had a good sense of humor. He was actually quite funny, though Ilya used to tease him about being boring.

It was only partly true and that hadn't really changed, even now.

"Move faster!" Ilya called, shaking his head. "Stewie has lead feet. So slow..."

"But he's good on the forecheck," Hollander said.

"True."

Ilya perked up as he watched Luca Haas get a breakaway. The players on the bench in front of him were all encouraging him from the bench and everyone was on their feet cheering as Haas scored.

"Yes! Well done!"

Luca swung by the bench, smiling wide, high-fiving everyone after hugging his linemates and Ilya felt himself smiling, proud of Luca.

"That was excellent," Hollander said.

"Yes. Very good."

When Luca was back on the bench, Ilya leaned over to him.

“Excellent play. Very good job,” he said, patting Luca’s shoulder pads.

Luca turned to look at him, grinning. “Thanks, Roz.”

Ilya smiled back.

By the end of the game, the Cens had won 2-1, and the boys were buzzing.

“Very good job today, boys,” Ilya said in the dressing room. “I am proud of your efforts. You’re working together, making smart plays. We have some things to work on. Defense especially and the PK. But overall, very nice work. We spent a lot of time in their zone. Two more pre-season games to go, let’s keep it moving. Practice the day after tomorrow. Do not miss the bus to the airport. Early wake up call. Flight is at ten a.m. Nice job.”

The guys clapped and cheered before Ilya left them to it, meeting with Hollander, Max, Bood, and Wyatt.

They would review some tape later but for now they were done for the night.

“I want a steak,” Bood said as they headed out to the bus to go back to their hotel.

“I’m pretty hungry, too,” Hollander added.

Ilya chuckled.

“Guess this means coaches’ dinner?” Max asked.

Everyone looked at him. “Yes. Okay. Someone pick somewhere.”

Hollander found a restaurant and called ahead to see if they could accommodate a table for five and was able to snag them a spot.

They went back to the hotel and Ilya gave the team one last warning about not missing the bus tomorrow morning before dropping off his tie and jacket in his hotel room, rejoining everyone in the lobby before they went to the restaurant.

Ilya very much liked his coaching staff. They were all very funny, knowledgeable people. They talked a little shop, going over the game, before turning their attention back to day-to-day things.

There was a lot of talk amongst the partnered guys about leaving their wives at home and the transition from being around and available to not.

Bood’s kids were in school now which made it a little easier for Cassie and while neither Wyatt nor Max had kids, the adjustment from being readily available all the time to not was tough for Lisa and Leah, respectively.

“And y’all living the single life,” Max teased Ilya and Hollander.

Ilya smiled a little and Hollander laughed in an awkward kind of way.

“You two seeing people?” Bood asked.

Ilya shook his head. “Too busy with this job.”

“That’s so boring, Roz! I thought you were fun and exciting.”

Ilya scoffed. “I’m old now.”

Wyatt waved a hand dismissively. “I’m a year younger than you and I’m still fun and exciting. Age is just a number!”

Ilya raised his brows and hummed.

“What about you, Hollander? You seeing anyone or too into the job, too?”

“Yeah, pretty much. I haven’t dated in... a while.”

“Boo!” Wyatt, Bood, and Max chorused.

“Should we try and hook you two up?” Max suggested

Ilya blinked, glancing briefly at Hollander, and then back at Max.

“I mean, like, set you two up with people to date. Not each other!”

“Right. Yeah,” Hollander murmured.

“That is not necessary,” Ilya sighed, leaning back in his chair.

“Why not? Leah and I have a lot of connections...”

“I appreciate the offer but no, thank you.”

“Holly?”

“I’m good thanks. I already have people in my life trying to do that.”

Ilya was surprised at the jealousy that sliced through him. It came out of nowhere. He had no claim to Shane Hollander, at all, so there was no reason to be jealous about hearing him maybe dating or seeing other people.

Why wouldn’t Hollander’s friends and family try setting him up with someone? He was a hot commodity. Anyone would be lucky to have him and it was insane for Ilya to think that he factored into any of that at all.

“I just want to focus on my job right now.”

“Fair enough,” Bood said.

“Okay. Well. I gotta ask because I’ve honestly been dying to know... but have you guys like, been with men? You’ve both come out so... what’s that all about?” Max asked, sounding genuinely curious.

“I have not dated men, no,” Ilya said. “But I have slept with a few.”

“I’ve slept with men and had, like, two semi-serious relationships. They didn’t last very long,” Hollander added.

Ilya glanced at Hollander’s out of the corner of his eye. He looked a little uncomfortable. Ilya hadn’t known about Hollander’s relationships, but then again, he’d made a point to know nothing about Hollander’s life.

His stomach sank into his shoes.

“Have you guys been with anyone in the League?” Max asked.

Ilya felt his heart rate kick up. He and Hollander shared a look before looking back at Max.

Ilya licked his lips. “No.”

He could see Hollander shaking his head. “I haven’t. No.”

Ilya picked up his wine glass and downed the rest of it. He and Hollander hadn’t ever discussed their history in detail beyond the apology at dinner during the summer. Ilya had assumed it would stay a secret, forever, and being confronted with it now, with Hollander right beside him, made him immeasurably sad and a little angry.

Max nodded. “It must have been hard for you guys. And not knowing that either of you were queer...”

“Yes. Was hard,” Ilya murmured, which was the truth. It had been very difficult, especially at the end, even after Scott Hunter had come out. Not because he and Shane had no idea about one another, but because they had known, and things had imploded.

“But that is why I want better for the team now. No one should be scared like I was scared,” Ilya said.

The table was quiet and Ilya could feel Shane’s eyes on him. He didn’t look him, afraid that if he did, everything would be showing on his face.

“I’m sorry that that was your experience, Ilya,” Wyatt said, his expression sincere. “You, too, Shane. It really sucks.”

“And we appreciate what you’ve both done. For the team. For the community at large,” Max added.

“For real though. You guys are making a huge difference, even if it doesn’t feel like it,” Bood said.

Ilya nodded. "Thank you."

"I appreciate that," Shane said. "But you deserve credit, too, Max. You've had the most unfair experience out of all of us. You deserved better during your time playing."

Max nodded. "Yeah. It was pretty shitty but we're making progress. I'm glad that I'm here and being given this kind of opportunity. But I sure as shit am gonna continue to be loud and annoying about it until trans folks are treated fairly."

"I'll drink to that," Wyatt said.

Ilya picked up his water glass, clinking it against various beer and wine glasses as they toasted, sipping from it.

Conversation steered toward adjusting to being coaches and how things were moving so far during pre-season.

Everyone seemed in good spirits, though they were all anticipating things to hit different when the season actually started.

It was nice to talk about that, offering support to one another, and affirming that no one was alone in this process. But Ilya still felt off after the conversation about his history, with Hollander still sitting there.

It was just awkward and uncomfortable, this weight between them that it seemed neither of them knew what to do with.

"Media's been positive, fans have been positive. I think we're trending in the right direction," Bood said and everyone nodded in agreement.

"That is all we can hope for," Ilya said. "Hopefully we won't crash and burn."

At the end of the day, whatever happened would pretty much be on his shoulders.

"We got you, Cap."

Ilya smiled at Wyatt. "Thank you."

Dinner wrapped up and they paid their bill, heading back to the hotel.

They were all on the same floor, stepping out of the elevator and wishing each other a goodnight as they went to their separate rooms.

Hollander's room was right next to Ilya's so they walked together down the hall, the silence heavy between them.

They got to their respective doors and they looked at each other.

Shane looked upset, almost troubled, perhaps.

They just kept looking for a long time, standing there. Shane seemed like he wanted to say something but Ilya wasn't sure his heart could take it.

The heaviness of the past fifteen years felt physical and Ilya wanted to both run into Shane's arms and run away from him.

He swallowed, feeling cracked open and pained. "Goodnight, Hollander."

Ilya keyed open his door and stepped inside.

"Goodnight, Ilya..."

Ilya closed the door behind him and leaned against him.

"Fuck," he murmured, squeezing the bridge of his nose.

At least they'd gotten that conversation out of the way. Ilya hoped that was the end of it and he didn't have worry about fielding questions about his love life... or hearing about Hollander's.

He just hated that there was still so much left unsaid between them, he just didn't know how to broach all of it, or if it even mattered.

Ilya pushed off the door, locked it, and walking into his room. He needed to sleep. They had to get up early tomorrow.

He could worry about all of this later.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Shane is back in Montreal

October - First Game of the Season - Ottawa at Montreal

“Aww yes, bitch. Come here,” J.J. laughed, his arms open for a hug. Shane laughed, smiling wide, and gave one of his best friends a tight hug.

“How’re you doin’, man?” he asked. He hadn’t seen J.J. since Shane’s retirement party but they talked fairly frequently.

J.J. still called him to talk and Shane was happy to hear about what was going on in his life and to catch up with him.

“Fucking fantastic, as always!”

They leaned away.

“It’s good to see you, Hollander.” J.J. smiled at him and patted his cheek affectionately.

“It’s good to see you, too, J.J.”

“Hey! What am I? Chopped liver?”

Shane and J.J. turned as Hayden made his way over, looking a little harried.

“You’re late, Pike!” J.J. teased and Hayden rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, yeah. Good to see you, too, J.J.”

They two of them clasped hands and hugged before Hayden turned to Shane.

“Hey buddy.”

“Hi,” Shane chuckled and wrapped his arms around Hayden as Hayden gave him a huge hug. Shane hadn’t seen Hayden that long ago. He’d spent some of the early summer with him, Jackie, and the kids, but it wasn’t the same now that they were all retired.

They all sat at the table that Shane had reserved for them at their favorite restaurant in Montreal. They’d come here after every win when they’d been playing together and it had kind of become part of their superstition.

It was nice to be back here again, to catch up before Shane's first game back in Montreal as an AC.

"Man, we should all be golfing and hanging out and shit. But this asshole had to get a new job and up and move to fucking Ottawa!"

Shane and J.J. snickered. Shane was looking at the menu, even though he always got the same things when they were here.

"Sorry to ruin your retirement plans," Shane replied.

Hayden huffed. "I just can't believe you picked *Ilya Rozanov* over us."

"Hayden..."

"Easy, man," J.J. murmured.

Hayden sighed, placing down his menu, looking at Shane. Shane placed down his own menu, folding his hands on top of it, and looked at his best friend. It wasn't the first time they'd had this conversation.

Coming out had gone better than Shane had expected. J.J. and Hayden had needed a small adjustment period but had been accepting and open. Telling them about his time with Ilya Rozanov had been, well, an entirely different thing.

Both J.J. and Hayden had been weird about it for a bit. They'd sort of come around, J.J. more than Hayden.

It had probably helped that Shane hadn't had the conversation with them until after they'd all retired and Shane could only imagine what that would have been like if he'd told them sooner.

Shane understood that Ilya had been a snarky asshole and that he got on people's nerves and while Shane hadn't seen *all* of Ilya, exactly, he'd been able to sneak a peek behind the facade, revealing someone who was rather gentle and soft.

"I didn't choose Ilya over you. There was an opportunity to work for my hometown team, to be part of the League again in some capacity, and yes, Ilya just so happened to also be there."

Which was true, though Ilya being there had carried more weight than maybe Shane was letting on. But Hayden didn't need to know that necessarily.

"I didn't mean it like that, I just... I don't know that I get it."

"You don't have to get it," Shane replied. "It's complicated. But it is something I feel very strongly about."

"I know."

“It’s very romantic, Hollander,” J.J. said, trying to ease things a bit, a little smile on his face. “Going after your man.”

Shane felt his cheeks warm but he huffed a laugh.

“He’s not my man. And I don’t know if he even wants me but I’m trying to at least make amends. I hurt him, badly, and I want to make it right, even if it doesn’t go anywhere.”

“You really like him that much, huh?” Hayden asked.

Shane nodded, fiddling with his water glass. “Yeah. I mean... when you met Jackie, you told me that you had never met a more beautiful woman in your whole life. Like, you saw her, and you knew that she was it for you, right?”

“I mean, yeah.”

“It was like that with Ilya. Sort of. We had a moment, in the gym of the hotel we stayed at for the draft. Nothing happened, we just... talked. And it was that moment that I just felt *something*. I’d never experienced that before. Just being with him in general...” Shane shrugged. He wasn’t sure he could ever put into words how it was that Ilya had made him feel, how Ilya *still* made him feel.

“It was so good that you’ve been chasing it ever since,” J.J. said and Shane nodded, holding out a hand in J.J.’s direction.

“Exactly.”

“But Ilya Rozanov? Really?”

Shane laughed, unable to help himself.

“Love is love, white boy! He can’t help it!”

“He’s not that bad, Hayden. It was mostly just an act when we were young. He’s still kind of got an edge but he’s actually a really nice guy.”

Hayden let out a long sigh. “If you say so. As long as you’re happy, you know I support you.”

“I know you do. Thank you. We’ll see where things go. I just hope that we can survive the season and not get torn to shreds.”

"I don't think it's possible to be worse than the Centaurs were after 1995."

“Thank you, J.J. That actually means a lot.”

“Of course.” He gave a little salute.

They ordered food and drinks, though Shane opted out of alcohol since he had to coach a game.

J.J., his fiancée Rosaline, Hayden, Jackie, and all the Pike kids, were going to be at the game and had been nice enough to get Centaurs jerseys to wear in honor of Shane.

He appreciated that they had done that and that they were coming to support him. It meant a lot.

He'd been told that there would be a tribute to him, at the start of the game, welcoming him back, and he knew he was probably going to get all teary about it. At least they'd given him some warning.

Lunch was lovely, as it always was. It felt good to hang out with his friends, to enjoy their company, and being completely himself.

He missed J.J. and Hayden. He missed being close enough to see Jackie and the kids. He missed the familiarity of being in Montreal but Ottawa was home for him, too. It was where he'd grown up and he was happy to be back there.

After lunch, he hugged his friends outside the restaurant, and headed back to the hotel to get ready for the game tonight, feeling a little lighter.

It was their first game of the season and Shane knew that everyone was nervous, including himself.

Ilya seemed surprisingly calm but he very rarely showed any sort of anxiety, not outwardly anyway. Shane wasn't sure that that had changed in the intervening years.

He went up to his room, plugged in his phone, and changed into his suit. It was simple, a dark blue, tailored to fit him perfectly.

He fixed his hair, leaving it down, made sure he had his phone, key card, and wallet, before heading out to the bus.

Ilya was already downstairs with Haas, Fortescue, and Petrov.

Ilya looked sharp in a dark green suit that made his golden-brown curls and hazel eyes stand out beautifully. The suit fit him perfectly and Shane had to push aside thoughts of peeling it off of Ilya to reveal all the golden skin underneath.

You are at work!

Shane greeted them, giving the Captain and his Alternates fist bumps, and a nod at Ilya, who nodded and gave a tight smile back.

Everyone was ferried onto the bus, coaches last.

Bood and Wyatt tried to liven things up a bit to some avail but it was obvious that the boys were nervous.

“Do you want to give the pep talk tonight?” Ilya asked Shane as they sat next to one another.

Ilya was jotting down notes of some kind and Shane noticed that he was writing in Cyrillic, which would make sense.

He lifted his head to look at Shane, his hazel eyes gold in the low light of the bus.

“You want me to?”

“I am asking,” Ilya replied. “Montreal is your city. I think it would mean a lot to them for the talk to come from you.”

Shane smiled a little and nodded. “Sure. Okay. I can do that.”

Ilya smiled and patted his knee. “Good.”

Shane huffed a soft laugh, though his whole body tingled at that touch.

Since the dinner with the other coaches, Shane had thought a lot about the lingering look that he and Ilya had shared in the hallway, the way Ilya had looked so heartbroken. And Shane knew that Ilya felt the same way he did.

He’d wanted to say yes when Max had asked if they’d been with anyone in the NHL and it hurt him to say no. And Shane knew Ilya had wanted to have done the same.

They still hadn’t talked about it. They needed to.

But he was starting to think that neither of them wanted to wreck the fragile peace between them, this budding friendship.

Shane just didn’t know where Ilya was at.

Was he feeling something, too?

Patience, he reminded himself. *Stray cat*.

The social media admins were doing some content for the YouTube page. A lot of the focus was on Ilya and a few of the players, with Shane, Bood, Wyatt, and Max kind of making guest appearances.

Ilya always did so well in front of a camera. He was so natural at it, so comfortable, and Shane watched on in admiration as he did some media before the game, after the walk-ins.

To Shane’s surprise, the admins asked *him* some questions.

“Since we’re back in your old stomping ground, how are you feeling?”

“Oh. I’m feeling okay. It’s weird being back but I’m excited to support the boys here.”

“Anything that you think the team should keep in mind as they play today?”

“Pucks on net, spending less time in our zone. This Montreal team is speedy, so making sure to slow them down and limit their scoring chances.”

“Thanks, Coach!”

“Sure thing.”

Once the guys were ready after warm-ups, Ilya let Shane have the floor.

Shane had never been a high energy Captain. He had been focused and stoic. He didn't really do pep talks, unless it was one-on-one. He was a lead by example kind of guy.

So his speech was more soft spoken.

He made sure to meet the eye of every guy in the room, reminding them that they were here because of their talent, their drive. They had the tools and they knew how to use them.

He knew that they could do it.

The line up read was more stirring, calling each man out to the calls and claps of his teammates, before they were all cheering, ready to get out there and play.

“Not bad,” Ilya said to Shane. “Could have had more, mm, what is word? *Pizazz?*”

“Oh fuck off.” Shane rolled his eyes and pushed at Ilya's arm.

They both laughed and Ilya squeezed Shane's neck, a brief, intimate touch that had Shane's whole body going warm.

“Let's get out there, Coach.”

Shane swallowed and nodded. “Yeah. Ready.”

Shane stood behind the bench, looking up as the arena went dark, and a welcome back tribute was played, covering all of Shane's major highlights with the Voyageurs' franchise.

He was surprised to find that his eyes were mostly dry and he smiled at Ilya as Ilya knocked the backs of their hands together.

Shane smiled and waved when the lights came back on. It was a nice tribute and he appreciated it but he was here with the Cens.

He was ready for this new chapter and he couldn't wait to see how the boys did.

By second intermission, things were not looking good.

The boys were down by three. They'd managed to score one goal, which was only marginally better than a shut out, and Shane was sweating in his suit.

Ilya had talked to the guys about being mindful of penalties. They were wasting time if they allowed the other team to constantly be on the power play.

The team had definitely took that to heart and the third period was much better than the first and second but Shane wasn't sure if it would be enough.

"I don't know what this is," Ilya said. "But is better than whatever the last two periods were."

"They're nervous," Shane replied.

Ilya was nodding his agreement. "Yes."

"At least we are not getting more stupid penalties."

"They're keeping it together."

Ilya murmured something in Russian and Shane smiled a little, the language oddly familiar.

"Go, Welly! Yes! GO GO!"

"Oh shit! Yes! YES!"

The bench erupted in cheers as they managed to score another goal.

The boys battled hard into the third but despite the additional goal, they lost 5-2.

The locker room was somber and Ilya tried to bolster everyone up, reminding them that it was their first game and they would have time to get into the swing of things this season.

"No sad goalie," he said, pointing at Andy, who had done an admirable job, blocking almost sixty shots on net the whole game. "Cheer him up!"

Shane went to see Hayden, Jackie, Ruby, Jade, Arthur, Amber, J.J., and Rosaline, thanking them for coming, and accepting their consoling at the loss. He promised Hayden and J.J. that he'd keep in touch and they'd make plans, promising the kids (who were all basically young adults now!) they'd see each other soon.

He went back to talk with the other coaches about some growing pains, everyone just orienting to the NHL, getting into the swing of the pace, and working together as the boys showered and changed.

They would have their home opener and things would be fine. They'd get some practice in, they could come back from this.

Shane couldn't help but feel he was responsible.

"Maybe my talk should have been more energetic. I could have done better," he lamented on the bus back to the hotel.

"You did fine," Ilya assured. "This is just all new. One game at a time, Hollander."

"If you say so," Shane sighed, defeated.

"No need to be so dramatic. Is one game."

Shane shook his head. "It could have been the speech. It could have been that we didn't run together this morning..."

Ilya laughed. "I forgot that you are so superstitious."

"I'm not!"

Ilya gave Shane a look and Shane scowled at him.

Okay, maybe Ilya was right. He just wished that he could think of what had contributed to the boys being off... besides them being so new and having nerves and being up against a pretty potent Montreal team.

So, yeah, maybe it wasn't the speech or that he and Ilya hadn't been able to run together because of travel. Maybe it was just the normal part of being a new-ish team against a more established one.

"Don't think too hard," Ilya said.

"Tell my brain that."

Ilya smiled, leaned over a little, his warm breath ghosting against Shane's hair. Shane could smell him and he smelled amazing. He had always smelled so good, at least if he wasn't smoking, even back when they had been kids, and that hadn't changed at all.

"Hollander's brain, please relax."

Shane laughed and Ilya chuckled, sitting back in his seat. They looked at each other and Ilya winked at Shane. Shane just smiled back, warmth blooming in his chest despite the loss.

They got back to the hotel and Shane was stopped in the lobby, people asking for photos and autographs before Ilya managed to pull him away toward the bar with the rest of the coaches.

Shane rested his head on the bar and Wyatt laughed, patting his back consolingly.

"You okay, buddy?"

"I don't know. I'm tired."

"Yeah. I hear that."

Ilya ordered them beers and they lamented their loss, while talking about what they could learn. Once they'd finished they all headed up to bed.

Shane felt marginally better. Talking with the guys, knowing that no one was placing blame, that they were all trying to work together to figure out how to proceed.

It was a good feeling, even though the loss stung.

Ilya wanted to make a point to not tear the team down, to help them build their confidence, especially after a loss like this.

And Shane didn't miss that he was doing that for his staff, too.

"Get some rest, Hollander."

"You, too, Ilya."

Shane stepped into his room, watching as Ilya disappeared into his own across the hall. He sighed as the door closed, tapping his forehead against it.

He shook his head and sighed, turning into his room, taking off his suit.

Shane flopped into bed, checking his phone.

Rose: So sorry about the loss! You guys played great!

Rose: And you looked AMAZING IN YOUR SUIT!! 🤗

Shane: Thanks 😞

Shane: they need some work but we'll get there

He wasn't expecting Rose to get back to him and that was okay. She was probably sleeping by now.

His parents had texted him, too, or at least his mom did, but she tended to talk for both herself and Dad.

Mom: We're sorry about the loss honey 😞 But you looked so handsome and professional And you and Ilya talking!! We're so proud of you!

Shane smiled.

Shane: thanks guys, I appreciate it

Shane: Thanks for watching, I'll text you tomorrow when we're on our way home

Mom: Sounds good! We love you! Sleep well! Get some great rest!

Shane: Thanks, will do, love you, too

Shane plugged in his phone, turned off the lights, and flopped onto his back in bed.

Not a great day for the team but Shane had kind of liked whatever was happening between him and Ilya.

It was more familiar. Comfortable.

He wasn't sure what it meant and didn't want to read too much into it but he wasn't mad about it. He'd liked it. He hoped that they could keep that going.

Only time would tell with the team and with Ilya and Shane just needed to allow things to unfold as they would.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Ottawa's home opener

A day before the Home Opener

Ilya opened the good vodka that Sveta had bought, pouring it into two rocks glasses. Neat for him, on the rocks for her.

He brought the glasses to the living room where his ex-wife and his dog were currently snuggling.

"I guess I'm third wheeling it tonight," he teased, passing Sveta her glass.

"Don't act surprised. You knew how this would be," she said, kissing the top of Anya's head.

Ilya flopped onto the couch, stretching out.

"Yeah, yeah."

"And get your gross man feet away from me."

"I got a pedicure!"

Sveta stuck her tongue out at him and he did it back.

"I invite you into my home, I'm an excellent host, and this is how you repay me?"

"You are so dramatic," she laughed and Ilya chuckled, holding out his glass. Sveta tapped hers against his and they both drank.

"Thank you for coming," he said, settling against the arm of the couch.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

Ilya shrugged a little and Sveta grabbed his ankle, shaking his foot.

They had been friends for a long time, since childhood. Sveta was one of the only people, besides Ilya's direct family, that had known him before his mother had died.

Ilya no longer spoke to his brother and his father had long since passed.

She was basically the only family he had.

“Still...”

“I’ll always be here for you. You know that.”

“I know.”

Ilya had always loved Sveta but not in the way he knew she deserved. She had done more for him than anyone else in his life and sometimes he wished things were different for them.

But Ilya’s heart belonged to someone else and he wasn’t sure he’d ever get it back at this point.

It was a testament to the kind of person that Sveta was that she encouraged him and continued to want the best for him.

She liked to remind him to let the people who cared about him care about him and that he had always supported her and her dreams, so why couldn’t she do the same for him?

“Are you going for your run with Shane tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“And I get to meet him at the arena?”

“Yes.”

Sveta clapped her hands. “Oh yay! I can’t wait!”

“Please be nice.”

“Ilyusha! I will be *so* nice.” Sveta smacked his shin.

“Ow!”

“Does he know about us?” she asked. “That we’re divorced?”

“Possibly. I haven’t talked to him about that specifically. He knows that we’re close friends.”

“Okay. That’s good. You should probably tell him we’re divorced.”

“If anything happens, I will, but nothing has happened and I don’t know if anything will, so, the point is moot.”

“Something will happen! It’s inevitable!”

“You don’t know that.”

She pointed at him before taking a sip of her vodka. “I do.”

“How?”

“Intuition.”

Ilya made a face at her. “Sure.”

“Mark my words, Rozanov.”

Ilya huffed a laugh.

“But in all seriousness...”

Ilya shrugged, shaking his head. “There’s not much to report. We’re... friendly. I definitely think that there’s still something there but... it’s risky.”

“I remember when you used to love risk.”

“Yes, before I had to worry about the hurt that came with it.”

“Ilyusha...”

“It’s just the truth.”

“I know. But he apologized and he’s showing up, doing his job, trying to be a friend...”

Ilya smiled a little. “I suppose.”

“What’s the worst that could happen?”

“The absolute worst case is that I lose my job.”

“What? How?”

“We resume our physical relationship and we get caught and fired for... sexual harassment or fraternization or something.”

“Well, I don’t think it’s harassment if it’s mutual and was fraternization even in your contract? Or like, a policy?”

“Not in so many words.”

“So maybe don’t worry about that too much.”

Ilya sighed. “The most likely worst case is that he leaves and I get my heart broken. Again.”

“Do you think it’s likely?”

“I don’t know.” Ilya massaged the bridge of his nose.

“Listen. I know you want to ease into things but I also think that sometimes you just have to go for it. If there’s something still there... then maybe that’s worth pursuing. What happened to make you think there’s something still there?”

Ilya took a sip of vodka. “We went to dinner, after the game in Detroit. Max was asking about our histories with men, if we’d been with anyone in the League. We both denied it at dinner but when we got back to our rooms, we just looked at each other. And I knew that Hollander had wanted to say yes like I wanted to say yes. Keeping what happened between us a secret, even after all this time, it’s heavy.”

“I can imagine. That’s a lot.”

Ilya nodded.

“I’m sorry that this has been so hard for you.”

“When are things ever not hard for me?”

Sveta made a soft noise of disapproval. “*Extremely* dramatic.”

Ilya let his head flop backwards. “I know.”

“Unless we’re talking about your cock. But that’s changed a bit since you’ve aged.”

“Svetlana!”

She cackled, absolutely delighted, and Ilya made a face at her.

“I’m still a fucking stallion.”

“I’m sure you are. When was the last time you got laid, huh?”

Ilya groaned, letting his head fall back again, and Sveta cackled some more.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but you *need* to get laid.”

Ilya let out a long suffering sigh and downed the rest of his vodka.

“Tell me about it.”

Since the divorce, he and Sveta had decided to stop having sex together. Their marriage had been a business arrangement but they’d always had a physical relationship of some kind. After that time together, they’d both agreed that the physical aspect of their relationship was over.

It wasn’t fair to Sveta, when Ilya wanted to be with someone else.

But things were good between them and he was grateful for that.

Anya was watching him over her shoulder, not wanting to leave the cozy spot she had snuggled up against Sveta, but needing to keep tabs on her Papa. Ilya rubbed a hand on her butt fluff.

“You are being very good,” he told her in English, because while he spoke Russian at home, usually when on the phone with Sveta, he was mostly speaking in English. He assumed that

was all she knew, since she was Canadian.

It was also possible she spoke French.

“She’s always good,” Sveta cooed, also in English.

Ilya was glad that Sveta had come. She was the Vice President of Marketing for the Boston Bears and it was busy for her now, too, but she’d made the time to see him, which meant a lot.

Ilya wasn’t nervous for the home opener exactly.

The Centaurs weren’t off to a great start but the season had only just barely started. He was hopeful the guys would find their footing but he had talked to Sveta as well, wanting her input.

She knew hockey, better than Ilya, probably even better than Shane.

Her insight had been in line with what he had been thinking, which had made him feel better. They just needed to keep trucking along and address issues as they came up.

But her being here was distracting in a good way.

Ilya knew that they could talk shop but he appreciated that they weren’t. It was nice just to catch up with her and what was happening in her life.

Ilya had learned that she was seeing someone. A biomechanical engineer named Henrik, but that everyone apparently called Hank.

He’d seen pictures of Hank and had heard all about him. He sounded like he was good for Sveta. A gentleman, smart, making good money.

Ilya had yet to meet him so he would have his final opinions when that happened but he was happy for Sveta. She deserved to be with someone who would worship the ground she walked on.

“Do you know what you’re going to wear tomorrow?” she asked.

“I don’t” he replied. “I was going to ask your opinion.”

“I think you should go bold. You should wear the burgundy suit. The new one. With the floral interior.”

“That was fast.”

Sveta smiled. “You look good in reds. It’s your color. And it’s perfect for the team. Red and black.”

“True. Alright. I trust your judgment.”

“As you should.”

Ilya laughed. “Always.”

They drank their vodka and watched a rom-com that Sveta was interested in. A heart-wrenching story about a woman who was the caretaker for a paralyzed man and their subsequent romance.

It was a sweet story and had Ilya surprisingly emotional, though romantic comedies weren’t usually his thing.

By the end of the movie, Sveta, Anya, and Ilya were cuddled up together, sniffing, tissues in hand.

“I wasn’t expecting that ending,” Ilya said.

“I wasn’t either.”

“Since when did we get so soft?”

“We’ve always been this way.”

They both laughed wetly, drying their eyes.

“We should get to bed. You’re going to have a busy day tomorrow.”

Ilya hummed and stretched.

They cleaned up the vodka glasses and Ilya took Anya out once more, before turning in for the night.

He wished Sveta a goodnight, leaving her in the guestroom, and followed Anya to his own room.

It was nice having her in the house, knowing that someone else was around. It wasn’t so bad alone, especially with the dog, but Ilya had missed the feeling of having someone else nearby.

It had been a long time since he’d had that.

It was going to be an interesting day tomorrow and he hoped the team could hold it together.

Home Opener - New York at Ottawa

Ilya woke up early for his run with Shane.

Anya and Sveta were both still sleeping so he snuck out of the condo as quietly as possible, meeting Shane at their usual spot on the corner.

They didn’t really talk, they just ran, listening to Ilya’s playlist.

They were looping on their way back when Shane started talking.

“I’m picking up my parents tonight,” he said. “They told me they want to be at every home game for the season. My dad used to take me when I was a kid. I grew up an Ottawa fan.”

Ilya nodded along, listening, though he wasn’t sure why Shane was telling him all of this, other than to say that they wouldn’t need to carpool.

“It feels very full circle, y’know.”

“Mm. Yes.”

They were quiet again before Shane spoke up once more.

“Are you... bringing anyone? Tonight?”

Ah. So that’s what was on his mind. Interesting.

“Yes,” Ilya replied, glancing at Shane. “My ex.”

“Oh.”

“We are still good friends.”

“I see.”

Ilya chuckled. He glanced at Shane again, his dark brows furrowed, his expression suggested that he’d tasted something sour. *Very* interesting.

“She is very supportive and I appreciate that she came.”

Shane nodded, his face softening a bit.

“I don’t have much family so...” Ilya felt like he owed Shane some kind of explanation, though he wasn’t entirely sure why.

“That makes sense,” Shane said after a long moment of silence.

Ilya nodded and they kept running.

They got to Shane’s place and Ilya stopped alongside him. Shane handed him his airpod.

“I’m looking forward to meeting her,” Shane said.

Ilya smiled small at him. “I look forward to meeting your parents.”

Shane smiled small back.

“See you at the arena, Hollander.”

“See you there.”

Ilya gave him a small salute with two fingers and was off running back to his place.

He ended up doing an extra lap around the block, wondering if Shane was jealous of Sveta. The idea made Ilya strangely happy, as if that was some kind of confirmation for Ilya that maybe Shane still had feelings for him.

At this point, he wasn't sure that either he or Shane were being very subtle. That one moment in that hallway in Detroit had eased up some of Ilya's defenses.

He had no idea what he would need for things to really change but at least he could say that there was still *something* there.

It was a little thrilling that. Like playing with fire. The kind of danger Ilya didn't mind flirting with.

Was that all he had needed? A small inkling that Shane might still feel the same and he was down for anything dangerous?

Ilya got back to his condo, finding a whole breakfast spread and coffee, Sveta and Anya waiting for him.

"What's all this?" he asked as he slid off his shoes and got to the floor to let Anya sniff and lick his face.

"I wanted to treat you," Sveta replied, a coffee mug in her hands.

"You didn't have to do that." Ilya stood, Anya cradled in his arms.

"I wanted to," she said with a shrug. "How is *Shane*?"

She smiled over the lip of her mug at Ilya.

"Fine," Ilya replied.

"Oh I bet he is," Sveta giggled and Ilya groaned, which only made her laugh more.

Even if it was at his expense, the sound was welcome.

"Come eat. And then we'll start getting you ready for your big debut! I took Anya out already so she's good to go there."

Ilya made Anya's breakfast and then sat down with Sveta to eat and have coffee.

Ilya had become a pretty decent cook over the years and he enjoyed making food, but it was nice to not have to worry about it, especially today.

After breakfast he prepped for morning skate and left the ladies at home before heading to the Censplex, picking Shane up along the way.

He seemed quiet on the drive but Ilya chalked it up to some nerves about the day.

On the ice, everyone was buzzing during practice, testing out gear, making sure everything felt good, talking about how excited they were to be playing at home, officially.

The arena had sold out, which was exciting, and one of the first times that had happened in almost thirty years.

They talked with Abby about media availability before and after the game.

Ilya checked in with everyone; all the players, his entire staff, making sure everyone felt comfortable and ready.

After practice, all the staff talked with the media, fielding questions about how they felt about the upcoming game, what they were looking forward to, what they were expecting from the players.

The overall vibe seemed positive, so Ilya would take that.

Once they'd finished with the media, Ilya and Shane headed back to their neighborhood.

"How are you feeling?" Shane asked as Ilya drove.

"Okay," Ilya replied.

"You're not nervous?"

"Ehn," Ilya replied. "Maybe a little but there is not much I can control."

"I think that's what I hate the most. Not being able to control things."

"Oh really?"

"Shut up, Rozanov."

Ilya chuckled. Shane Hollander was an absolute control freak and it wasn't like that was a secret. It just made him who it was. And Ilya thought it was endearing as hell. He always had.

"Is okay to be scared."

"I wouldn't say I'm scared," Shane replied gently. "Just nervous. I want to make sure the boys do well, that they feel good out there. I want to make sure I'm doing a good job."

"You are. You are a good coach."

Shane huffed a soft laugh. "I'm not as good as you. You're so good with everyone. You make it look effortless."

Ilya smiled a little and looked at Shane as they waited at a red light. "I have had more practice. And is not a competition, Hollander. We are on the same team."

Shane smiled, boyish and sweet. "Yeah. I guess that's true."

The light changed and Ilya pressed on the gas to get them going again.

Ilya dropped Shane off at home and went back to start getting ready for the evening.

Sveta had already pulled out his suit for him, along with shoes, and a watch, which she didn't have to do but he wasn't going to fight her about it because he knew it made her happy.

He showered, putting product into his hair, wanting his curls to be perfect.

He changed into his suit and the watch and underwent Sveta's inspection before she gave him her approval.

She was dressed more casually, wearing a personalized Centaurs jersey with Ilya's last name and number, designer jeans, and sneakers.

"Thank you for being here," he told her, bussing her cheek.

"Always."

They left Anya snoozing on the couch and Ilya drove them to the arena, going through the staff entrance.

It was the first time all the families and partners were all together for this season, so everyone was very excited.

Ilya spotted Shane with an older man and woman, his parents no doubt, talking on the other side of the room.

Sveta hooked her arm around Ilya's. "Let's say hi."

Ilya nodded and they made their way over.

Shane noticed him, smiling. Ilya apologized for the interruption, introducing Sveta.

"Ilya's best friend," she said, shaking hands with everyone.

"It's so nice to meet you," Shane said to her.

"Likewise. I'm a huge fan."

Shane smiled, cheeks going a little pink. "Oh thank you."

"I'm right here," Ilya said and Sveta just waved a dismissive hand, which made everyone laugh.

"These are my parents, Yuna and David. Mom, Dad, this is Ilya Rozanov."

"Very nice to meet you. Officially." Ilya shook hands with both of Shane's parents.

"It's so nice to meet you, too, Ilya. Officially," Mrs. Hollander said, smiling at him.

“We’ve heard good things,” Mr. Hollander added. “As a Cens fan, I’m excited to see what you bring to the table.”

“I hope not to disappoint,” Ilya said and Mr. Hollander patted his arm reassuringly.

“You’re gonna be great.”

Shane, Sveta, and Mrs. Hollander were talking casually, and Ilya watched them for a moment. Shane looked a lot like his mother and with Shane and Sveta standing together, Ilya realized that he had a type.

Beautiful, stubborn, competent individuals with tender hearts.

They spent a little more time mingling. Shane’s parents were very kind and complimentary, which Ilya wasn’t expecting, but appreciated. Before too long, it was time to start the show.

Ilya gathered his staff, heading over to get ready for warm-ups and then the party would really get started.

The atmosphere at the arena was pretty electric and Ilya was excited.

He’d always loved the energy of a home opener and it was so nice to see the turn out for the Cens.

Everyone seemed excited for this fresh new start and that was promising.

Wyatt and Bood got an extremely warm welcome back to Ottawa, as did Shane, as the hometown boy.

Max and Ilya were also introduced and welcomed into the Cens family, which was very nice.

Ilya was glad to see Shane gaining more confidence behind the bench. He was always very sure when it came to all things hockey but it was also an entirely different experience to coach.

But he was becoming more sure of himself and fuck if that wasn’t attractive.

Looking at Shane with his earnest, intelligent eyes and that shy smile, especially when Ilya praised him for a great play, made Ilya's heart flutter.

Shane practically glowed under the praise. Ilya was pretty sure that had been a thing from the start but *now* he was paying attention.

Overall, the game against New York was good. The boys put in a valiant effort but they lost the game 2-1.

It wasn’t an auspicious start but Ilya was proud of them anyway. New York was a more established team and they’d simply outplayed them.

Ilya made sure that the boys felt bolstered. They would keep preparing and get better and better as the season went on. They all needed to be patient with themselves.

Ilya thanked Shane, Bood, Max, and Wyatt for their efforts before they all parted to meet up with their families.

Sveta gave him a big hug when he found her out in the hall.

“You guys did so good.”

“Thanks.”

He appreciated her support and encouragement, even if he didn't feel his best.

Back at home, Ilya spent some time with Anya, took a shower, and flopped into bed.

He spent several hours just turning the game over in his mind, thinking about things he had missed, things he could improve, writing down notes, before eventually nodding off.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

The team needs a pick-me-up

November - Minnesota

Ilya was on his phone in his hotel room, halfway dressed for a workout.

On his screen was a photo that had been taken during one of the previous road trip games the Centaurs had played in Seattle.

The photo showed Ilya, squeezing the bridge of his nose, eyes closed, one hand on his hip, with Shane standing next to him, clipboard up to his face, as if he was whacking it against his forehead, which was exactly what Shane had been doing in real time.

Under the photo the article's headline read: *Once the best players in the league now the worst coaches? Are Rozanov and Hollander cut out to lead the Centaurs to victory?*

Ilya knew that shit wasn't good.

The boys were on a six game losing skid. They had not won a single game on their road trip so far. In fact, they had lost every game they had played so far this season. Which wasn't that many but it was pretty significant.

Ilya was fairly sure this was a record for losses for any franchise.

He sat down heavily at the end of his bed, rubbing his fingers against his temples as he read the article, absolutely blasting him and his capacity to be an effective coach.

And Ilya was seriously wondering if he was cut out for the job.

Maybe he wasn't meant to coach in the NHL. Maybe his style was too soft. Maybe he was just stupid and didn't actually know what he was doing.

"Blyat'," he hissed, tossing his phone down, running his hands into his hair.

He was at a loss. He had no idea how to turn this around. He recognized the more technical aspect of things, like the turnovers. Those were definitely a problem and that was something that could be worked on.

He just wasn't sure *why* the connections on the ice weren't happening. Nerves, maybe? Pressure? Ilya thought that they were doing a good job of keeping things relatively light.

Even Shane, who was the most intense out of all the coaches, put in effort to not pressure the team. He joked with them, acted like a hockey player around them. He wanted them to succeed and he was tough in his way, but not a prick.

Ilya stood up and finished putting on his workout clothes. He snatched his phone up angrily, along with his airpods, and went to the gym.

He wished he had access to a barbell. He wanted to toss around something heavy just to get his frustration out but a long hard run and some dumbbell work would have to do.

He arrived at the gym, finding it blissfully empty. He stretched some and then got on the treadmill, starting in on a hard pace, listening to angry music from the early 2000s.

He was running for about ten minutes, when Shane showed up. He spotted Ilya and came over, waving.

Ilya took one of his airpods out.

“Did you see the article?”

“Of course.”

Shane made a face and nodded. He joined Ilya, hopping onto the treadmill next to him, and started running.

“I was thinking maybe we could—”

Ilya cut Shane off by holding up a hand. Shane stopped talking and Ilya handed him his other airpod. Shane smiled, taking the hint, and put the airpod into his ear.

They ran together in silence, listening to Ilya’s rage-y music.

After their run, they did a strength circuit together, and by the end, Ilya was sweaty and tired and marginally less frustrated.

It hadn’t hurt to watch Shane working out either, muscles straining as he did rows and tricep extensions and bicep curls, skin all dewy with sweat, hair pulled up into a messy bun, pieces of hair that had escaped sticking to his neck.

They sat on the floor, catching their breath, and it reminded Ilya of the first time they’d ever really talked. The night after the draft, the moment when they had both felt a spark between them.

It was strange to think about how much time had passed between then and now and to find themselves here.

Looking at Shane sitting across from him, breathing hard and sweating, Ilya wanted to kiss him.

Not even a sexy kiss, just something to ground him. Something soft and sweet and shared.

He licked his lips and looked away, his heart tight in his chest.

Shane gave him his airpod back and Ilya accepted it, placing it back in its case with the other airpod.

He drank from his water bottle.

“So... what do we do?” Shane asked into the quiet gym.

Ilya shook his head, shrugging helplessly. “I don’t know. We have to work on turnovers but I don’t know what else they need.”

“Maybe they need to... try less?”

Ilya looked at Shane and gave him a curious look. That was a fascinating statement coming from him. Shane was the most try hard person Ilya knew.

Shane smiled a little. “I think it’s possible that they’re in their own heads about having to prove themselves. Being a new team, trying to build up the franchise, having a coaching team made up of some legendary players. Even if we’re not putting any pressure on, they’re probably putting it on themselves. I think they’re overthinking everything, instead of just playing.”

Ilya considered this.

“Very...” he paused, trying to remember the word in English. “*Perceptive* of you.”

Shane smiled at Ilya and chuckled softly. “I can understand the feeling. It’s a lot for them. It was a lot for us, too. The Bears and Voyageurs hadn’t been the best teams when we joined.”

Ilya nodded. Shane was right. Both teams had been struggling, unable to even make the playoffs. Having two young guns come on and actually getting the team there had been impressive.

The pressure had been real, on and off the ice. And it was a contributing factor to where Shane and Ilya were now, in both positive and negative ways.

Ilya knew that they both wanted the same thing; for the team to succeed without feeling like they were going to buckle under the pressure and have to hide themselves away for the sake of hockey.

Sometimes, you could have your cake and eat it, too.

There would always be nuance and balance. Pressure wasn’t always a bad thing but it had to be used effectively.

And it wasn't like there was actual expectation. It was not possible to have a rebuild team make it very far in their first few years. They needed to take a step back and think big picture.

Ilya had to think.

He and Shane eventually left the gym, parting ways in the hall. They had a flight to catch and would be on their way to Toronto, and then back home to Ottawa.

It was going to be a rough rest of the trip because Ilya knew the guys would have seen the articles, would be asked about it by the media. He was going to be putting out fires all day.

But at least there was only one more game and then they'd have a few days respite before the next one.

There was going to be a lot to navigate... but at least he didn't feel so alone.

Somewhere over Cloyne, Ontario

"Hollander," Ilya said, turning to Shane, who was sitting next to him on the plane.

The ride was very quiet. No one was playing poker or rabble-rousing or even really talking. Most of the guys had seemed pretty dejected, understandably so, making their way onto the plane, going straight to watching videos or playing games or sleeping.

Ilya had set up shop in his usual seat by the window, on his laptop, airpods in, with Shane coming to sit next to him.

Shane had dozed off and Ilya gently touched his arm.

"Hm?"

One brown eye opened to look at Ilya sleepily.

"What happened?"

"Nothing. I have idea."

Shane closed his eye, brows furrowed.

"What idea?"

"Look."

Ilya passed his laptop to Shane, who now had both eyes opened, and clumsily took Ilya's laptop, nearly dropping it.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

It took him a moment to adjust as he looked at the screen, still waking up.

Ilya watched him mouth 'Ilya Rozanov Celly Compilation,' still confused.

"What is this?" Shane looked at Ilya.

“Is a compilation of all my cellies.”

Shane blinked. “Why?”

“For the boys. To show them how to have fun.”

Ilya recognized that it sounded extremely egotistical of him but he knew, for a *fact*, that he had been a fan favorite during his time in the NHL because he always looked like he was having fun.

And that was true, for the most part.

It was the last two years of his career that had truly worn him down, when he had reached his limit, and had had enough.

But the idea still stood.

“I want them to get in touch with their inner kid,” Ilya said, leaning over the hand rest so he could speak softly. “I want them to remember what it was like to have fun.”

Shane nodded, as if he were finally catching on.

“Yeah. Okay. That makes sense.” He looked back at the computer screen. “What about mine?”

Ilya looked at Shane like he was crazy and Shane did a double take.

“What? I had fun!”

“You have never had fun on the ice ever, Mr. Seven Stanley Cups.”

“That’s not true!”

Ilya arched a brow at Shane and Shane literally *harrumphed*, turning away from Ilya.

“I totally did.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Shane shoved Ilya’s laptop back in his hands and Ilya started laughing. God. He fucking loved teasing Shane. He was so easy.

“Shut the fuck up, Rozanov. You’re such an asshole,” Shane hissed, but he was smiling and laughing, too.

“Is good idea, no?”

Shane chuckled. “Yeah. It’s pretty good.”

Ilya beamed at him, setting his laptop down, and getting back to work on his little project.

He opened up the text chat he had with all the coaches and wrote up something short and sweet about what he was thinking and planning.

“Can you read this?” Ilya asked Shane. “Is okay?”

Ilya turned his laptop toward Shane and Shane leaned over to read it. Ilya got a whiff of whatever it was he was wearing. Was it his body wash? More likely cologne.

Something light and citrusy. It was nice and Ilya closed his eyes for a moment, just enjoying the moment of having Shane this close.

“Looks good,” Shane said and Ilya opened his eyes.

They looked at each other for a very long moment and Shane settled back into his seat. Ilya swallowed, his heart racing. He wanted to reach out and brush the loose tendrils of dark hair falling against Shane's cheek behind his ear.

Instead, Ilya sent the text.

It didn't take long for Max, Bood, and Wyatt to respond with positive feedback and a few helpful suggestions.

In the end, the idea was to compile all of their cellies and other ridiculously cool moments from each of their careers, even Shane's.

The highlight reel to end all highlight reels.

It was something that a kid would watch with his friends, getting all excited about trick shots and cellies and fights and the perfect hits that just bodied people.

It was all their favorite things about what it meant to be a hockey player.

The video would end with Max's Golden Goal at the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver, which he'd sent over.

Max: This is one of my proudest accomplishments. I wasn't out publicly at the time but everyone on the team knew. And that meant more than anything.

Ilya sent the videos along to Mike, their video coach, and explained what he had in mind.

Mike thought it would be a great idea.

Satisfied with his plan, Ilya put his laptop away, and settled in his seat.

“Nice job, Coach,” Shane murmured softly.

Ilya smiled at him. “Thank you.”

They landed in Ottawa around one in the morning, everyone parting ways to get home.

Ilya was buzzing. He felt good about the video compilation thing and just... being this close to Shane.

It was ridiculous, really. It had only been four months, not that long at all, and yet...

Ilya got back home, walking into an empty condo. He'd be picking up Anya from the dog hotel tomorrow.

He locked his door, took off his shoes, and carried them and his bags back to his room. He dropped everything onto the floor and left them for himself to deal with tomorrow.

He peeled off his clothes, dumping them into the hamper, and went to wash off all the travel, before crawling into bed.

He was exhausted. It had been a long road trip.

Ilya plugged in his phone and lay on his back, looking up at his ceiling for a few long moments, before closing his eyes.

He cleared his mind of the buzzing around this new idea and upcoming practices and Shane Hollander came to mind, because of course he did.

In all honesty, Shane was never far from Ilya's thoughts.

Ilya didn't resist, no longer fighting himself.

The image in his mind was just Shane, leaning close, smelling so nice.

It was Shane in the gym in Minnesota and how he looked as he did dumbbell lunges, wearing shorter, more form fitting workout shorts that made his ass and thighs look incredible.

He was so unfairly beautiful and fit.

Not that Ilya was anything to sneeze at but still, even after all this time... Ilya was still curious.

He wanted to know what it was like to be with Shane now, in their forties. Would it be better than it had been when they were in their twenties?

He wanted to know if Shane made the same noises as he used to. If he was still a slut for it.

Probably.

Ilya kicked off his comforter and slid a hand down his body, wrapping a hand around himself, stroking.

He thought about fucking Shane Hollander in a hotel room when they were twenty-two, his ass bouncing as Ilya fucked into him, the helpless noises he made as Ilya pressed him into the mattress.

He thought about the way he'd watched Shane's shorts pull tight across his ass, the way his back muscles had flexed, the way his skin had glistened.

He thought about Shane on top, that time back in Boston, riding Ilya's cock like he was made for it...

Ilya laughed softly, slightly manically, at the thought of grabbing his phone and looking at all of Shane's ads, particularly the underwear modeling he'd done.

But Ilya didn't need it, his memory was enough.

It was hard to forget all of the times he and Shane Hollander had spent together in hotel rooms and the hookup building that Hollander had bought for them.

They hadn't seen one another often, only about four times a year for games, a little extra for All-Star weekend, but the times they had spent together had been absolutely explosive.

Their chemistry had always been off the charts and even seeing one another after all this time, there was still something there.

Ilya swore under his breath, stroking himself faster, remembering Shane's warm, wet mouth, the perfect, tight heat of being inside of him.

He came embarrassingly hard and much faster than was normal for him but *fuck*, it had always been that way with Shane.

He laughed at himself, feeling ridiculous, laying in bed, an absolute mess.

Something was going to have to give eventually, he just didn't know what that would be or what it would look like.

It was terrifying and also thrilling.

He got out of bed to clean up, shaking his head at himself as he looked in the mirror.

It hadn't been very long since Shane had come back into his life and already he'd wormed his way behind Ilya's defenses.

Ilya was starting to wonder if maybe he would just never be able to protect himself from Shane Hollander.

He went back to bed, pulling the covers over himself, and wondering if it would just keep being like this forever.

Ottawa

After a rest day, they were all back at the arena for practice.

Ilya walked into the video room, the team gathered in the theater like seats.

He didn't say anything. He simply stood at the podium and brought up the video that the social media admins had compiled for them.

The lights were turned down and Ilya pressed play on the video.

It was extremely cinematic, with perfect music, and intense commentary from each game.

Ilya stood back and looked out at the room, watching the team as they started to get into the video.

It was a slow build, all of them unsure what was going on, before they were laughing and cheering, oohing and ahhing.

Ilya smiled.

By the time the video was ending, the guys were on their feet, cheering, as if the Olympics were happening right now and they were watching Max's goal in real time.

When the video wrapped and the lights came back on, he went to stand in front of the team, hands in his pockets.

"I know that this has been a very hard start to the season," Ilya said. "We are finding our way in the League. Is hard to start from scratch, to learn on the fly. But I want all of you to remember this."

Ilya pointed at the screen behind him.

"I want you to remember why you love hockey. Why you play. Do not worry about impressing anyone. Just play hockey without thinking too hard. You know the game. We are going to work on those turnovers. But is okay to play less with your head and more with your heart."

He looked out at the team and nodded.

"Get dressed, we will see you on the ice."

Once they were on the ice, Ilya explained that he and Shane were Captains. Ilya's alternate captain was Bood and Shane's was Max.

Wyatt was the ref.

They would split the team in two, Ilya taking one half and Shane taking the other half.

The goal was to work on turnovers and limiting them, so they would be scrimmaging.

Ilya and Shane would take the face-offs, whoever won the face-off, that team got the puck. They had to protect it from the other team and score. The other team was simply trying to disrupt their play.

“Be quick, protect the puck, and communicate,” Shane told them.

Ilya and Shane bent at the face-off circle.

Ilya smiled at Shane and Shane smiled back.

“Well this is familiar.”

“You miss seeing me here, Rozanov?”

“How could I not miss that beautiful face?” Ilya replied. It came out like a chirp, but there was more behind it, and they both knew it.

Shane’s cheeks bloomed a dark pink and he looked away. Ilya couldn’t help but smile, biting his lip.

“Ready, guys?” Wyatt asked.

They both nodded and Ilya won the face-off.

It was back and forth for the entire practice and the guys seemed to actually be having fun.

They would pause every so often to go over certain things before starting again, wanting everyone to communicate better with one another, to make mistakes now, so they could be corrected. That seemed to be the biggest thing that was missing.

By the end of practice, things were starting to look a lot better. More time on the ice was certainly needed but Ilya was pleased.

He and Shane hung back after the team had been dismissed.

They messed around with a puck, playing keep away. It was fun and silly and they just laughed together.

It felt nice to laugh with Shane.

Maybe a little too nice.

But also... right.

Jesus. He felt like he just kept getting deeper and deeper and he didn't know how to stop the slide. He wasn't sure that he wanted to.

They collected the pucks and the rest of their gear, heading off the ice.

“That was fun,” Shane said as they walked back to the locker room, looking at Ilya with a soft smile.

Ilya smiled back, maybe just as soft. “Yes. It was.”

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

There's something in the water and the Cens are on fire

December - North Carolina

Shane closed his hotel room door, looking up to see Ilya coming out of his own. Over the last few trips they'd been in the rooms next to or across from one another, which made Shane weirdly fluttery inside.

Ilya looked up and smiled at him.

"Hello again."

"Hi."

They'd seen one another not too long ago in the gym, running together, listening to Ilya's music.

"Grabbing coffee?"

Ilya nodded. "You?"

"Yeah."

Ilya held out a hand in the direction of the elevator. "Shall we?"

Shane nodded and they walked down the hall together.

He and Ilya had seemed to have fallen into a routine. Working out together, carpooling, grabbing coffee and breakfast when they were on the road, sitting next to one another on planes, messing around with pucks on the ice after practice.

Shane didn't want to really assume anything, since so much of what was happening was unspoken, but he was feeling like there was... *a vibe*.

They joked and teased one another, they laughed a lot. There were moments when Shane was pretty sure that Ilya was flirting with him and Shane was definitely flirting back (or trying to anyway).

If he hadn't been sure about still being in love with Ilya before, he was definitely sure now.

All of those feelings had come right back to the surface upon seeing Ilya again and had only grown over the five months they'd been working together.

Shane wasn't sure he was hiding his feelings very well but he also kind of didn't care.

He liked when Ilya paid attention to him. It wasn't like Ilya gave him special treatment necessarily, but they shared things that were just between them.

Shane felt special.

They were certainly headed toward... something.

Maybe the bubble would burst and they'd settle into something more platonic but he just didn't know.

It didn't feel that way. Not when Ilya would casually touch him and Shane would touch him back, when Shane would catch himself looking at Ilya, his gaze lingering, and Ilya would look at him and wink.

"Hollander."

"What? Sorry."

Ilya was looking at Shane quizzically, the elevator stopping and opening up to the lobby.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. Just... lost in my own thoughts."

Ilya chuckled, reaching out to poke Shane's temple as they walked into the lobby.

"Your brain has to relax."

Shane laughed. "Yeah, well. Easier said than done. What were you saying?"

Ilya slung a casual arm across Shane's shoulders and Shane felt his cheeks heat. He leaned into Ilya a little, the contact made every part of his body that touched Ilya's feel warm and tingly.

"I was saying that I think we will win tonight."

Shane waved his hands at Ilya, as if to quiet him. "Don't say it out loud!"

"What? You think I will jinx it?"

"That's exactly what I think!"

Ilya laughed, a full laugh. He had a nice laugh. Deep and rich and joyful.

"Relax, Hollander. Will be fine. We are getting better."

Shane couldn't deny that. The team had significantly less turnovers the last few games, less silly penalties, too. The scoring was still eluding them but they were taking more shots, making more (and smarter) attempts, better calculated risks.

"I do think they're starting to find their footing." Shane smiled a little. "They want to be good for you. They love you."

Ilya slid his arm from Shane's shoulder, his hand trailing down Shane's back, almost absently, and Shane wanted to melt into a puddle on the floor.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. You haven't heard them talking? They don't want you to lose your job."

Ilya laughed again as they stepped into line at the Starbucks in the hotel.

"That is nice of them."

"I'm being serious. They care."

"I know." Ilya nodded. "I know they do. They're good guys."

"They are," Shane affirmed softly.

They got to the front of the line and placed their orders. Ilya tapped his card to pay for them before Shane could even have a chance to think.

He bumped Ilya, annoyed, as they went to wait for their drinks.

Ilya just cackled playfully in response.

Ilya's overall mood today seemed... happy.

He had slowly been warming to Shane but things with the team had been hard. They'd all been stressed, even as they'd joked around, but Shane could feel a marked difference in Ilya today.

He seemed lighter. More joyful. More like the Ilya that Shane had met all those years ago. A little cocky, as bright as the sun.

They grabbed their coffees when their names were called and Ilya rested a hand on Shane's shoulder, squeezing.

"Today is a good day," he said, sipping his venti caramel macchiato, and winking at Shane again.

Shane smiled up at him and laughed softly, feeling his cheeks warm.

"Yeah. I think it is."

They made their way out of the Starbucks and into the lobby, grabbing some seats there, where some of the players found them.

They chatted with the guys and everyone seemed in such high spirits.

Shane wondered what was in the water. He wasn't mad about it, he just thought that it was so... serendipitous. The stars aligning.

He just hoped the positivity would hold.

That night, in the locker room, everyone was buzzing.

It felt like the team had gotten a new lease on life or something.

Shane had no idea what had happened between the games in Florida to now to totally switch things on it's head, but the boys were really feeling it.

"Do you think we might actually pull something off?" Max asked Shane.

"I mean, with this energy? We might be able to make miracles happen."

Even Luca, who was fairly soft spoken in the locker room, was hyping the guys up.

Behind the bench, Shane was absolutely shocked when Vanya scored a minute into the first period.

It was a gorgeous one timer off of Haasy's pass, absolutely beautiful, over the goalie's left shoulder.

Ilya said something in Russian, laughing and clapping.

"Holy shit," he chuckled and Shane smiled up at him.

"I think we're off to a great start!"

Ilya nodded in agreement, smiling widely at Shane. When Vanya came back to the bench, Shane watched Ilya lean over to speak to him, most likely in Russian, and Vanya's smile could have split his face.

Ilya shook his shoulder pads a little, telling him 'well done', before returning back to his post behind the bench.

It seemed they could only go up from there.

Carolina was the top team in the League so far. It was only December, so plenty of season left, but they'd only lost one game so far.

Shane wasn't sure what it was but the Cens were *dominating*.

Their defense was all over the Carolina forwards, the Centaurs' forwards were absolutely lethal.

"Who are these guys?!" Boody laughed as they scored again, leaving the score 2-0 at the end of the first.

"I think they finally unlocked!" Shane replied, smiling and clapping. He leaned over to talk to the guys as they came off their shift, telling them how well they were doing, to keep this up.

It wasn't until second period that Shane put two and two together.

He listened to Forty as he gave his interview between periods, answering questions over a headset.

"Yeah, I mean, I'm sure it's surprising. We just see how hard Roz works for us, how he always builds us up, teaches us. We know we've been struggling and we just needed to dig a little deeper. We needed to turn it around for him. So, yeah. Hopefully we can just keep getting pucks on net."

Shane smiled, his heart turning into goo. He loved this team and how good they were. He loved that they loved Ilya as much as Ilya loved them.

Shane wasn't sure he'd ever been on a team that was as full of love as the Centaurs were. It was wild.

Shane had always gotten on well with his teammates. He loved them like brothers. And while hockey was his whole life, it was still his job.

Shane didn't think he'd ever felt the way this team felt about one another. Besides J.J. and Hayden, Shane had never actually been that close to anyone.

But his coaches had always wanted the team to be a machine. You would go to war for one another on the ice and Shane did his fair share of captaincy duties and showing up for the guys.

This was just... a whole other level.

And it was surprisingly healing.

"Good job, bud," Shane said, patting Forty's arm as he went back towards the locker room. He looked at Shane, smiling, and gave a little salute.

By the second period, the guys were on *fire*.

The score currently sat at 4-0.

"Do we even need to coach them?" Shane asked, a hand on Ilya's arm, leaning over to speak into his ear to be heard.

“Probably not,” Ilya laughed.

As the game progressed, Shane was more and more certain that they were actually going to win this thing.

And win *big*.

He didn’t say it but he didn’t have to say it. Everyone behind the bench was strung tight, watching, but the guys didn’t even let up the gas. They just kept going.

Shane was so fucking proud of them.

This was the effort they wanted to see. This was the hockey IQ, the teamwork, the quick thinking.

He didn’t want to call it a comeback... but it was the start of something good, that was for sure.

Ilya’s pep talk to the boys before the third period was rousing. It was like listening to someone before the Stanley Cup game. It made Shane tear up a little.

He hoped that the guys could keep up this energy for the rest of the season, win or lose. He just didn’t want them to burn out. For them to have all of this for just one win.

But for now, he let it go.

The third period was incredible hockey. Everything you would want in a game. A fast back and forth, where everyone was on point.

In the end, the Cens managed to score once more, and the game ended 5-0.

How they had managed a shut out, Shane had no idea, but it was a miracle. Something incredible to behold. Andy had been unbelievable, blocking sixty shots on goal.

The entire bench exploded. Ilya and Shane had their arms wrapped around each other, jumping up and down while the boys on the bench hollered and sped out onto the ice.

“Holy fucking shit they did it!” Shane yelled, laughing, looking at Ilya as they held each other.

Ilya was smiling wide, looking happier than Shane could ever remember seeing him.

He wanted to kiss him. He looked so perfect.

They just kind of looked at each other for a very long moment, before Bood, Max, and Wyatt glommed onto them and they all group hugged.

Everything after that was kind of a blur.

They had found a bar not far from the hotel and had completely taken over. Ilya had to remind everyone to be on their best behavior and that they had an early flight tomorrow but everyone was very excited.

Ilya commandeered a table and all the coaches sat around it, sharing a pitcher of beer.

“I’ll be very interested to see what the media has to say tomorrow,” Max said.

“Me, too, dude,” Wyatt sighed. “What a freakin’ trip. This team, man.”

Shane chuckled, sipping his beer, and watched Ilya, who was looking out at the guys.

Shane wasn’t sure how long they stayed at the bar. He drank more than he usually would and was a little tipsy but not too bad.

But the longer he sat and talked with Ilya, the more resolved he felt.

He could feel the tension between them, his skin prickling every time they touched, even if it was just accidentally knocking feet under the table, or resting a hand on an arm or shoulder as they talked, recounting the evening’s highlights.

Shane didn’t want to be anywhere else but looking into those hazel eyes, nearly golden in the low light of the bar.

He got up to use the bathroom, planning.

He washed his hands, going over exactly what he would do.

When he returned to the table, he had his spare key card in hand. Bood was gone, leaving Max and Wyatt talking.

As surreptitiously as possible, Shane slid Ilya his key card. Ilya took it, looking at Shane, his gaze steady.

“I’m gonna head back to the hotel,” he said. “Room 4218, just in case you need me.”

Ilya nodded, sliding his hand with the card under the table.

“Goodnight, Hollander.”

“Goodnight.”

Shane said goodnight to Wyatt and Max. He made his rounds to remind the boys to be on their best behavior and back before curfew. He wished Bood a goodnight as he passed him on the way out and then walked out into the temperate December night.

He felt jittery, excited about the night’s victory, and his own boldness.

He and Ilya had been dancing around one another long enough. Either Ilya would come to his room or not and at least Shane would have an answer.

He got back to the hotel and went to his room, keying in.

He showered because he wanted to be clean absolutely everywhere, then changed into his jeans and a t-shirt. He checked his bag, pulling out the lube and condoms he always packed because it was better to be prepared than not.

Ilya would probably tease him about that but Shane didn't care.

He remembered when this had been their norm. Waiting in hotel rooms for quick hookups.

The familiarity of it was heady but Shane hoped that maybe, going forward, things might be different.

Shane wanted more than just hookups. He wanted to love Ilya.

He just hoped that Ilya would want to love him, too.

Shane waited in his hotel room for maybe twenty minutes, sitting, standing, pacing, before the door clicked, and opened.

Ilya stepped inside. He closed the hotel room door and locked it, turning to look at Shane. He was still in his suit. He was wearing his jacket, his tie gone, shoved into a pocket, and three of his shirt buttons undone.

They looked at each other for a second, tension taut between them. Shane's heart wobbled in his chest. He'd wanted this for so long, waited for this moment. He was glad that Ilya had shown up, even if he felt a little queasy.

He was so handsome. Shane could look at him for hours.

Ilya dropped his jacket onto the floor and toed off his shoes. He slid his hands into his pockets and moved slowly into the room. He always looked so elegant, fluid, like a big cat. Shane watched him, his heart hammering, his stomach fluttering anxiously.

He stopped in front of Shane, looking down at him. Shane looked back and swallowed. He could feel Ilya's warmth this close, smell his cologne. Shane licked his lips.

Ilya reached up with one hand, smoothing some of Shane's hair behind his ear, cupping his face in one big, warm palm. And then they were kissing.

Shane slid his hands into Ilya's curls, the strands just as thick and soft as Shane remembered. Even kissing like this was familiar, Ilya commanding and thorough, his lips soft, mouth warm. His stubble pleasantly burned Shane's skin.

Ilya shifted his hand from Shane's face, resting both hands on the small of Shane's back, holding him close, before sliding down to his ass.

Ilya growled, sliding his leg between Shane's thighs, and Shane ground against him eagerly, sighing into his mouth.

The floodgates had opened and Shane wanted Ilya's dick in every part of him all at once. He wanted to devour him and from the way Ilya was kissing him... he maybe felt the same.

"Fuck," Ilya breathed as Shane's hands went to his trousers, undoing his belt, the fly of his pants, sliding his hand inside to wrap his hand around his warm, thick cock.

"Ilya," Shane sighed, looking into Ilya's eyes for a moment, before Ilya was slipping his tongue back into Shane's mouth.

Shane made a help sounds as he stroked Ilya's dick, managing to disentangle himself to get onto his knees, so full of wanting that he could hardly see straight. He was salivating, wanting to get his mouth around Ilya's cock, and he didn't think that he was going to last long at all, not after all this time.

"Shane," Ilya said above him as Shane managed to get Ilya's dick out, one hand going to Ilya's hip. Shane's whole body flushed with warmth at hearing Ilya say his name.

Shane barely touched him, one of Ilya's hands on his shoulder, the other in his hair, when Ilya came right on his face.

And to Shane's own embarrassment, he came in his underwear.

They both froze, the only sound in the hotel room was their ragged breathing. Shane could feel his face burning.

He opened his eyes tentatively, looking up at Ilya, who looked shocked and appalled. His face, so normally composed was flushed with embarrassment.

"I—" he said and then Shane burst out laughing. A second later, Ilya burst out laughing, too.

They both just laughed, easing out all the tension.

Ilya helped Shane to his feet, looking him over. "Are you okay? I am so sorry."

"It's okay," Shane chuckled. "I'm fine. Just surprised."

They stood there together and Shane pulled his shirt off, using it to wipe his face. Ilya looked at him, sheepish, and Shane chuckled softly. Ilya took the shirt, getting a spot that Shane had missed before dropping the shirt on the floor.

"Well... now that that's out of the way..."

They both laughed again.

"Can, I, um, take off your clothes?" Shane asked.

Ilya nodded and Shane reached up to undo the buttons of his shirt. He did the cuffs first, then the front, sliding the shirt from his shoulders, letting it fall to the ground.

Shane brushed his fingers over Ilya's shoulders, before pushing his pants and underwear down, and Ilya stepped out of them.

He bent over, taking off his socks, and Shane smiled.

He took a moment to just look at Ilya.

He hadn't seen him naked in years but he looked really fucking good; the same but different.

He was still so strong; broad shoulders and firm pecs, huge thighs and that perfect ass you could definitely bounce a quarter off of. He was maybe a little softer around the middle but still in great shape.

His dick certainly hadn't changed.

Shane knew that Ilya was sizing him up, too, could feel his eyes on him, and heat pooled more slowly in his belly, his cheeks warm. Just a little self-conscious.

It had been a while since he had been with anyone, even longer since Ilya had been with him, and he wasn't in his twenties any more. He was older, a little softer, too, but he knew he was in good shape. He just hoped Ilya still found him attractive.

Shane met Ilya's eyes.

Ilya slid a finger into the waistband of Shane's jeans, tugging a little.

"May I?"

Shane nodded.

Ilya undid the fly of Shane's jeans, sliding them down Shane's legs, and Shane shimmied out of them.

He took his underwear off, too, kicking them aside.

Shane smiled, stepping into Ilya's space, reaching out tentative fingers to brush over the ever present chain and crucifix around his neck, trailing into the dusting of chest hair, flecked with silver.

He rested his hand over Ilya's left pec and the snarling bear tattoo.

Ilya's hands rested tentatively on Shane's hips, sliding over his lower back, one hand trailing up Shane's spine, the other curving around one of Shane's ass cheeks.

The touches, being this close, made Shane feel dizzy with desire. He was afraid to rush now, not wanting to spook Ilya, but feeling desperate for him, wanting to touch and kiss him everywhere.

Ilya smiled, as if he knew what Shane was thinking, and kissed him.

Shane opened for him easily, wrapping his arms around Ilya's neck, bodies pushed together. Ilya's cock pressed against his hip and Shane loved the catch of Ilya's chest hair against his skin.

They kissed for a long time at the end of the bed, Ilya's hands squeezing Shane's ass, and Shane slid his hands over the muscular mound of Ilya's shoulders, down his firm pecs, his belly, around him to squeeze his ass, too.

Ilya chuckled and Shane hummed, smiling.

"Can I suck you?" Shane asked, brushing his mouth against Ilya's.

"Da. Yes."

Shane kissed him once more, before sliding to his knees again. Ilya was half-hard and Shane took a second to just... look.

Ilya's dick was proportional to the rest of him and uncut. It was impressive, honestly, and Shane loved having it inside him.

He kissed and kitten-licked at Ilya's cock, closing his eyes, wanting to enjoy this, almost giddy about it.

This was *happening*.

He wrapped his mouth around Ilya's dick, taking him deep. He heard Ilya hiss above him, his cock stiffening, and Shane couldn't help but moan at the way it felt to have Ilya fill him like this.

He was a little out of practice, but it was kind of like riding a bike.

One of Ilya's hands slid into his hair and Shane rested a hand on Ilya's hip, his other hand wrapping around his own cock, stroking slowly.

Ilya murmured something in Russian and Shane hummed around him. He loved when Ilya spoke in Russian, even if he couldn't understand.

He spoke so fluidly, his voice changed slightly as he spoke in his native tongue.

It was sexy as hell.

Shane wasn't sure how long he was on his knees, too lost in it to be keeping track, before Ilya tugged gently on his hair.

Shane let him slide from his mouth and swallowed, looking up at Ilya.

He was pulled to his feet and Ilya kissed him.

"Do you want me to fuck you?"

“Yes,” Shane breathed.

“Get on the bed.”

Shane did as he was told, climbing into bed. He looked over his shoulder, on his hands and knees, and he watched Ilya’s eyes hone in on his ass. Shane smiled and practically preened.

“Do you have things?” Ilya asked.

“Yeah. Over on the desk.”

Ilya turned to the desk, grabbing the condoms and lube, and joined Shane in bed.

Shane felt Ilya’s hands grip his ass and was surprised as he felt the unexpected press of Ilya’s tongue against his rim a moment later.

“Oh fuck. *Ilya*, wow—!”

“Wow,” Ilya repeated, chuckling, and Shane whined.

“Shut up, Rozanov.”

"You have never had someone eat you out before?"

"I have, just—"

"Mm. I see."

Ilya laughed some more, before going back to fluttering his tongue. Shane didn't even have time to be embarrassed. Ilya was so fucking good with his tongue, it was crazy.

Shane let his chest rest on the mattress, hands fisted in the sheets, surprised with how relaxed he felt by the sensations, and so turned on he was, steadily leaking all over the comforter, but he couldn’t find it in him to care.

Ilya switched between the gentle fluttering and longer, firmer strokes and then to circles, which made Shane moan.

“So noisy,” Ilya murmured fondly and Shane grumbled.

Ilya chuckled and went back to what he was doing for a few more minutes, before he leaned away.

Shane heard Ilya pop the cap on the lube, before he felt Ilya’s finger rub up against his rim.

Ilya was still as sure and confident as he had been back then, as if the bedroom was his domain and sex was what he was best at.

Which, to be fair, was probably true.

Shane had only ever compared his other partners to Ilya and they had never been able to match up.

Sex with Ilya had been the bar and it was one that no one had been able to clear. Not even close.

Shane had been dreaming about this for *years* and now it was happening.

“Fuck you look good like this, Hollander,” Ilya hummed.

Shane wanted to tell Ilya how much he had missed him, how much he wanted him, loved him, wanted to be with him. He knew he was too eager, too desperate, but he couldn’t help it.

But he didn’t say it, gasping instead as Ilya pushed a finger inside of him.

It was like they hadn’t missed a beat, like they were simply picking up where they had left off fifteen years ago.

“Relax,” Ilya rumbled behind Shane, leaning over him to press kisses to his back. Shane inhaled and exhaled slowly, easing into the mattress and around Ilya’s finger.

Ilya didn’t rush, which Shane appreciated. He opened Shane thoroughly, teasing his prostate a bit, until Shane was whining and panting.

“Fuck, Ilya. *Come on*. I’m ready.”

Ilya huffed a laugh. “Still so impatient.”

Shane shivered a little at the acknowledgment of their history. He withdrew his fingers and Shane bit his lip against a whimper at the loss. He heard Ilya unwrap a condom, popping the lube cap again.

Shane felt the blunt head of Ilya’s dick press against his rim and he pushed his ass back.

“*Please*.”

Ilya swore in Russian again, his hands curling around Shane’s hips as he pressed into him in one long, slow slide. Shane’s mouth fell open and he gasped. Fuck, he’d missed this so much... being entered and filled like this...

“Okay?” Ilya asked once he was inside, his voice a bit unsteady.

“Yes. Yeah. You feel so fucking good.”

Ilya groaned softly, pulling out and then pressing back in with a shallow little thrust. Shane bit his lip again and hummed.

“Still okay?” Ilya ran a soothing hand over Shane’s back and Shane nodded.

“Yeah. Keep going.”

Ilya repeated the motion, deeper this time, and Shane moaned, fisting his hands in the sheets. Ilya adjusted his angle, thrusting in again, and Shane gasped.

“Fuck. Yes. Right there.”

Ilya’s hands held Shane’s hips tighter as he found a hard, quick pace. Shane’s mind was empty, focusing solely on the pleasure of being fucked like this, of being fucked *by Ilya*, after all this time.

A part of him had been afraid that he would be disappointed, that the sex would be worse than how he’d remembered, but it wasn’t.

It was *so good*. Maybe even better.

Ilya had always known what Shane wanted, what he needed, and he was not disappointing.

Shane did his best not to make too much noise. They were in a hotel surrounded by their team and coworkers. Shane wasn’t sure who had come back from the bar yet.

He shoved his face into the mattress as Ilya fucked him within an inch of his life, pounding into him over and over. Shane could hear Ilya’s harsh breathing, the sound of his chain as he moved.

“Oh my god,” Shane breathed. “Holy shit. Ilya. I’m coming, I’m—” Shane garbled out as he came so hard he saw fireworks behind his eyelids.

He heard Ilya murmur something before he stilled behind Shane as he came, grunting.

“Jesus Christ,” Ilya murmured, leaning over Shane, pressing a kiss to his shoulder blade and Shane just hummed happily.

Ilya didn’t linger. He pulled out and shifted off the bed.

Shane rolled onto his back, starfishing out, basking in the post-coital bliss. He felt victorious. They’d had such an insane win tonight, he and Ilya had finally had sex. Everything was perfect.

He blinked his eyes opened, looking at the ceiling, listening to Ilya in the bathroom, smiling like an absolute idiot.

Finally. Finally!

Ilya came out from the bathroom a moment later and Shane held out a hand for him.

Ilya hesitated, then came back to the bed, and Shane took his hand, pulling him close.

“Stay,” he murmured, reaching up to brush some of Ilya’s curls off his forehead. He wanted Ilya to stay so badly he didn’t even have words to express it.

He just wanted to hold Ilya, kiss him, stroke his curls. He wanted him close.

It was hard to read Ilya's expression, his hazel eyes slowly tracking Shane's face.

Shane knew that they had a lot they needed to discuss, a lot of things to be hashed out, and next steps to figure out.

But that could wait until tomorrow.

He cupped Ilya's cheek in his hand, brushing his thumb tenderly over a cheekbone, his insides melting as Ilya closed his eyes, leaning into the touch.

"Okay."

Shane smiled, pulling Ilya down on top of him, and Ilya went easily.

Shane kissed him, so happy that he was here, that he was staying, that they had finally had this again after so long.

It reminded Shane a little of that day in Boston, the intimacy and closeness. How things had felt like *more*.

"We should sleep," Ilya murmured, kissing Shane's jaw and Shane nodded.

"Yeah."

Ilya got up again, turning off the lights, and Shane got under the covers, pleased when Ilya joined him, rolling him over, and spooned up against him.

He was warm and comforting pressed against Shane's back, and Shane snuggled back against him.

"Goodnight, Ilya."

"Goodnight, Shane."

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

The morning after

The next morning

Ilya woke up slowly. He was warm and comfortable, snuggled up under the covers, with his nose pressed into a warm shoulder.

It was quiet, the only sound in the room was the low hum of the radiator and distant traffic.

It took him a few moments to register what was happening, fighting against the urge to go back to sleep, falling into the security of having another body close to his, in his arms.

Ilya blinked his eyes open.

He was in Shane's hotel room, spooning up against him, his dick very snugly pressed up against Shane's bare ass.

The situation was extremely cozy and Ilya's sleepy brain was not complaining about the arrangement.

But the more he woke up, memories from last night came flooding back.

Shane passing him his room key, leaving the bar. Ilya waiting fifteen minutes before following after him.

It had been like old times; sneaking around, meeting in hotel rooms, having hot sex.

But last night had been different.

Ilya felt a little like he was being possessed, like he couldn't resist what Shane was asking of him, without saying a single word. It felt like the culmination of the last fifteen years, the tension that had never resolved between them, had finally been relieved.

It had been sexy, of course, to be in that hotel room with Shane, seeing him naked again after so long. But it had also been *soft*, like Shane had wanted to really *be* with Ilya, as opposed to just wanting sex.

Fucking Shane had been incredible, as it always had been, maybe even better, but it had also been incredible to kiss him and touch him, to have Shane hold his face in his hand and look at him so softly, so tenderly.

It was like they were allowing themselves to finally have what they had both been wanting for so long, no longer caring about decorum, or what the other might think.

Which was dangerous.

Ilya swallowed, very carefully extricating himself from Shane, not wanting to wake him up.

He slid out of bed, gathering up his clothes. He found his phone in his pocket. Plenty of time to get out of here and ready for the flight they needed to catch.

Fuck, Rozanov. The hell are you doing?

Every part of Ilya screamed to get back into bed with Shane, to kiss him awake, to have sleepy morning sex, and hold him for the next half hour before they had to start getting ready to leave.

He could imagine it. The sweetness in Shane's face and his warm kisses and his tender, worshipful touch. It would be so easy to get lost in him, to enjoy his body, as much as his company.

Ilya was starved for affection, for the capacity to share space with another person.

He could feel the walls around his heart snap back into place. He was being absolutely ridiculous. He should have never accepted Hollander's key card. He should have told him no, he should have said that they couldn't do this, not again.

He needed to get out of here.

Ilya scrambled back into his clothes and snuck out of the room, peering into the hall to make sure no one was around, before going back to his own.

He got inside, closing the door.

"Fuck," he hissed. "Fuck, fuck, fuck. Shit."

He was an idiot. He was an absolute *fucking idiot*.

He knew that he and Hollander had been getting closer. He knew that whatever there had been between them was still there, somehow, but Ilya didn't think he could do this again.

He couldn't start sleeping with Hollander again and open his heart to him, only for Hollander to reject him or run away or something.

Maybe he was just being a coward but he didn't have it in him.

He didn't know if he could ever trust Hollander again and he didn't want this to just be sex. He didn't want to fall back into that pattern.

His body was good enough but was his soul worth loving?

Not to mention the fact that they worked together now.

Ilya shook his head. He had to get it together. He had to shower and pack and get the team organized so they didn't miss their flight.

He couldn't afford this kind of shit. He didn't have the capacity to worry about it.

Ilya dumped his clothes on the floor, plugged in his phone, and went to the bathroom to shower, hoping it might help him clear his mind a little.

After his shower, he changed, and packed. He listened for any noise from next door, his heart racing as he thought about Hollander knocking on his door.

But nothing happened.

Ilya made sure that he was ready to go and went down to the lobby before anyone else to start the check out process and get a coffee.

He waited as people began slowly trickling down from their rooms. He was glad Hollander wasn't one of the first ones and it was easier to ignore him when Ilya was busy with the players and other coworkers.

They managed to get everyone out of the hotel and on the bus on time, Ilya sitting with Max instead of Hollander

On the plane, Ilya made a point to sit next to Wyatt.

"You okay, buddy?" Wyatt asked.

Ilya nodded. "Fine. Tired."

Ilya didn't miss the way Hollander kept stealing glances at him, looking crestfallen, and Ilya was tempted to just fold like a cheap card table.

Especially after Hollander's text came in.

Shane Hollander: can we talk?

Ilya ignored the text message and closed his eyes. His heart ached.

He had to put professional boundaries back in place. He had to make it clear that the sex was a one off, a moment of weakness. It wouldn't happen again. It *couldn't*.

But there was a very loud part of Ilya that rebelled against that idea. The part that *wanted* Shane, that loved him. It wanted to accept the risk. It wanted to try again.

It wanted, it wanted, it wanted.

Ilya clamped down on that part. Hard. Pushing it away as far as possible.

He couldn't.

He just *couldn't*.

He opened his eyes, turning his head toward the window, wiping away tears with his thumb, hoping that Wyatt didn't notice.

A week later

Wyatt knew that something was going on with Roz and Holly.

When he had first come on as goalie coach, he'd been ecstatic. Even though the Centaurs had been one of the worst teams in the League, he'd really enjoyed his time there.

The vibes had only ever been good, despite the losing nature of the franchise.

It was pretty clear that the team had needed an overhaul and once that had happened, Wyatt had been very eager to get in there.

Lisa had her job here and she had already sacrificed so much for his career, so it felt only fair for him to do something close to home.

It was a franchise he had been a part of and had enjoyed and it meant that they didn't have to pick up and move.

And to sweeten the pot, he got to work with Bood, one of his former teammates!

He had been very intrigued to see Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander coming on as coaches as well.

They both had had such interesting histories in the League and while Wyatt hadn't known either of them personally, it was hard to not know *of* them.

Wyatt had never seen Holly and Roz interact up close besides media events and All-Star games. He didn't remember much of their dynamic so it was fascinating to see them up close, working together.

Wyatt was perceptive in the way that many goalies were, noticing things that other people might not, because it had been his literal job to do that.

He'd observed his new coworkers, curious about them. He was already familiar with Bood, and Max was so open and cheerful, it had been easy to get to know him.

But Roz and Holly were harder to pin down.

Roz was a typical Slav. He was hard to read in general, not giving anything away unless he wanted you to see it. He was good natured, funny, extremely charming. Much more handsome in person.

Smelled good, too.

Holly on the other hand was more quiet, shy, a little awkward. You could really get him going if you asked about anything hockey related but he was a sweet guy. A surprisingly open book, though Wyatt was under the impression that Holly didn't think he was.

Watching them together, in the beginning, was strange.

It was like there was a history there. Something had happened. Their interactions were stilted and Wyatt could tell that Roz was kind of avoiding Holly, never actually engaging with him unless other people were around.

Then, sometime in July, things seemed to improve.

Roz was friendlier, more open. It seemed like he and Holly were spending more time together, able to talk one-on-one, even laughing and joking around.

Wyatt had learned that they were carpooling, that they went on runs together because they lived in the same neighborhood.

Wyatt wondered if they had been friends, maybe, and had had a falling out, because watching them together during the summer and into the fall, they seemed to be getting on like a house on fire.

Max and Bood had commented on it, too, saying how nice it was to see the two former rivals getting along so well.

Wyatt had been happy for them. He had been glad that they had maybe worked out whatever it was that they had needed to work out between them.

But now, things were *weird* again.

Wyatt had been sitting next to Roz on the plane back from Carolina and Roz had definitely been crying. He was trying to hide it but Wyatt had noticed. He hadn't wanted to say anything, not wanting to make Roz uncomfortable.

There was like a dark cloud around him. He was much more closed off, colder.

Holly was going around looking like a kicked puppy. The guy looked so forlorn and sad that Wyatt's heart hurt for him.

And it did not go unnoticed (by Wyatt) that Holly was looking at Roz with the saddest eyes Wyatt had ever seen.

Something had happened between the two of them and neither of them were hiding it very well.

Everyone was noticing. Wyatt knew Max and Bood could sense something was off and the boys were starting to catch on, too.

There had been a huge shift in the coaching dynamic and it was absolutely throwing everyone off, which was the last thing anyone wanted.

The team had been on fire in Carolina and the last thing any of the coaches wanted was for that good luck to burn out because of bad coach juju.

He'd talked to Lisa about it because she was always the voice of reason.

He knew that sometimes he read into things too much and thought he saw something that maybe actually he didn't or he had misinterpreted.

He told her what he had been witnessing, what the other coaches and players said, giving her as much information as possible since she wasn't around the team as much as he was.

And she seemed to agree that there was something hinky happening.

So Wyatt had decided to take it upon himself to figure out what the fuck was going on.

He was not a confrontational dude. In fact, he was the opposite, very chill and laid back, but for the sake of the team, and Holly and Roz's sanity, he would do it.

He went about his usual routine in the morning. Lisa was already at work so he was on his own. He worked out, made coffee and breakfast, watered the plants, and got ready to head to the arena.

He texted Lisa his usual *good morning beautiful wife!* text and was on his way.

Wyatt usually arrived at the arena a little after Holly and Roz and he saw both their cars there.

They weren't carpooling.

Interesting.

Wyatt filed that away and made his way inside.

He greeted the security guys, Ted and Arnie. He said hi to Bess, Juanita, and Julio, part of the janitorial staff.

He saw a few of the boys and greeted them with hugs and hair ruffling.

Wyatt didn't see any sign of Holly but he bet that Roz was in his office.

Wyatt swung by the cafeteria, grabbing something for himself and for Roz, and then headed to Roz's office.

Roz was indeed in his office when Wyatt arrived, on his iPad. No Anya under his desk.

"Knock knock," Wyatt said as he stood in the doorway, knocking on the door.

Roz looked up and smiled at Wyatt.

"Hazy," he greeted affably. "How can I help?"

"Oh I'm just stopping by to say hi," Wyatt replied. "Brought this for you."

He handed Roz a plate that had a muffin on it, blueberry, the kind that Roz liked.

He took the plate curiously and set it down.

“Is everything okay?”

Wyatt nodded. “Yeah. Of course.” He turned and closed Roz’s office door and then sat down in the seat next to his desk.

Roz was watching him, picking up that something was going on.

“Are you sure?”

Wyatt nodded. “Yeah. Things are fine. Everyone is doing great but I just, I couldn’t help but notice that uh, something’s off about you and Holly.”

Ilya blinked at Wyatt, his face smoothing into a neutral mask.

“What do you mean?”

Wyatt swallowed. “I mean, like, you seem... down.”

“I am fine.”

Okay. Well. He definitely should have prepared himself for this to be harder than it seemed. Maybe he should have talked to Shane first.

“Listen, Roz. I’m not calling you out or anything. I’m just concerned. You seemed pretty jacked up on the plane the other day and you haven’t seemed quite yourself since. Did something happen between you and Holly? Did you have a lover's spat?”

He laughed, meaning it as a joke, but he actually saw a flicker of something in Ilya’s eye. He leaned back in his seat, as if trying to make more space between himself and Wyatt.

“I mean, that was a joke. I’m sorry.” Wyatt shook his head. Damn. Was he fucking this up already? “It just seemed like a really big shift and we all felt it. You guys got really close over the summer. Things seemed to be going super well. You two seemed really happy! Like you were friends again after a long time of not talking or something and now all of a sudden it’s like... you’re *just* coworkers.”

“Nothing happened between Hollander and I,” Ilya said flatly.

Wyatt did not believe that for a hot second.

“You know you can talk to me, to any of us. We care about you and Shane. We care about the team. I don’t know what’s going on and I’m not going to force you to tell me but the boys know something is off. We want to help.” Wyatt sighed, standing up. “It’s an open invitation. Call me, text me, whatever.”

Ilya nodded. “Okay.”

Wyatt nodded, too. "Okay."

He turned, opening the office door, and left.

Later, after practice, he sat with Max and Bood in his Wrangler, talking about Ilya and Shane.

"How did it go talking with Roz?" Max asked.

"Not good," Wyatt replied. "I mean, I wasn't surprised that he just put up this Slavic ice wall but I also kind of was. I don't know what's up but I think that whatever it is got under Roz's skin. He's hurt. But Shane's been walking around like his grandmother died so, I don't know..."

"Did they fight?" Bood asked.

Wyatt shrugged. "Maybe. If they did, I have no clue what they fought about. I know their relationship is kind of weird because of the rivalry and stuff but I can't imagine that they're still holding onto that after so many years."

Wyatt and Max nodded in agreement.

"Do you think they're, like, sleeping together?" Max asked, in a whisper.

"It's not out of the realm of possibility," Wyatt replied, just as softly. "Which is risky but I'm not here to judge. I think I'm just so surprised how quickly things turned."

"Mm. One minute they're frosty, then the next they're two peas in a pod, and now they're frosty again..." Bood sighed.

"Is there anything we can do?"

Wyatt looked at Max. "Besides locking them in a room together and telling them to sort it out, I don't think so. Unless one of them tells us something."

The three of them all went quiet.

"I think we might just have to ride the wave, fellas. I let Roz know that we're here for him, I'll do the same with Shane, and maybe they'll be able to sort things out.

"I hope so," Bood said.

"Yeah. Me, too."

Friday

"Is everything okay?" Sveta asked as she and Ilya video chatted.

Ilya was sitting at his counter, making pelmeni.

When he had left Russia, he had taken a few things with him, sneaking them into his bag before he'd come to America.

A photo album that contained almost all of the pictures of his mother that he had and her recipe box.

His mother's pelmeni recipe, written in her elegant, Cyrillic handwriting, sat on the counter in front of him. He'd made the filling (beef and pork) and the dough, and was carefully making each dumpling, and setting each aside so he could cook them after.

Ilya had learned to deeply enjoy cooking. He'd always been able to cook to some degree but had really leaned into it after his retirement.

He wasn't half bad.

"Hm?" Ilya replied.

"I asked if everything was okay," Sveta replied, sounding worried. Ilya looked up at her.

"Everything's fine. Why?"

Sveta's eyebrows pinched together. "Because I know you. And I know when something's happened. It's like you've got a storm cloud over you. *Did* something happen?"

Ilya blinked a few times, eyes stinking, and went back to making the pelmeni.

"No."

"Don't lie to me, Ilya."

Ilya sighed and swallowed, looking up at Sveta.

"Shane and I slept together. On the road trip in North Carolina."

Sveta's face was impassive on the screen, not giving away anything about how she felt about Ilya's confession.

"Okay," she said softly.

"It was..." Ilya shifted his gaze away, looking at the far side of his kitchen. "Amazing. Perfect. Like no time had passed at all. But..."

"But...?"

Ilya closed his eyes and shook his head. "I can't."

"What do you mean you can't?" her voice was gentle, curious.

Ilya looked at her.

"What do you mean?" she repeated.

"I can't. I can't go through all of that again just for him to fucking... run away. Leave."

"Ilyusha..."

Ilya shook his head. "I don't want to talk about it."

Sveta was silent for a moment before she spoke again into the quiet.

"I think you need to stop being so afraid. Being in relationships with people, any kind of relationship, means knowing that they might hurt you. I don't think Shane Hollander wants to hurt you any more than he already has and I think you need to get over yourself. Let him in or don't but you can't keep playing hot and cold."

Ilya looked up at Sveta. It wasn't that she had never been real with him before. She was maybe one of the few people in his life who was real with him, sometimes painfully so.

But she seemed, angry, almost.

"I'm so tired of you denying yourself what you want because you think that you're unlovable. You aren't. You are one of the easiest people to love. Let him love you for Christ's sake."

"Svetlana..."

"It's true!"

Ilya sighed.

"What do you want me to do then?"

"Talk to him! It's really that simple. Stop making it out like it's more complicated than it actually is." She shook her head, tossing her hands up. "Men!"

Ilya couldn't help but laugh a little and Sveta laughed, too.

"I'm being serious."

"I know you are."

"Talk to him."

Ilya sighed. "I'll try..."

She nodded. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so harsh... I know he hurt you and I know it's not easy. I understand why you would have left. I just want you to be happy. You deserve to be happy."

"I know you do. It's okay."

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

They changed the topic of conversation after that.

Ilya made the pelmeni and ate while on the phone with Sveta. She was having a salad.

They talked about other things, Sveta's job, Hank, her plans for Christmas with her family.

"I'll be in Russia this year... will you be okay?"

"I'll make it work."

They ended the call and Ilya cleaned up his kitchen. He knew that Sveta was right, to a certain degree. He was just trying to protect himself because Shane had hurt him, badly, and his heart was a fragile thing, even if he didn't want to admit it.

They were both stuck in their own way but Ilya did recognize that something did have to give. He just had to figure out what to say and how to say it.

He wasn't sure if he could fix it... but he had to at least try.

And Shane did need to know how he felt. The love and the hurt.

That night, he lay in bed, looking at the texts that he and Shane had once exchanged when they were just dumb kids. The texts picking up fifteen years later.

They hadn't been texting often, but when they did, the conversation was funny, teasing, lots of silly memes.

It was nice. Friendly. Intimate. Shane was funny and it was something Ilya loved about him.

Ilya looked at the last text.

Can we talk? left on read.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya finally talk

January 2032 - Boston

Shane looked around at the roaring crowd filling the stands at TD Garden.

The last time they had been here, Ilya had gotten a standing ovation during his welcome back. They'd played an incredible highlight reel of all his best moments in Boston and the crowd had been deafening for one of the best players who had ever graced their franchise.

There were a ton of Rozanov jerseys that Shane had seen, that he was still seeing, even though Ilya had been retired for five years now.

They hadn't spoken, not really, since their last road trip game a month ago. Things had gone back to how they had been when Shane had first joined the team. Cordial. Professional.

They had stopped carpooling. Stopped running together. Ilya didn't want to talk to him alone.

Christmas had come and gone. Shane had been with his parents and he wondered where Ilya had been. Probably with Svetlana... Shane tried to ignore the jealousy he felt.

He would have liked to have asked Ilya to spend Christmas with his family but... that had been completely unrealistic.

After the short break, the team seemed re-energized, and was doing fairly well. They hadn't had as electric a game since Carolina, but they were definitely chalking more points in the Win category, so that was good.

But Shane knew that he wasn't at his best and he didn't think Ilya was either.

They were both distracted, busy ignoring one another, though Shane was desperate for them to talk, in private, and sort everything out.

Ilya had left Shane on read and acted like the text Shane had sent didn't exist, that the night they'd had together hadn't happened, that the entire six months of rebuilding some kind of relationship, a *friendship*, hadn't occurred at all.

It made Shane feel so sick inside.

He was anxious. Uncomfortable. He yearned so deeply it made him nauseous. Ilya was right fucking there and Shane couldn't have him. And he hated it. He hated it so much it burned him up inside.

Shane hated getting up in the morning and feeling like he was going to have a heart attack because of the discomfort, the tension, all the anxiety he felt.

And he knew the boys were feeling it, the other coaches.

Wyatt had talked to him, asking if he was okay, if things were alright between him and Ilya.

Shane was at a loss and he knew something was going to snap.

Right now, he had a job to do, and he did his best to push down his feelings to show up and be professional, to help the boys.

But he had to hand it to them, they were managing things beautifully.

The game ended with the Cens winning in OT, 2-1.

Ilya shook Shane's hand and Shane hated it.

They went back to the locker room, Ilya talking to the team post-game, they did some media, and then they all headed back to the hotel.

Shane didn't stay and mingle, going straight to his room. He lay on his bed, feeling miserable, which wasn't helping, at all.

He should probably eat something but he wasn't hungry.

He took out his phone, looking at the texts between himself and Ilya for the umpteenth time.

Shane sat up.

Okay.

They were at a stand-off.

They'd had sex. Ilya had panicked? Freaked out?

Shane understood why he would do that. They had kind of been easing into things and Shane had basically broken things wide open.

It had been impulsive and he could see how Ilya might not have handled it well, given Shane's past track record.

He grimaced.

They really did need to talk. *Really talk*. Shane needed to make so many things right or at least course correct.

He wanted to hear Ilya out and he wanted Ilya to know how he felt. Truly. That he wanted to try if Ilya wanted to try.

Fuck. God. Please let him want to try.

Shane didn't know what he would do if Ilya didn't want to try. Maybe he'd leave the team...

Shane went to the bathroom. He washed his hands, splashed cold water on his face, and brushed his hair. He looked at himself in the mirror.

It was now or never. He had to just go for it. Moment of truth. If Ilya rejected him completely, it would hurt, a lot, but Shane would be okay. And he would know. And then he could move on.

Whatever the hell was happening now was absolute torture and he couldn't take it any more.

Resolved, he went back into the bedroom. He left his suit jacket and tie in his room, made sure he had his phone and room key, and went to Ilya's room down the hall.

Shane stood at Ilya's door, so anxious he felt like he might throw up. He took a few deep breaths and knocked on the door.

He waited for what felt like forever, flexing his hands, before Ilya opened the door.

He was dressed down, in a pair of Adidas sweats and a black tank top. He looked ridiculously good, but unhappy to see Shane, his plush lips pulled into a frown.

"Yes?"

Shane pressed his lips together.

"We need to talk," he said firmly, looking at Ilya head on.

Ilya looked back at him, his expression hard, before he nodded and took a step back, allowing Shane into the room.

Shane stepped in, walking past the bed to the other side, Ilya closing the door.

He came into the room, too, hands in his pockets, and leaned against the desk.

"What do you want to talk about?" Ilya asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

"You know exactly what I want to talk about."

Ilya shrugged and Shane closed his eyes.

"I want to talk about what happened in North Carolina. I want to talk about what happened in Boston."

Shane could see the tension in Ilya, the way it rolled off of him in waves, and Shane felt near tears.

“I’m sorry, Ilya. I am so sorry for what I did. I know what I said over the summer and I meant it then, but there’s so much we have to talk about. We can’t keep going on like this.”

“Go on like what?”

“Don’t be an asshole. I’m being serious.”

Ilya’s face was impassive as he looked at Shane.

“What do you want, Hollander?”

“I want to fix this,” Shane said, feeling desperate. “I don’t want things to be like this between us. It’s horrible.”

Ilya swallowed, looking away. He unfolded his arms, gripping the desk instead.

“You ran away. What was I supposed to think?”

Shane nodded slowly. Okay. This was a good start.

“I’m sorry I ran. I was scared and stupid and overwhelmed. I wasn’t ready to come to terms with who I am and what I wanted with you. It’s not an excuse, it’s just what I was experiencing. And I recognize how much my actions must have hurt you. I worried about you. I just didn’t know what to do. There hasn’t been a day that’s gone by where I haven’t thought about you.”

Shane hadn’t ever said any of this aloud. He’d always thought it, it was how he felt, but he never imagined he’d be able to say it to Ilya’s face. He swiped away a tear with his thumb.

“You could have called,” Ilya murmured, glancing at him.

Shane let out a short laugh.

“I didn’t think it was an option. I know I’m sorry isn’t enough. But I am. I wish I could go back in time and fix it. I would have stayed. I would have talked to you sooner.”

Ilya looked at him and Shane could see the vulnerability there, the pain, and he didn’t know if he was making this better or worse.

Shane swallowed. He was shaking.

“You hurt me,” Ilya said, the words sounding forced, as if it was difficult for him to say. Shane imagined that it was.

“Leaving how you left, in Boston. You came out after you retired. You didn’t say anything after I came out when I retired.”

Shane nodded, his throat tight. “I know. I’m so sorry. I didn’t think you would want to hear from me... I was afraid I’d make things worse. Or that you were so mad at me you wouldn’t

want to hear from me. I am so, so sorry I hurt you. I want to make up for it... if you want that, too."

Shane took a few steps closer, trying to close the distance between them. Ilya looked at him.

"How can I trust you?"

"I'll prove it. I'll show you. I promise."

Shane came to stand in front of Ilya, reaching for his hand. Ilya let him take it.

His hazel eyes were glassy with unshed tears and Shane's heart ached for the younger versions of themselves.

"What do you want, Shane?" Ilya asked. He sounded tired and sad and Shane wished he could take all the hurt away. Just snap his fingers and make everything all better.

"I want to fix everything. I want to love you. I never stopped loving you. I've loved you this whole time," Shane practically whispered, his vision blurry. "And I understand if you don't feel the same, after everything. But I wanted you to know. That's all."

They were quiet for a long time, Shane brushing away tears with the thumb of one hand, still holding Ilya's in the other, sniffing softly.

"You love me?" Ilya murmured so quietly that Shane almost missed it, his voice sounding so... young.

Shane looked at Ilya and Ilya was looking at him as if he couldn't quite believe that Shane had said that he loved him. As if it was hard for him to recognize that he was loved at all.

"Yes," Shane replied, nodding. "I do. I've loved you for a long time. I'm sorry I didn't say it sooner. But it's true."

Ilya licked his lips and his eyes glimmered with tears, nearly spilling over. Shane had never seen him this emotional before. He was always so stoic. Sometimes even cold. It hurt Shane's heart to see him all worked up and he fully understood how much pain he had caused.

He bundled Ilya into his arms before he could think about it, holding him tight, Ilya's head on his shoulder.

"I love you," he said again, one hand resting in the curls at the back of Ilya's head. "I mean it."

Ilya didn't make any noise but Shane could feel him shudder, the exhale he let out shaky. He sniffled.

Shane closed his eyes, resting his head against Ilya's, tears sliding down his own face.

He'd been holding all of these things inside him for so long and saying them out loud was cathartic. He still didn't know what it meant for them, if anything at all, but they were here...

and maybe that was a good start.

Ilya slid his arms around Shane, holding him back, and Shane rocked them a little. He turned his head, resting his face in Ilya's curls, pressing a kiss there, his heart clenching.

They finally pulled apart, just enough, sniffing and wiping at their eyes. Ilya reached across the desk, grabbing tissues, and handed some to Shane.

"Ugh," Shane huffed. "I'm sorry."

Ilya swallowed, wiping his nose, nodding. He sighed and they looked at each other again.

"I love you, too," Ilya murmured.

Oh.

Shane smiled, surprised, tears spring to his eyes anew.

"Really?" he asked.

Ilya nodded and smiled a little. "Yes. For a very long time. Is why everything hurt so much..."

"That makes sense." He touched Ilya's face, cupping it gently in his hands. "I know it may not mean much to hear right now but it wasn't my intention. I was scared."

"I know."

Shane looked at Ilya, seeing so much of that twenty-six year old kid who had tried so hard for Shane. Opening himself up in the way he knew how, being vulnerable, and he could only imagine the devastation that must have followed at Shane's rejection.

"I want to try if you want to try."

Ilya curled his fingers around one of Shane's wrists.

"So... what? I get a new job?"

"No." Shane shook his head. "We do this together. We do both."

"Seems messy, Hollander."

"Hasn't it always been? You're worth it, Ilya."

Ilya's eyes tracked Shane's face, as if he was looking for something. Deception maybe? Any sign that Shane was going to flee.

"If you want to do this, then I'm all in, one hundred and ten percent."

Ilya huffed a soft laugh, closing his eyes for a moment. "Shane Hollander doesn't half ass anything."

“I really don’t,” Shane chuckled.

Ilya opened his eyes and they both laughed, things easing a little between them. Shane ran a careful hand into Ilya’s curls, then brushed the back of his hand over Ilya’s cheek.

“So... what do you say?”

Ilya blinked slowly. “Okay.”

Shane smiled, holding a scruffy cheek in one hand. “Yeah?”

“Yes.” Ilya smiled, too, small and fragile, and Shane knew he was being handed a gift. He was going to have to do this right and he intended to.

Shane cupped Ilya’s face, being as careful as possible, kissing him.

“Okay,” he murmured, kissing Ilya again. “Okay.”

They kissed some more, arms wrapping around one another, Ilya’s tongue dipping into Shane’s mouth.

Thank god thank god thank god.

They were going to do this. They were on the same page. They loved each other.

They *loved* each other.

Shane was filled with relief and renewed hope and gladness. He knew that love couldn’t fix everything, that they would have to work for this thing. But it was a start. An incredible, amazing start.

There was still so much to discuss but they would. They would have that chance. Ilya had let him in, when he didn’t have to. He was willing to take a risk.

“Thank you,” Shane murmured, pressing his forehead to Ilya’s, squishing their noses. “Thank you for giving me a chance.”

Ilya smiled softly and hummed.

“Don’t fuck it up,” he murmured back and Shane laughed.

“I’m going to do my fucking best.”

Ilya closed his eyes and breathed, his hands pressed to Shane’s back. “Me, too.”

Shane kissed him again because it was impossible not to.

They kissed for a long time, making out against the desk, before Shane finally managed to pull Ilya to the bed, where they just flopped onto it, and kissed some more.

Clothes were slowly peeled off until they were both naked, tangled up together, touching and caressing.

Shane had a leg tossed over Ilya's hip, sliding his fingers through his chest hair, fiddling with his chain.

"You're so beautiful," Shane said, feeling so helpless and so open, like it just wasn't possible for him to hide how he was feeling any more. It was written all over his face and he couldn't stop talking. "And you smell so fucking good. And I don't know why I forgot how tall you are and I love that and—"

Ilya cut him off, kissing him and smiling. "You are beautiful, too."

He reached up, brushing some of Shane's hair behind his ear. "I like the long hair."

Shane felt his cheeks warm and he laughed. "Thanks."

There was so much they needed to catch up on, so much time that had been missed. But right now, Shane just wanted Ilya to feel all loved up.

He wanted to start making up for lost time, for hurt feelings.

He was well aware that getting off together wouldn't fix everything but it couldn't hurt.

"What would you like?" Ilya asked, his fingers tracing over Shane's skin in lackadaisical patterns, the touch making Shane's skin prickle pleasantly.

"Honestly?"

Ilya looked away, then back at Shane. "I would hope so, yes."

Shane laughed, flicking Ilya's pec, making him laugh. "Ow!"

"It's a loaded question."

"Is it?"

Shane nodded. "I want a lot of things. Too much maybe."

Ilya seemed to consider this, then rolled Shane onto his back, looming over him. "Tell me one thing."

Shane huffed a soft laugh, reaching up to touch Ilya's curls, then his cheek, brushing his thumb over Ilya's warm, soft mouth. He kissed Shane's thumb and Shane smiled.

"I just want to be close."

"Do you want me to fuck you?"

"Always," Shane replied and Ilya laughed.

“Okay.”

He shifted off of Shane, sitting next to him, propped up against the pillows and headboard. Shane straddled him, hands on Ilya’s shoulders as he grabbed the lube and a condom from his bedside table.

“You came prepared...”

Ilya shrugged. “You never know when a beautiful hockey coach is going to come and confess his love to you.”

Shane laughed out loud and Ilya was smiling, kissing Shane’s neck. Shane hummed, smoothing a hand into Ilya’s curls, resting at the back of his head, sliding down the back of his neck.

Ilya reached a hand between them, wrapping it around both of their cocks, stroking lazily. Shane hummed and gasped softly as Ilya nipped his neck, moving lower, sucking a mark into his skin, where his shoulder met his neck.

“God,” Shane murmured. “You can do whatever you want to me...”

Ilya laughed, kissing the hollow of Shane’s throat, and looked up at him.

“Oh yes? You are that easy?”

“Only for you.”

Ilya’s eyes crinkled as he smiled, the expression amused. Shane liked seeing it. He hated seeing Ilya sad or neutral. He loved the way he got so bright when he was happy.

“I feel very special.”

“You are,” Shane said. “I mean it. I fell in love with you and never stopped...”

Ilya’s expression softened then, perhaps understanding that Shane was being serious.

“I meant what I said. All of it,” Shane murmured.

Ilya nodded, brushing his thumb over the heads of their dicks, making Shane moan.

“I believe you,” he murmured and kissed Shane hungrily.

That was all Shane needed to hear, at least right now. He understood if maybe Ilya wasn’t ready to forgive him completely, that he needed to see Shane show up and be there for him like a partner should be.

And Shane could do that. He knew he could. Especially for Ilya.

Ilya sped up his hand just a little, pausing in kissing Shane just to grab the lube, but Shane took the opportunity to kiss all over his face, sliding a hand down Ilya’s chest to squeeze a

muscular pec.

“Your turn,” Ilya said, kissing Shane once more, before taking his hand and pouring lube into his palm.

Shane chuckled, watching Ilya slick his fingers, reaching behind Shane to start opening him up, as Shane replaced Ilya’s hand around them with his own.

“I wanted this for so long...” Shane murmured as he jerked them off, Ilya’s finger inside of him.

“Wanted what?”

“This. You,” Shane breathed and moaned as Ilya nudged his finger against Shane’s prostate.

“Thinking about my dick for fifteen years?”

“Yes,” Shane sighed. “But more than that. You, too. Being with you. I dreamt about those few hours together in Boston. How nice it was...”

Ilya watched Shane’s face, adding a second finger, and Shane groaned.

“You want me to make you more tuna melts?”

“Yes,” Shane answered honestly, swallowing. “And to tell me I’m boring and tease me and then... cuddle with me.”

Ilya smiled a little, exhaling, fingers curling and stretching inside of Shane.

“Cuddle you?”

“Yeah. I want it all.”

Ilya nodded. “You can have it,” he whispered, biting Shane’s bottom lip, adding a third finger. Shane whined.

He tightened his hold around Ilya, trying not to jerk them too fast because he really wanted Ilya inside him, but it felt so fucking good. This was better than anything Shane had ever had before.

It was like they’d finally cleared away the dust and debris and were allowing themselves to settle.

They could have all of this. Love and sex and... happiness.

They wouldn’t be lonely any more because they would be together.

“Come on. I’m ready,” Shane breathed against Ilya’s mouth.

“Just a little more,” Ilya replied. “I like watching you like this.”

Shane huffed, biting his lip as Ilya finger fucked him in time with Shane's strokes on their dicks.

"Ilya..."

"You can do it. I know you can."

He kept going for a little longer, before finally withdrawing his fingers. Shane panted, listening as Ilya opened the foil on the condom, and slid it on. He slicked himself and Shane shifted his weight back, sitting down on him.

"Fuck, Shane," Ilya gasped, grabbing Shane's hips.

Shane loved this feeling. He loved being filled up like this and Ilya was so snug inside of him.

He rode Ilya with what felt like reckless abandon. He knew they were in a hotel, surrounded by their team and coworkers, and Shane did his best to be quiet, but he slammed his ass down on Ilya's lap over and over, riding him for all he was worth.

Ilya was speaking in garbled Russian and Shane smiled. Fuck. He loved that he could reduce Ilya to this. He loved that after all this time, they still had this spark, this pull, this desire.

"Gonna come for me, Rozanov?"

"Fuck. Too soon."

Shane slowed his pace to a slow grind, watching Ilya's head fall back, his hands squeezing Shane's hips, then his ass, kneading it in his hands.

"This good enough?"

Ilya swore again in Russian, lifting his head, then he flipped Shane onto his back.

"How do you want it?" he asked.

"Hard. Give it to me. Wanna feel it for days."

Ilya just gave one nod and snapped his hips, making Shane gasp. He adjusted his hips slightly, doing it again, and this time Shane moaned, grabbing onto him as Ilya hit his prostate.

He found a punishing rhythm, fucking Shane hard, the mattress squeaking, and Shane didn't care. It was so good. Fucking incredible.

He wrapped himself as tightly around Ilya as he could, one hand fisted in his curls, Ilya's hot breath on his face, their mouths brushing together in pseudo-kisses, the crucifix pendant knocked against Shane's sternum in time with Ilya's thrusts.

"Oh fuck, Ilya. Oh fuck. I'm right there. Don't stop, don't stop, don't—!"

Ilya covered Shane's mouth as he came and he let himself be loud, knowing he was muffled by Ilya's hand.

His orgasm felt like it went on forever, body clenching around Ilya, and he stilled and came, too, biting his lip to stay quiet.

Ilya looked at him and Shane looked back, Ilya's face one of concern, and it took Shane a moment to realize that he was crying.

"Are you hurt?" Ilya asked, removing his hand from Shane's mouth and Shane laughed wetly.

"No. I'm fine. I'm great. That was so fucking hot."

Ilya let out a small, uncertain laugh, and Shane tugged him down. "C'mere."

Ilya went, tucking his face against Shane's neck, nuzzling and kissing him there, resting his hand against Shane's cheek, his thumb brushing Shane's temple.

Shane closed his eyes, just breathing, allowing Ilya to settle over him like a weighted blanket.

"I know we're not supposed to say this after sex... but I love you."

Ilya's breath puffed against Shane's neck as he laughed. "I love you, too."

Shane smiled, petting Ilya's curls, and running his fingertips up and down his spine, happy to just be with Ilya like this.

He was elated actually.

He was happy that they had talked. There was still so much more to say but things were much better than Shane had anticipated.

Ilya loved him. And he loved Ilya.

It felt kind of like a miracle.

Eventually, Ilya pulled off of Shane, going to the bathroom to clean up, and Shane wiped his face. He came back with a wet cloth, starting to clean Shane up.

"I can do it," he murmured and Ilya smiled, kissing him.

"Is okay. I want to."

Once Shane was all clean, Ilya stretched out next to him, head perched in his palm.

"So... now what?"

Shane licked his lips. "Would you want to go on a date? With me?"

"Out in public?"

“Yeah.”

Ilya smiled lopsidedly, looking surprised. “Yes. Okay.”

Shane grinned. “Good. I’ll plan the whole thing. Make reservations. Everything.”

“Okay,” Ilya chuckled. “Sure.”

He reached out, taking Shane’s hand, and kissed Shane’s knuckles, then his palm. Shane’s heart fluttered.

“I would like to try...”

“Me, too.”

“Will be work, I think, but...”

“I’m willing if you are.”

“Yes but...” Ilya held Shane’s hand, brushing his thumb over Shane’s knuckles, watching what he was doing, instead of looking at Shane. “You may have to be patient with me.”

“Of course,” Shane replied gently. “You might need to be patient with me, too.”

Ilya lifted his eyes. “I think I can do that.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

Ilya kissed Shane’s hand again.

“Stay?” he asked.

Shane smiled. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Ilya and Shane are going to give this thing a go

The next morning

Ilya woke up to the low hum of the radiator in the hotel room and various sounds of other people in the hotel; distant laughter, a door closing, a baby crying.

He was slow to wake, far too comfortable all snuggled up against Shane, not wanting to disturb the peaceful moment.

He was hard, his dick pressed against Shane's ass, a comfortable arrangement for them apparently, but he was in no rush. They were going to have to get up soon anyway to make sure the team was ready to go, but right now, he just wanted to enjoy this.

In this moment... Ilya was allowing himself to be in love.

For a long time he had denied himself this feeling and what it meant. He had thought it wasn't possible to have this, especially with the person he wanted it with.

But Shane was here, his breathing deep and even, his long hair tickling Ilya's face but Ilya didn't mind it.

He pressed soft, lingering kisses to the back of Shane's shoulder, smiling as Shane began to rouse. He made a soft noise and stretched out, looking over his shoulder at Ilya.

"Good morning," he murmured, all sleepy and sweet, and Ilya just about melted.

"Good morning," Ilya murmured back, nuzzling Shane's cheek, and resting his lips against the muscular round of one of Shane's shoulders. He had freckles on his shoulders and across his upper back.

Ilya had never noticed them before. It was possible they were new, something that had come over the years as Shane spent more and more time in the sun, his skin changing. Ilya had always loved his freckles and he liked that there were more of them now.

Shane rolled over in his arms, snuggling against Ilya's chest and he smiled, chuckling, as Shane tossed a leg over Ilya's hip.

They stayed like that for a while, just dozing, before Shane lifted his head, and Ilya kissed him.

The kisses were warm and slow, Shane's touch tender and worshipful as his palm slide over Ilya's chest, up into his hair.

It was so easy to get lost in him. Shane was all sleep-warm and cozy, and Ilya wanted to crawl inside of him.

They had slow, sleepy morning sex, Ilya fucking Shane's thighs so they didn't have to worry about prep, and it was sexy as hell.

Though everything that they did was sexy as hell. Ilya wasn't sure there had ever been a time when he'd had sex with Shane that hadn't been amazing.

They just had crazy chemistry and Ilya wanted to find out all the things that Shane had maybe learned over the years. Shane had had other partners (which Ilya didn't really like to think about) but Ilya wanted to see what had come of that.

He could think about that later though.

For now, he and Shane were happily spent and sweaty and sticky. They needed to shower and get ready to actually do their jobs but Ilya was enjoying the way Shane wrapped his curls around his fingers and released them, his body pressed against Ilya's body.

"We should probably get moving, eh?"

Ilya chuckled and kissed the tip of Shane's nose. "Yes. Probably."

Shane sighed. "Okay."

He went to move away but Ilya held him.

"Ilya..."

"A few more minutes."

Shane huffed a laugh and didn't fight very hard, wrapping his arms around Ilya and holding him close.

They did, finally, extricate themselves from one another, though it pleased Ilya that Shane seemed just as reluctant as he did to be apart.

Clothes were gathered from the floor and Shane redressed.

"So, um, should we... say anything?" Shane asked. "To the team? Or the coaches?"

Ilya shook his head. "Not yet. This is... new."

"Oh, right, yeah, of course."

Ilya smiled a little, moving closer to Shane. He'd put on his underwear but wasn't wearing anything else. He took Shane's hand, bringing it to his mouth.

“Just for us,” he murmured. “For now.”

Shane’s cheeks turned the sweetest pink and he smiled. “Okay. That makes sense.”

“Besides, I’m sure Hazy will ask a bunch of questions.”

“Should we not...”

Ilya shrugged. “I will just say we had a very long talk and we are okay now.”

Shane chuckled. “Yeah, that’s fair.”

Ilya looked at him. “We still have a lot to talk about but... I want to try. I don’t want to be a secret but because we are starting new, maybe is a good idea. For now.”

“Totally. I think that’s very reasonable.”

“Thank you.”

Shane touched his cheek. “Of course. I’ve waited a long time for this. I don’t want to screw it up now.”

Ilya chuckled and kissed Shane softly.

“You should go.”

“I know.”

They kissed some more, wrapping around each other, holding on tight.

“I’ll see you soon.”

Ilya nodded and smiled, checking the hall to find no one there, and allowing Shane to sneak out. He gave Ilya a little wave before he went back to his room and Ilya’s heart clenched.

He closed his hotel room door, laughing to himself, running his hands down his own face.

What was he getting himself into?

They sat next to one another on the plane. Shane pressed his arm against Ilya’s and Ilya smiled at him.

They got back home to Ottawa, sneaking away to steal kisses, before briefly reaffirming their plans for a date, and then went their separate ways.

At home, Ilya felt like he was on cloud nine. It was like every bad thing in his life ever had been sucked up in a tornado, completely banished.

He texted Sveta about it and she immediately called him, even though it was well after one in the morning.

“What are you doing awake?” he asked her, laughing.

“None of your business! Tell me everything!”

Ilya told her everything, sitting down on his couch, still in a bit of disbelief.

“I’m really proud of you,” she said. “I’m glad you talked to him.”

“We’ll see what happens.”

“It’s a really good step.”

Ilya hummed.

He sat up, resting his elbows on his thighs, phone to his ear.

“Do you think I’m setting myself up?” he asked her softly.

“I don’t know,” Sveta replied gently. “Humans are messy. But we’re older and wiser now. We’re more sure of what we want. I think it’s worth a shot, y’know?”

“Yeah...”

“I know it’s hard not to be afraid but sometimes the risk is worth it.” Sveta laughed softly. “You taught me that.”

Ilya smiled. “You’re right.”

Sveta hummed. “I’m *always* right. Now we both need to get to bed. Keep me posted about everything. I’m excited to hear more.”

“I will make sure you’re kept fully in the loop. Don’t worry.”

"Good. Thank you. Now get some sleep."

"Yes, you too. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Ilyusha."

They ended the call and Ilya sighed out into the room.

Ilya stayed on his couch, leaning back, his head against the back cushion, and fiddled with his mother’s crucifix.

He didn’t think he was making a mistake.

Being with Shane felt right. It always had. There had always been something special about him, the way that Ilya had been so drawn to him.

And it said something that Shane had felt the same, that he'd been carrying all of this around for so long.

Their careers and life in hockey hadn't been easy. Ilya knew how difficult it had been to be closeted and while he had had the benefit of his bisexuality, making it easier to hide because he *did* like women, it had still felt horrible to be rejected by the person he had fallen in love with, who just so happened to be a man.

He could only imagine what it had been like for Shane.

And Ilya knew that Shane had been under more pressure than him, that there had been more stacked against him, and he'd still managed to be the person he was; kind and generous and so fucking successful.

He'd been the one to come to Ilya, to try and make things right, to tell Ilya that he loved him and wanted to try, even after all this time.

"He means it," he said out loud, to his mother's ghost, as much as to himself.

Shane Hollander was still Shane Hollander. He didn't just do this kind of stuff unless he was willing to whole ass the entire thing.

Ilya laughed softly to himself.

What a Shane thing to do and fuck... it made Ilya feel special. Chosen.

Shane Hollander loves me.

Ilya closed his eyes and swallowed.

It had been a very long time since he had felt loved. Wanted. Not that he didn't have people in his life who loved him but this kind of love, specifically.

The kind of love where someone would want the all of him and love him even when there were faults and ugly parts.

Of course there was always the possibility that those parts would be too much and Shane would leave again but, he was willing to try.

You're worth it, Ilya.

That was all Ilya could ask for. Which meant that he had to be in it, too, one hundred and ten percent. They were going to do this thing and maybe he was a little excited about that.

A week later

"So, like, are you and Holly cool now?"

Ilya looked up at Hazy, halfway through a bite of spaghetti. He covered his mouth as he chewed and nodded, holding up a finger.

Hazy laughed, taking a seat across from Ilya in the café.

“Yes. We talked. We are good now,” Ilya answered, once he’d swallowed.

Hazy nodded and bit into a meatball.

“Everything... okay? You guys seemed to be really at odds.”

Ilya nodded, wiping sauce from his face with a napkin.

“We needed to clear some things up,” Ilya replied. “Our history and everything...”

It wasn’t a lie exactly and he and Shane had agreed to see where things went for them, before they started talking to people. Everything was new... and neither of them wanted to jinx it.

“Oh, yeah. I guess stuff might have been pretty rough, with the rivalry and shit.”

“Mm.”

“Well, I’m glad you guys figured it out.”

“Yes. Me, too.”

Conversation turned to coaching and the upcoming games, as well as concern about the weather. Games might be canceled and rescheduled due to snow fall. It had already happened once already when Ottawa got walloped with over fifty-six centimeters of snow.

Shane joined them part way through the conversation. He smiled at Ilya, bright and beautiful, and Ilya’s heart sped up.

He felt like he was a teenager in a lunch room and his crush had decided to sit next to him.

Ilya rested his foot against Shane’s under the table and Shane pushed his back against Ilya’s. Ilya glanced at him, fighting a smile.

Practice was great.

The boys were coming along nicely. They’d had a string of wins which had helped boost their confidence and while a miracle would get them into the playoffs, it was nice just to see them finding their footing.

The media was being kinder as well, which helped. They’d run a new piece about how maybe Ilya and his team could pull this off after all.

Overall, things were going extremely well, and Ilya had to remind himself that waiting for the other shoe to drop wasn’t helpful. They just needed to go one step at a time.

After practice, he and Shane lingered on the ice.

“We still on for tonight?” Shane asked, skating close to Ilya, looking up at him with a little smile on his face, eyes darting to Ilya’s mouth, then back to his eyes.

“Of course,” Ilya replied and Shane smiled, eyes crinkling.

He stole a kiss, which surprised Ilya, then skated away, gathering pucks. Ilya was grinning like an idiot and followed after him, helping to clean up.

They walked back to the locker room together, had their end of practice meeting, then walked out to their cars.

Their hands brushed as they walked and Ilya did it again, purposefully this time, letting his fingers briefly tangle with Shane’s, before pulling away.

They got to Shane’s car first.

“I’ll see you in a few hours,” he said, shy and sweet, his cheeks all pink under his freckles.

“See you soon.”

Ilya blew him a kiss, leaving Shane laughing and shaking his head. Ilya turned toward his car, smiling, unable to help it.

Back home, he changed into something warm and comfortable for their date; a white Henley, a nice camel colored quarter zip with a well-fitted pair of dark wash jeans, and black leather boots with warm socks.

Ilya hadn’t been to this restaurant before. Shane had sent him the link and it looked a bit upscale but not jacket and tie level.

Ilya called a car, since he assumed they’d be drinking, put on his nice wool overcoat, and kissed Anya goodbye before he was on his way.

He texted Shane to let him know he was en route.

In typical Shane fashion, he was waiting for Ilya inside the vestibule of the restaurant. It had started to snow.

“Were you waiting long?” Ilya asked.

“No. Only a few minutes,” Shane replied.

Ilya chuckled and leaned in to press a kiss to Shane’s cheek.

“Hi.”

Shane was blushing already and Ilya's heart gave a helpless wobble. “Hi.”

They went into the restaurant, checking their coats, and were led to their table.

Shane was wearing a navy sweater and khaki trousers, with a nice pair of boots, his hair down, and looking very neat, some of it tucked behind his ear. His style had gotten better over the years and he looked very handsome. Navy was a good color on him.

They sat and were given menus and were told that their server would be with them shortly. Shane kept sliding his finger behind his ear intermittently, an anxious reflex.

Cute.

“Thank you for this,” Ilya said.

“Of course,” Shane replied. He looked a little self-conscious, glancing away. “I’m really glad we could do this.”

Ilya softened completely, watching Shane, and all the sweetness about him. So shy and sincere. He felt a little ridiculous for having resisted for so long.

“Me, too.”

Shane looked at him and smiled, eyes all crinkled, his nose, too, so boyish and adorable.

They just smiled goofily at each other for a minute before putting on their glasses, and turning back to their menus.

“Do you want to split a bottle of wine?” Shane asked.

“Sure.”

“What do you like?”

“Reds, mostly. Some white, but only dry. If it tastes like butter, I don’t want it.”

Shane chuckled. “Okay. Hm. I like red, too. How about this one?”

Shane shifted his menu, pointing to a bottle. Ilya read it and nodded.

“Yes. Okay. Sounds good.”

Shane ordered the bottle for them when their server came by and then they got into discussing appetizers.

Once those were decided (hash browns with caviar and pork empanadas), their server came back with their bottle to try.

They both liked the wine so their server poured their glasses, while Ilya ordered their apps.

They cheersed and sipped their wine. Ilya leaned back in his seat.

“Can I confess something?” Shane asked, leaning over the table slightly, as if they were sharing a secret.

Ilya gave him a dubious look, raising a brow. It seemed this date was off to an interesting start... he wasn't sure if he should be nervous or not. "Okay. Sure."

"Even if I didn't like the wine, I would have just kept the bottle."

Ilya chuckled, not expecting Shane to say that. "Really?"

"Yeah! I would feel so bad! They opened the bottle and what am I gonna say? I don't like it?"

"I think you only send the bottle away if the wine is not good. Like, vinegar."

Shane's face went red. "Oh my god, seriously?"

"Yes. Pretty sure."

"I thought you could like, reject it..."

They both started laughing, Shane's face beet red. "Holy shit. Okay. Today I learned."

"Is a good thing you just keep it all the time."

Shane shook his head. "I don't know anything about wine. I only know a little because of Rose."

Ilya hummed, sipping his wine, and not saying much else. He had some complex feelings about Rose Landry.

"And how is *Rose*?" Ilya asked, aware of the bite in his voice.

Shane looked at him curiously. "She's good. Busy. She's married now, with a son. We're still friends. A lot like you and Svetlana."

Ilya nodded a little. Well... that made him feel slightly better.

"What is, um, your story... with Svetlana?" Shane asked, licking his lips, pursing them slightly, as if Sveta's name was sour on his tongue. It made Ilya smile.

Ilya supposed it was only fair that they talk about these things, one of the many they needed to discuss, if they were going to move forward with a relationship.

"We are very good friends, from childhood. She is Sergei Vetrov's daughter and was born in America. We, um, got married for me to have American citizenship. Was like business deal."

Shane's dark eyes scanned Ilya's face, his brows slightly furrowed.

"Really?"

"Yes. Only for a few years and then we divorced. We are still very good friends."

"I heard that you had gotten married but, um..."

“Is not something I like people to know.”

“Yeah. That’s fair.”

Ilya sipped his wine. “Svetlana and I talked about this. We both agreed. And she wanted to help me. I did not want to go back to Russia. And if I came out like I planned to, I would not be able to go back, so.”

“It was for security.”

“Yes.”

“I see. That must have been hard.”

“Yes and no. I love Svetlana. But not in the way she deserves to be. She is in a relationship now and is happy. That’s all I want for her.”

“That’s good then.”

“Yes. Very.” Ilya took another sip of wine. “You and Rose?”

“Oh, yeah. Uh. She was basically my beard while I sorted out my sexuality and stuff. She’s great but we just weren’t compatible in that way.”

“Mm.”

They were quiet for a long moment and Shane shifted in his seat uncomfortably.

“Were there other men?” Ilya asked, perhaps a bit indelicately, but Shane let out a surprised laugh.

“Yeah. A few. I dated two men seriously but they just weren’t... what I wanted.”

“No?”

Shane shook his head, then looked Ilya right in the eye. “No.”

Oh. *Well.*

Ilya smiled a little and nodded some more. “I see.”

Their appetizers arrived and they divvied up plates and utensils. Shane cut the empanadas and Ilya cut the hash browns.

“This is delicious,” Shane murmured.

“Yes. Very good,” Ilya agreed.

They talked about the food for a bit, finishing their apps, and then talked about entrées.

Their server cleared their plates and took their orders, refilling wine glasses.

“You set the bar extremely high,” Shane murmured after a sip of wine. “Just... so you’re aware.”

Ilya smiled crookedly at Shane, actually quite pleased to hear that he had apparently ruined Shane Hollander for anyone else. Which was fair. Ilya felt ruined by Shane, too.

“Oh yes?”

“Mhm. The guys I was with were great but...” Shane looked at his wine glass as he slowly swirled the wine. “They weren’t you.”

He looked up at Ilya then, vulnerable and open, and that look went straight to Ilya’s heart and cock.

“Shane... we are in public,” Ilya teased and Shane’s face went red again.

Ilya laughed. He was so fucking adorable it was almost too much. Ilya reached out a hand, taking Shane’s in his, rubbing his thumb over Shane’s knuckles.

“There were other hookups,” Ilya said softly. “But no relationships. I just stopped seeing people altogether.”

“You did?”

“Yes.”

Shane’s brows furrowed again and he looked at Ilya with a stricken expression.

“Ilya...”

“Is okay. My choice. I needed to work on myself and...” he shrugged. “I thought about you all the time...”

Shane smiled a little, eyes glimmering in the low light of the restaurant. “I thought about you all the time, too.” He blinked, shaking his head. “I’m sorry it took so long.”

“Me, too, but, we are here now.”

“Yeah.” Shane squeezed his hand. “We are.”

Ilya had always wondered if Shane had thought about him the way he thought about Shane. In his darker moments he hoped that memories of Ilya caused Shane pain much in the same way Ilya was in pain.

As time had gone on, the feeling was more wistful, bittersweet.

Do you think about me the way I think about you?

Having it confirmed was both wonderful and terrible.

Wonderful because Shane had been thinking of him, worrying, yearning, and terrible because those were painful things to feel when you thought of someone.

Fifteen years was a long time to be holding all of that but Ilya knew that being here now was better than never getting here at all.

Their entrées arrived and they released hands.

Ilya turned the conversation to lighter topics. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate Shane being open and he wanted to do his best to be open, too, but it was nice to settle into lighter discussion, particularly hockey talk, which always got Shane going.

But Ilya liked listening to Shane's thoughts. Sometimes Ilya would play devil's advocate, being contrary just to work Shane up. He'd missed being able to do that. He loved teasing Shane.

Shane would eventually catch on, telling Ilya to fuck off, and they would giggle like they were teenagers on a first date.

It felt that way though and Ilya wondered if this was what it was like to *really* feel in love. He had desire for Shane, his heart aching with longing for him, but this was the good bit. The part where you knew that the person you were with felt the same and everything was new and exciting.

Ilya wanted to enjoy this, just to luxuriate in how good it felt, but he was thinking, too, how nice would it be to have *years* under their belt. To know one another more completely, to settle into the security and comfort of a long term relationship.

Apparently they'd been carrying torches for one another for fifteen years. Who was to say they wouldn't still feel this way in thirty, forty, fifty years?

Well, maybe not fifty, but forty-five might not be so bad...

Their entrées were cleared away and Ilya poured the rest of the wine into their glasses, setting the empty bottle aside.

"I have a question," Shane said.

Ilya bowed his head slightly in acknowledgment.

"Did you stop smoking?"

Ilya laughed. "I did. Yes. A few years ago. I will have the occasional cigar but, I haven't smoked cigarettes in, hm, four years?"

"Good for you," Shane replied. "I worried about that a lot. Your health."

Ilya's heart clenched at hearing that. So earnest and sweet.

"You are too sweet," Ilya said, shaking his head, and Shane just blushed and laughed.

“I couldn’t help it!”

“You are so Canadian.”

“Shut up.”

They both laughed and their server returned with dessert.

“Compliments of the chef, gentlemen,” he said. “We’re always happy to have two hockey legends in the house. Cheers.”

“Oh thank you so much,” Shane said as the server placed the dessert down with some spoons.

The server left and Ilya waited until he was far enough away before leaning over the table. Shane leaned in, too.

“What is it?” Ilya asked.

Shane looked at the dessert, confused. “The lava cake, I think. Hold on.”

Shane slid his glasses back on, picking up the menu, and Ilya couldn’t help but smile. He looked *really good* in the glasses. They suited his face and there was something about them that just made Shane look *extra* sexy.

“Yeah. It’s the lava cake.”

Shane went to take his glasses off and Ilya reached out to touch his arm.

“Leave them on.”

Shane blinked at him and then smiled. “Yeah?”

“Yes.”

“Alright then.”

He chuckled and Ilya smiled at him, passing him a spoon.

They cut into the cake, warm liquid chocolate oozing out. They ate the gooey dessert and accompanying strawberry slices.

It was delicious and extremely decadent.

“I would eat that again,” Ilya said.

“I don’t usually love dessert but that was very good.”

Their server brought the check and Shane stole it, keeping it out of Ilya’s reach, going so far as to smack the billfold against Ilya’s hand.

“No. I’m paying.”

Ilya made a face, eyes narrowed. "Fine."

Shane slid his card into the billfold and Ilya leaned back in his seat. He kicked lightly at Shane's shin under the table.

"Can I help you?" he asked, sounding exasperated, but smiling.

"What are you doing after this?"

"Nothing," Shane replied. "Probably going to bed."

Ilya loved that answer. So innocent and pure. There were a lot of things that had changed about Shane as they'd gotten older but a lot that had stayed the same.

"So boring, Hollander."

"Please," Shane huffed, rolling his eyes.

"Come back to my place." Ilya said it casually, flirtatiously, but with enough room for Shane to decline. They were already having sex, that much was clear, but if Shane decided to slow things down for them to just date, properly, then Ilya was okay with that.

He didn't mind taking Shane's lead.

"Yeah?" Shane asked, cheeks going pink.

"If you want to. Open invitation."

Shane smiled. "I think I'd like that."

The check was brought back and Shane grabbed his card, signing the receipt, and adding cash tip.

"Ready?"

Ilya nodded.

They left the table together and while they'd obviously been noticed, Ilya found himself feeling calm about it. Shane didn't seem bothered.

They hadn't discussed it.

Fifteen years ago neither of them would have been caught dead anywhere in public in anyway that suggested they might be in some sort of romantic tryst with a man.

But now... they were both out.

It was possible no one would think anything of their dinner. Or maybe someone had noticed them holding hands and smiling and flirting.

But the only strike against them was that they worked together and Ilya wasn't sure that mattered all that much at the current moment.

They got their coats and Ilya called them a car. It was snowing much harder now and starting to stick.

They waited at the curb, snowflakes catching in Shane's dark hair, and he looked perfect.

They got into the car once it arrived and Ilya was pleasantly surprised when Shane took his hand and held it in both of this.

"Are you okay?" Ilya asked. "Being noticed and..."

Shane looked at him, the street lights passing by casting weird shadows on his face. He smiled a little and kissed the back of Ilya's hand.

"I'm tired of hiding," he murmured.

Ilya nodded. "You're very brave."

Shane laughed softly. "So are you."

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Back at Ilya's place

They got to Ilya's building and he paid for the ride, both of them getting out of the car. Ilya offered his arm as Shane came up to the curb and he accepted it, sliding it through Ilya's.

"I would have opened the door for you, too," Ilya said.

"So gentlemanly."

"I can be."

Shane chuckled and Ilya got them into the building, then they headed up to his condo.

"Anya will be happy to see you."

"I'll be happy to see her. Does she have to go out?"

"Just once more."

"Okay."

"Won't take long."

Shane smiled, leaning into Ilya. "Take your time."

Ilya could feel the buzz of anticipation between them, the knowledge of what they were going to do in Ilya's condo tugging at the tension between them.

But things were more tempered.

Ilya could remember not being able to help himself when he was around Shane, feeling so desperate for him. Hungry.

And he wouldn't say that that had disappeared but it was like a low banking fire that could maintain itself, before something caused it to catch and burn brighter, hotter.

They walked to Ilya's apartment, both of them looking at each other at the sound of excited paws on the other side of the door, accompanied by whining.

"Aww," Shane laughed.

Ilya opened the door and Anya was nothing but a wiggling ball of fur.

“Yes, yes. I know, I know. I’m sorry I was gone for so long. But I brought Shane.”

“Hi Anya!”

After giving Ilya his usual greeting, Anya’s excitement turned up to an eleven at realizing that Shane was here, too.

She whined and yipped, pawing at him, desperate for his attention.

“Anya! Control yourself!” Ilya admonished, though he was laughing.

“She’s fine, it’s okay,” Shane laughed, on the floor with her, still in his jacket and shoes, rubbing her belly, though he dodged her attempts to lick his face.

“This is undignified,” Ilya said, hands on his hips, shaking his head.

Anya did not care in the least.

Ilya let her have a few more minutes before he told her it was time to go outside, which was what Anya loved only slightly more than belly rubs (and Shane, apparently).

“Make yourself at home,” he said to Shane, turning on the lights in the kitchen for him. “Help yourself. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay. No rush.”

Ilya left with Anya on her leash, catching a glimpse of Shane toeing off his shoes, before the door closed.

Anya was very speedy with doing her business, thank god, because Ilya was very eager to get back to the beautiful man who was currently in his condo waiting for him.

They got back into the apartment and Ilya took off Anya’s harness, collar, and leash, hanging them up. She went to find Shane as Ilya took off his shoes and hung up his coat.

He paused, observing Shane’s shoes and coat next to his and it made Ilya all squirmy inside.

He went into the condo, finding Shane in the living room, sitting cross legged on the floor with the dog. It was surreal, seeing Shane here, looking like he belonged. It made Ilya’s heart race.

“I am being cock blocked by my own dog,” he huffed and Shane laughed.

“Nah,” Shane chuckled. “I think she fully supports you.”

“Oh really?” Ilya arched a brow and pointed his hand at the dog, who had all four paws in the air, tongue lolling out of her mouth, as Shane gave her belly rubs. “This is what I get for spoiling her...”

“Sorry, Anya,” Shane said. “ But I *am* here to see your dad...”

Shane got to his feet, taking a few steps closer to Ilya. Ilya chuckled, watching him, looking down at him as Shane stepped into his personal space.

“Mm, I feel so special.”

“You are.”

“When did you get so charming, Shane Hollander?”

“I’ve always been charming.”

Ilya shook his head. “No.”

“Fuck off, Rozanov,” Shane huffed and Ilya smiled, cupping Shane’s face in his hands, and kissed him deeply.

Shane kissed him back, humming softly, wrapping his arms around Ilya’s shoulders, one hand resting at the back of his neck.

Ilya loved kissing Shane. He always had. He loved the softness of his lips, the warmth of his mouth, the way he surrendered.

Ilya allowed a hand to trail down Shane’s spine, to his ass, squeezing appreciatively, and making Shane sigh.

They parted for a moment to breathe, Shane’s face tucked against Ilya’s neck, breath warm on Ilya’s skin. He kissed him there and Ilya held him for a moment, hands sliding along his waist and back, enjoying the softness of his sweater.

He took Shane’s hand after a moment, kissing him once, before leading him to the bedroom, pausing every so often to push him against a wall and kiss him some more, feeling him up.

He liked that Shane was just as handsy, trying to touch Ilya everywhere. Shirts were rucked up, hands eager to slide against skin.

They reached the bedroom and Ilya flipped on the lights, turning them down so the space was a little more moody.

He had one arm wrapped around Shane, a hand on his lower back, and he kissed his cheek, his ear, nipping at the lobe.

“What do you want?” he asked, holding Shane’s chin between his thumb and forefinger, brushing his thumb over Shane’s red, kiss-swollen mouth.

Shane sighed, closing his eyes for a moment, long lashes laying against his flushed cheeks.

“I want to suck you,” he said, looking at Ilya. “I want you to fuck me.”

“Mm. Yes,” Ilya rumbled in reply, holding Shane’s face and kissing him roughly.

Shane let out a little whine, pressing himself as close as possible, hands finding their way under Ilya’s quarter zip and Henley again, touching skin.

They peeled off each other’s clothes, letting them fall haphazardly to the floor, and Shane went right to his knees, kissing and kitten-licking Ilya’s dick.

Ilya hummed in approval, sliding his hands into Shane’s hair, just to hold him, and see his face better.

Shane made soft little noises, hands stroking over Ilya’s thighs, one hand going to his balls.

“Fuck, Shane…”

Shane sighed, sucking the head of Ilya’s cock into his mouth for a few moments, licking and sucking just underneath it, before taking Ilya down.

He let out a soft gasp, unable to look away. He rested one hand on Shane’s cheek as he sucked, stroking his thumb along a cheekbone.

“Yes, like that.”

Shane hummed around Ilya in response, the vibration making him pant.

It wasn’t the first time Shane had been on his knees for Ilya with Ilya’s dick in his mouth but it was still hot as hell.

Ilya used to think about those blowjobs, fantasizing. He’d jerked off to those memories more times than he was willing to admit but the real deal was so much fucking better.

And Shane had gotten really fucking good at sucking dick.

Ilya didn’t need to ask him to stop, Shane sliding off of him after some very indulgent minutes. His lips were red and slick, his eyes dark with desire, and Ilya pulled him to his feet, kissing him messily.

They fell into bed together and Ilya grabbed the lube and a condom, before leaning over Shane to kiss him some more, Shane’s fingers in his hair, running over his shoulders, down his chest, and then around to his ass.

They didn’t dally though.

Ilya sat back, slicking his fingers, and Shane spread his legs eagerly. The sight was mindbogglingly sexy.

“Such a slut for it,” Ilya hummed and Shane bit his lip.

Ilya filed that away for later, smiling. He rubbed a finger against Shane’s rim in slow, soothing circles, watching Shane settle a bit.

“We can go slow,” Ilya said, turning his eyes up to watch Shane.

Shane nodded. “Okay.”

Ilya hummed, kissing one of Shane’s knees, before sucking the head of Shane’s dick into his mouth, sliding a finger into him. He recalled that Shane had liked this when they’d first slept together.

He finger fucked in time with his mouth over Shane’s cock, wanting him to feel the most, fingers twisting, curling, and gently stretching apart.

Shane seemed to be losing it as Ilya added a third finger, whining and panting, fingers sliding into Ilya’s hair, fisting his curls, his other hand tangled in the sheets.

“Jesus Christ, Rozanov. Are you gonna fuck me or keep torturing me?”

Ilya pulled off of Shane very slowly, letting him slide from his lips, giving the damp tip a kiss.

“What? You don’t like it?”

“For fuck’s sake. *Of course* I like it.”

Ilya chuckled.

“You’re such an asshole.”

“Mm, but you like it,” Ilya cooed, kissing along Shane’s groin, to the inside of one thigh, nipping the sensitive skin. “You are ready for me?”

“Yeah. Been ready. C’mom.”

“Brat,” Ilya huffed and bit Shane’s inner thigh.

“Ow! Fucker.”

Ilya snickered, kissing and licking over the bite, before removing his fingers, and grabbing the condom. He slid it on, adding lube, and shifted closer to Shane. Shane shifted his legs and Ilya pressed against him, sliding into him, careful and controlled.

Shane was so hot and tight around him and he watched his face, eyelids fluttering closed, mouth falling open. He had his hands wrapped around Ilya, fingers digging into his back.

“Okay?” Ilya asked once he was all the way in. He caressed a hand over one of Shane’s ass cheeks.

Shane nodded. “Yeah. Perfect.”

Ilya hummed, nuzzling Shane’s cheek, kissing the corner of his mouth. He pulled out and pressed back in, listening to the noises Shane made, wanting to be sure that he was enjoying

himself.

“Holy shit. Yes. Right there. Like that.”

Ilya fucked Shane harder, picking up the pace just a bit, and Shane moaned, one hand fisting into Ilya’s curls, the other resting against his neck, brushing his cheek.

Ilya leaned over him, their faces brushing. “You feel so good, Shane.”

Shane moaned softly, biting his lip. “You, too. Love how you feel inside me. Dreamed about it.”

Ilya couldn’t help but moan at hearing that. Knowing that Shane had dreamt about him... like he’d been dreaming about Shane.

“Yes. Me, too.”

“Really?” Shane panted.

Ilya nodded, brushing his mouth against Shane’s. “Yes. All the time.”

The words were just spilling out of him, the filter between his brain and his mouth completely off-line because he was just so lost in Shane, wanting him to have everything he wanted, to make him feel so good.

Shane rested his hand against Ilya’s cheek, pulling him down for messy, desperate kisses.

“I missed you,” Shane panted. “I missed this.”

“I missed you, too. And this,” Ilya replied, voice surprisingly tight.

“Don’t stop,” Shane breathed and Ilya didn’t intend to.

He kept going, fucking Shane in that steady rhythm, loving the noises that he made, the way he looked, as if he’d never felt anything so good.

He eventually reached down between them, wrapping a hand around himself, and Ilya sped up.

“Yes, Shane. Fuck. Let me see.”

Shane moaned, stroking himself hard and fast, eyes open and locked onto Ilya’s.

“Oh fuck, Ilya. I’m so close. I’m so— oh shit, yes, ah—!”

Ilya watched Shane’s eyes roll back, body arched as he came hard all over his hand, getting come on his chest, his body clenching around Ilya so perfectly. Ilya fucked him through his orgasm, emptying himself into Shane just a moment later.

They were both breathing hard, foreheads pressed together, noses brushing.

Shane hummed, smoothing his hands over Ilya's back, rubbing their faces together, which made Ilya smile.

"God, that was so good."

"Mm. Yes."

"I'm so glad we're still really good at sex."

Ilya laughed, kissing the corner of Shane's mouth. "Yes. Me, too."

He pulled out of Shane's carefully, going to the bathroom to clean up, and came back, wiping Shane down carefully, kissing him.

They stretched out side by side and Shane rolled onto his side, curling into Ilya's space. Ilya was happy to hold him, playing with Shane's hair, pressing kisses against his scalp.

Eventually Shane leaned away so they could look at each other.

"You have a beautiful home," he said, reaching up to brush some of Ilya's curls back from his forehead, swiping a thumb over Ilya's cheekbone.

"Thank you. Svetlana helped."

Shane smiled wanly, which amused Ilya. "She has good taste."

"Yes. Much better than mine. Cheaper than hiring a designer."

"Fair enough." Shane fiddled with Ilya's chain. "Was it difficult? Moving?"

"Not really. I had a lot of help. I miss Boston but Ottawa is not bad. A little boring. Is your hometown so, I understand you better now."

"Shut up." Shane rolled his eyes and Ilya laughed.

"Are you happy to be back?" Ilya asked.

Shane considered the question. "I think so. I was in Montreal for so long that it became home but I'm from here. My parents are still here. It's familiar and comfortable."

Ilya watched as Shane chewed on his lip, considering something.

"I moved to my cottage for a while. I think I was there maybe, like, six months, and I was losing my mind. I felt so stir crazy. I talked to my agent about other opportunities and the coaching position came up. She told me you would be the head coach and I knew that I had to take the job. It was my chance to see you and talk and... maybe get a second chance..."

Ilya smiled small, heart fluttering at hearing the words, knowing that Shane had taken the job because of *him*, because he had been *thinking* and *planning*.

Ilya wasn't sure that anyone had ever put that much effort into him before. Not where love was concerned, anyway.

"I don't think I fully realized until I was at the cottage how lonely I was. I'd always missed you and thought about what it would be like to try again, with both of us out. And it sort of felt like the stars had aligned, you know?"

"Yes."

"I really am sorry it took so long."

"Is okay." And Ilya meant it with his whole heart.

He leaned in and kissed Shane's forehead, letting Shane snuggle close. They stayed like that for a little while, just breathing together, before Shane pushed Ilya onto his back.

"Can I just like... look at you?" he asked.

Ilya tilted his head curiously on the pillow and smiled. He put his arms behind his head, placing himself on display.

"Of course."

Shane laughed, blushing, and leaned back, sitting on his heels in between Ilya's legs. Ilya didn't mind being naked and on display and he watched curiously as Shane's eyes looked him all over, as if cataloging, perhaps what he had once known of Ilya, with updated information.

Ilya didn't mind having aged. He was in good shape, a little softer than he used to be, but still strong. If anything, the silver in his hair made him self-conscious, but he seemed to be the only one who cared. Everyone else thought it made him look distinguished.

Shane's fingertips followed his eyes, sliding over Ilya's skin very gently, touching certain spots that tickled, or made Ilya's skin goose bump.

Occasionally, Shane would lean in to kiss over a random scar, or just a spot that he seemed particularly enamored by, like the curve of Ilya's bicep, and his wrist.

"Did you get hip surgery?" Shane asked, fingers brushing very lightly over the laparoscopy scars on his right hip.

"Yes," Ilya replied.

Shane looked at his other hip.

"Double hip arthroscopy and labral repair?" he asked.

"Yes." Ilya's brows furrowed. That was a weirdly specific thing to know, even for Shane. Shane chuckled, taking Ilya's hand, and resting it on his own hip. Ilya was confused for a second, until he felt the slightly raised line of a scar.

“You, too?”

“Same surgery.”

They both laughed and Ilya pulled Shane to him, kissing him.

“I am not surprised,” Ilya murmured.

“I’m not either,” Shane chuckled. “It’s just funny.”

“We always had a lot in common...”

“That’s true. And even now that we’re old.”

Their hockey careers and stats had been so similar for so long, even the trajectory of their careers. They had always been different people but their status and experience as players had been wholly theirs, no one else could really ever understand it.

It had always been them at the top. Together.

That had always been the thread that had tied them together. But even beyond that... they had always made each other laugh.

Now, as older adults, there was more to talk about, more life experience. They had settled more into themselves and that made it easier to see that they were actually quite compatible.

They had enough in common to build that rapport and trust, but enough difference that things weren’t boring.

They were complementary.

"Speak for yourself. I am not old."

Shane chuckled.

“Is it weird that I like learning all this new stuff about you?” he asked.

“No,” Ilya replied, shaking his head. “Is nice.”

“It is.”

Ilya smoothed a tender thumb over Shane’s cheek, then his shoulder. “I love all of your freckles.”

Shane laughed, blushing. “Thanks. Yeah, there are more of them now.”

“Very pretty,” Ilya murmured.

"You really like my freckles?"

"Yes. Always. They are stunning."

Shane blushed deeper. "Really? You think so? I've always hated them..."

"No! They are gorgeous."

Ilya sat up a bit, kissing Shane's cheek, and rolled him onto his back.

"Oh, is it my turn?" Shane laughed.

Ilya just nodded.

He found the scars on both of Shane's hips, nearly identical to Ilya's own, though perhaps a bit fresher? It seemed likely that Shane had gotten the surgery more recently.

"You still do yoga?" Ilya asked, pressing a kiss to Shane's hip, and along some of Shane's stretchmarks on his thigh.

"Mm. Every day. It helps a lot."

Ilya lifted one of Shane's legs, bending it back astonishingly far and Shane laughed. "Hey!"

"Not bad for an old man."

"Fuck off."

Ilya chuckled, kissing Shane's ankle, and settled his leg down.

"You are still the same," Ilya sighed.

"I don't know about that," Shane replied dubiously.

Ilya made a face that suggested his disagreement, shaking his head. Shane was in excellent shape. He had deeper crow's feet and laugh lines, he was a bit softer, like Ilya was, and Ilya had noticed a sprinkling of gray in his dark hair.

The days of six-pack abs were behind them, but that didn't mean Shane was any less beautiful or fit.

Ilya could spend the whole day admiring him.

He leaned over to blow a raspberry on Shane's not-so-firm stomach, just because he could, and Shane burst out laughing.

"What the hell?!"

Ilya shrugged. "I wanted to."

"Weirdo."

"Turn around. Let me do it on your ass."

"No!"

“Come on, Hollander. You are no fun.”

They tussled for a bit, laughing, until Shane had just wrapped himself around Ilya like a koala.

“This is fine, I guess,” Ilya sighed and Shane laughed some more, pressing kisses to his cheek.

Ilya turned his head to look at him and Shane yawned.

“Oh god. I’m sorry.”

Ilya laughed. “Is okay.”

They disentangled themselves, Shane sitting up, Ilya reclining on his side.

“Would you like to stay?” Ilya asked, hoping Shane would say yes.

Shane looked at him, soft and sweet and shy.

“Is that okay?”

“Of course,” Ilya replied, holding out an arm, and Shane nestled against him.

“Yeah. I'd like that,” he hummed.

Ilya’s heart wobbled in his chest and he held Shane closer. “So would I.”

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Shane has dinner with his parents

A week later

Shane laughed softly against Ilya's mouth, laying half on top of him, kissing him just to kiss him.

They both needed to get up and ready to start their day. They had an afternoon game they needed to be preparing for, but Ilya had his arms around Shane, seemingly unwilling to let him go.

"We should get up," Shane murmured.

"Should we?" Ilya asked, kissing Shane's bottom lip.

Shane chuckled, pushing his hands on Ilya's chest to get a little distance.

"We have a schedule to keep."

Ilya huffed and rolled his eyes. "Party pooper."

Shane wrinkled his nose at him and they both laughed. Shane obliged Ilya with a few more quick kisses, managing to extricate himself from Ilya's arms and his (extremely comfortable) bed.

Ilya took his hand and Shane smiled at him, laughing softly, slowly pulling away, Ilya's fingers slipping from his, as Shane made his way to the bathroom.

Ilya whistled and Shane rested his hand on the bathroom doorframe, looking over his shoulder.

Ilya was lounging casually, head propped up on his arm, still half covered by his comforter.

"Stop," Shane laughed, not truly meaning it. It felt nice to be admired, for Ilya to think he was sexy, and make sure that Shane knew it.

He stepped into the bathroom, closing the door. He could hear Ilya chuckling in bed, singing something, but Shane didn't catch it.

He felt a little like he was in a fantasy.

Seeing Ilya all the time. Having sex. Being *romantic*. *In love*.

It seemed that all they had needed was permission from one another to tumble headfirst into... whatever this was. It wasn't hooking up and they loved each other, but it wasn't quite yet a relationship.

Shane worried that maybe they were moving too fast, that they needed to slow down, and figure things out.

They were talking a lot, which was a good thing, slowly unraveling the past fifteen years between them.

At the end of the day, Shane just wanted to be the best partner for Ilya that he could be. He wanted to make up for all those past hurts and hope that Ilya could truly forgive him. He wanted a future with him and it seemed that Ilya wanted that, too.

He understood it would take time. The sex part was easy, but everything else? That would take work, and Shane was wholly committed to it.

Once he was finished in the bathroom, he came back out, gathering his clothes. Ilya was watching him, Shane could feel his eyes on him. He glanced up, fixing his shirt, and Ilya patted the spot next to him.

Shane huffed a laugh and moved closer, sitting on the edge of the bed. He rested a hand on Ilya's chest, brushing his fingers against Ilya's chain, and into his chest hair. His skin was warm and Shane could feel his heart beating.

"Stay," Ilya hummed.

"Can't," Shane sighed but he loved that Ilya was asking. "I don't have clothes here and we have an early game." He kissed Ilya's mouth lightly. "And I'm seeing my parents for dinner tonight. They'll be at the game."

Ilya sighed. "Fine, fine. So busy."

Shane chuckled and kissed Ilya again. Ilya took advantage of this, pulling Shane against him, and then flipped their positions so Ilya was on top of him.

"You are sure you can't stay? Wear one of my suits."

Shane grinned and laughed. "They won't fit me!"

Ilya chuckled, too, eyes crinkling as he smiled, and god, he was the most beautiful thing Shane had ever seen.

They kissed some more before Ilya finally relented and let Shane go, following him out of bed.

"I'll see you at the arena," he said. "And I'll text you tonight."

“Okay.”

Shane put his socks on while Ilya slid into his underwear, t-shirt, and sweatpants.

They left the bedroom together, greeted by an excited Anya. Ilya was going to take her out, grabbing her booties.

It had snowed the night before.

“I’ll see you soon,” Shane said at the door, Ilya holding it open, Shane half-way out.

Ilya nodded. “Yes.”

They kissed goodbye, Shane rubbing their noses briefly before he stepped out into the hall. He caught Ilya smiling and it made him smile, too.

“Bye,” he said.

“Bye.”

Shane walked back to his place, trudging through the snow and the cold, but he barely felt it, still all warm from that parting kiss.

Back at home, he made breakfast and coffee, showered, and changed, allowing himself enough time to decompress for a bit before he had to get his parents and bring them to the game.

Shane knew that his parents were excited to have him so close again. Not that Ottawa was particularly far from Montreal but twenty minutes was literally no time at all compared to two hours.

His parents, his mom in particular, had loved that he had played for the team she had adored her whole life.

And now his dad got to feel the same way, since Shane was now coaching for his favorite team.

Growing up in a household with an Ottawa fan and a Montreal fan had been interesting but Shane had always loved Ottawa, and he remembered going to games with his dad and really having fun.

They’d been a decent team when Shane had been a kid so it was nice to be part of the effort to bring them back to their former glory.

Shane was home for about two hours before he had to get his parents.

He picked them up, listening to his mom as she chattered away, dad sitting more quietly in the backseat.

Shane glanced in the rearview mirror to peek at his dad.

“You okay, Pop?” he asked.

Dad glanced up and nodded. “Yeah. I’m fine.”

Shane nodded, watching his dad for a moment longer. He didn’t *seem* off. He seemed perfectly fine, maybe just a little more quiet.

“I know your mother has a lot of opinions about the team but I think you’re doing great,” Dad continued, winking at Shane, and Shane laughed, while Mom protested.

Dad laughed, too.

“I did not say that he was doing a bad job! They’re doing *fine*!”

“Just fine? Jeez, Ma.”

“Oh hush, both of you!”

They got to the arena and Shane made sure that his parents were all settled.

They had made easy friends with a bunch of the SAPs, which was nice, chatting with them.

“I’m gonna head out. I’ll see you guys after the game, okay?” Shane said to his parents.

“Of course, honey! Good luck!”

Shane hugged both of them goodbye and went off to find his fellow coaches.

Despite standing impossibly close to Ilya behind the bench, Shane wasn’t all that distracted.

They were always very aware of each other, having an almost preternatural way of knowing when and how to communicate to one another.

And that just seemed heightened now. Shane had been so aware of Ilya before, not wanting to make any wrong moves, feeling so tense and unsure about things between them, but that worry had lessened, replaced with a knowing.

He wasn’t sure how to explain it but he just felt like they were really in sync.

Everyone was.

All the coaches and staff. The guys. They were playing so much better in just three months and Shane was so proud of them.

They were able to hold the game steady at 1-1 through the second period but a bullshit penalty on one of the Cens threw a wrench into things.

Shane watched as Ilya fought with the refs about the penalty and it was something to behold.

Ilya was an even-keeled person, overall. Shane had seen him get into fights earlier in their careers. He had fought less as they'd gotten older but no one wanted to pick a fight with him at that point.

Having to fight the Bears' Captain usually meant getting your ass handed to you.

As a coach, Ilya was very much a pillar of calm, but he could be a terror when it came to bad calls.

Shane had never known Ilya as Captain. He knew it, as a general fact, but he had never had any idea how Ilya was in the locker room.

He'd heard teammates talk about him, saying that they liked Ilya's style, that he always brought great energy, but in the few years leading up to his retirement, Shane remembered noticing that guys were... concerned.

No one ever spoke disparagingly about Ilya. He was a playful asshole, the guy everyone loved to hate, but he was respected. When people noticed how he'd changed, it came with a level of concern.

Not that anyone did anything about it but Shane remembered hearing those rumblings.

He felt like he was seeing glimpses of what Ilya's Captaincy had been like before all of that.

Shane still didn't know much about what had been happening with Ilya at the time, wanting to reach out, but also too scared and uncertain given how things had been between them. A gulf too big to traverse.

But maybe Ilya would tell him. Fill in the gaps.

Until then, he would just sit back and enjoy Ilya's performance.

Shane was impressed, watching Ilya fight over the penalty, only to be denied by the official. He came back behind the bench, muttering in frustrated Russian.

"Can't win 'em all," Shane said to him. "It's good you fought for it."

Ilya shook his head, taking a deep breath and letting it out hard through his nose. "Is bullshit and they know it."

"When have the officials ever not done some bullshit?"

Ilya snorted. "Fair enough, Hollander."

Shane smiled and bumped Ilya playfully.

With Vegas on the power play, they scored, placing the score at 2-1, which was still better than Shane had anticipated.

In the end, the Cens lost the game, which was a bummer, but they had fought really hard.

The bullshit call certainly hadn't helped and Vegas didn't always play fair.

"Maybe we report them," Shane said during debrief with the other coaches.

"How?" Bood asked. "They technically follow the rules."

"It's just slimy."

Everyone made a noise of agreement.

"Yes. But we can only do so much. We will work on tightening things up. Win next time. Something to work toward," Ilya said.

They chatted a bit more about the game and then everyone parted ways. Shane lingered, waiting for Ilya.

Ilya took notice. He smiled, resting a hand on Shane's lower back. The touch made Shane all warm inside.

"Have fun with your parents," he said.

"Thanks," Shane replied.

Ilya glanced around, as if looking to make sure they were alone, before stealing a kiss. Shane's cheeks went hot and he was filled with pleasant surprise.

"Have a good night," Ilya said, stepping away.

"You, too," Shane replied, dreaminess in his voice. He watched Ilya leave, smiling his sexy, crooked smile, and giving Shane a wave, before he disappeared.

Shane touched his mouth, still tingling from the kiss, and suppressed a giggle.

He took a moment to compose himself and then went out to find his parents.

Shane drove his parents home, parking his car in the driveway, and followed his parents into the house.

He felt like a kid again, coming home from practice.

He took off his shoes at the door, hanging up his coat, gloves and hat shoved into the pockets.

"Make yourself comfortable," Mom said and Shane smiled at her, taking off his suit jacket and tie, draping them over the back of the couch in the living room.

He went into the kitchen, grabbing a ginger ale from the fridge.

"Shane, would you mind grabbing the casserole dish in there?" Dad asked.

"No problem." Shane set down his soda and took out the dish, passing it to his dad.

"Need help?"

"Nope. This is just gonna go into the oven to heat up and I'm gonna make a side salad. You want any wine, kiddo?"

"Okay," Shane smiled, picking up his ginger ale, and sat at the kitchen table. "I'm good, thanks."

Growing up, his parents had alternated who cooked. Both of his parents had worked for the government and Shane remembered them commuting to and from work together, which he had kind of always loved.

His parents had met at McGill, during their sophomore year.

Mom had been the student manager for the hockey team and Dad had been a player.

Shane had always loved his parents' love story.

He'd always kind of fantasized, as a kid, that maybe he'd meet someone that way, through hockey. It had been vague, like maybe they'd work in communications or were a physical therapist or something.

He hadn't ever thought it would be a fellow player... until it was.

He was much more comfortable with his sexuality now than he had ever been, though sometimes he felt like he didn't quite fit in.

It had always kind of been that way, straddling two worlds, never really belonging in either of them.

It was one of the things that had been helpful about Scott Hunter's Queer Coalition. Being able to connect with and relate to other hockey players who were queer. It made him feel less alone, less weird.

He felt like he belonged.

It had been a long time since he had felt that way.

"The boys are doing so much better, honey," Mom said, breaking Shane from his thoughts.

"Hm? Oh yeah. They are. We're really proud of how far they've come."

"It's a shame that Vegas is, well, Vegas."

Shane chuckled. "Yeah. I know."

"So," Mom said, joining him at the table with a glass of Chablis. "How's everything going?"

"With the team?" Shane asked.

“With Ilya,” Mom clarified.

“Oh. Uh. Good. Great. We, uh, we obviously get to see each other a lot so, it’s been good, I think. Busy.”

Mom nodded, her dark eyes trained on him. “I can imagine. That’s good though. Things feel... okay?”

“Yeah. I mean, it’s early. It’s only been a few weeks so, I don’t know. Anything could happen but, it’s nice.”

“Are you happy?”

Shane huffed out a soft laugh. “I am.”

“Then that’s all that matters.”

Shane smiled a little.

“We’ll see how things go. It’s going to require some navigating and stuff but, it’s been good so far.”

“When do we get to meet him?” Dad asked and Shane laughed.

“Maybe soon? We’re trying not to rush. I don’t want Ilya to feel pressured. It’s been a long time and we’re just figuring things out right now...”

“Of course! Take your time! You let us know when things feel right. We would love to meet him whenever you two are ready,” Mom assured.

“I know. We just want to ease into things, I guess. There’s a lot to heal there, I think. I want to show up for him.”

Which was all true. Things were complicated. It was easy being with Ilya, truly, but their history wasn’t the smoothest, and Shane knew that there was more to be navigated. He didn’t want to rush them into something and then it imploding on them again.

They both needed stability.

“Oh, sweetheart. I know. It’s okay. Take as much time as you need.”

Shane relaxed and smiled. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Of course. And I just hope the two of you are being safe while you figure all of this out.”

"Mom!"

"What?! I'm just reminding you to be careful!"

"I'm forty! And of course I'm careful. Jesus." Shane could feel his whole face going hot with mortification.

"Well..." Dad said to try and break the awkwardness. "You two seem to get along well behind the bench."

Shane ran his hand through his hair, shooting his dad a grateful look. "We do, yeah. I think we're very aligned. Different styles but we have the same end goal. And all the guys are great."

"I want to know more about Haas. He's always been one to keep an eye on," Mom hummed, sipping her wine.

Shane laughed. His mom loved talking shop and Shane was happy to oblige. Dad was content to listen and offer his occasional two cents.

It was a pretty normal Hollander family dinner.

They talked about the team and the players and what Shane was seeing behind the scenes. It was nice to be with a team so open and the locker room Ilya was cultivating was healing.

Eventually Shane got up to help his dad with dinner and they all sat at the kitchen table, eating and catching up.

Shane loved his parents. He felt lucky to be so close to them, to have their support, and he wanted Ilya to meet them.

He wanted Ilya to be a part of his family.

After dinner, Shane helped his mom wash dishes.

"What do you like about him?" Mom asked.

"Who?"

"Ilya." She bumped her hip against his and they both laughed.

"Oh. Well..."

"Besides the fact that he's very handsome."

"Mom!"

"What?! I'm not blind!"

Shane laughed, his face going hot. "Yes. He's handsome. But I mean... he's smart. Charming. He's extremely funny. He's an incredible hockey player. An amazing coach. He's like... the whole package..."

Mom smiled. "He seems like a great guy. I know he kind of always seemed like an asshole when you two were still playing but..."

“It was mostly an act,” Shane replied. “Ilya’s really sweet. I think maybe even kind of... sensitive? We’re still learning each other, you know?”

“Of course. And that’s good. You should both take that time. It’s important.”

Shane nodded. “Yeah.”

“Your father and I are excited to meet him whenever the time is right.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Anytime. We’re so proud of you.”

“I know.”

Mom rested her head on Shane’s shoulder and he rested his on top of hers. He remembered when it was the opposite, but he’d been taller than her for a long time now.

“Hey. What am I? Chopped liver?”

Shane and his mom turned, both of them laughing as Dad wrapped his arms around them, kissing their temples.

Shane smiled, grateful to be surrounded by so much love and care.

He finished with his mom in the kitchen, then started getting ready to head home. He hugged his parents goodbye, letting them know he’d text them when he got back.

He thanked them for coming to the game and promised that he would make plans to bring Ilya for dinner when they were both ready to do that.

He appreciated his parents being so enthusiastic but one thing at a time.

He and Ilya needed to figure out what they were and what they wanted together.

Then the rest could come.

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Ilya takes care of Shane

The next day

Ilya glanced at Shane out of the corner of his eye as he drove them to the arena for their game that evening.

Shane wasn't exactly a chatty guy. He was much more of a listener, though he would participate in conversation, laughing at jokes Ilya made, or whatever.

Instead he was sitting next to Ilya, anxiously fiddling with the beanie he was holding in his hands.

"Are you okay?" Ilya asked.

"Hm? What?"

"Are you okay?" he repeated. "You seem anxious."

"I'm fine."

Ilya glanced at Shane again, not buying that for a second. He turned into the parking garage, going to the usual spot he used in the lot, and parked the car.

He unbuckled his seat belt and turned to Shane, resting a hand on his arm. Shane looked at him.

"What's going on?" he asked.

They had seen one another that morning for their run and things had been fine. They hadn't talked much, sharing Ilya's airpods like they always did, Shane asking about certain songs and the artists that sang them.

Ilya wasn't sure what had happened in the few hours in-between their run and now that had Shane all twisted up.

Shane shook his head. "Nothing. It's fine."

"Is not nothing, Hollander."

Shane seemed determined not to look at Ilya straight on and Ilya sighed, reaching for Shane's hands and holding them in his.

"Tell me one thing."

Shane looked at their hands. He was very still for longer than Ilya would have expected but he tried not to rush Shane along.

Finally, Shane shifted his hands in Ilya's, holding his fingers.

"I don't know," he said softly. "I just have a bad feeling. I don't know if it's about the boys or what."

He shook his head, looking at Ilya, and he could see how uncomfortable Shane was, how hard it was for him to open up like this. And he appreciated that Shane was trying. For him.

"Okay," Ilya murmured. "Well, worst case scenario, we get our asses handed to us." He shrugged a little. "That will suck but is not the first time. Probably won't be the last. We learn, we move on, yes?"

Shane smiled a little. "Yeah. I guess that's true."

"No one likes to lose. I hate losing. I know you do, too. But we are all new and growing. Will be okay."

Shane nodded. "Yeah."

"And you won't get fired."

"You don't know that!"

Ilya laughed. "Pretty sure I know that."

Shane rolled his eyes, shaking his head, and Ilya snickered.

"See? Is fine."

He reached up, touching Shane's cheek, turning his head so he would look at Ilya.

"Not so bad."

"No. Not so bad."

Ilya smiled at him. "Feel better?"

"A little."

"I will take it."

Shane smiled and laughed. "Thanks."

“Of course.”

They looked at each other, smiling, Shane’s cheeks going pink.

“Do you want to kiss me, Shane?” Ilya asked, teasing.

Shane’s pink tongue darted out to lick his lips, which Ilya took as a yes.

“Gimme kiss.”

“Ilya,” Shane huffed.

Ilya leaned over the center console to get closer, still holding Shane’s hand in his. “I know you want to.”

Shane leaned away. “No. Ilya! Stop!”

Ilya huffed. “Fine. You are no fun.”

“Someone could see us...”

“We are all the way in the corner... no one will see...”

Shane pouted for a moment and Ilya touched their noses.

“Just one...” he murmured, closing his eyes, and rubbed the tips of their noses together.

Shane huffed and Ilya was surprised to feel Shane’s lips on his own.

It was a quick, chaste kiss, but a kiss nonetheless.

He opened his eyes and smiled widely at Shane, who was all self-conscious, but he was smiling, too.

Ilya leaned in close, practically squishing Shane against the door, nuzzling and kissing at his cheek and neck, making Shane laugh.

“Stop, stop, stop!” he said, though he wasn’t trying very hard to fight back.

Ilya pulled away, grinning. They were both a little disheveled but he didn’t care. It was fixable. And Shane was smiling and all red like a tomato and absolutely adorable. Ilya wished they had an extra few hours so he could take Shane apart... but that could maybe be arranged after the game.

“We have to go,” Shane chuckled and Ilya sighed, sitting back in his seat.

“Yes, yes. Okay.”

Shane looked at him through his lashes, the look extremely flirty, and Ilya rested his arm on the center console again.

“Maybe later...?” Shane asked.

Ilya smiled, stealing one more kiss, and winked at Shane when he pulled him away.

“Yes. Absolutely. Come on.”

Things seemed a little better after that. Shane was more relaxed, more like his usual self, chatting with the team, the other coaches, the staff.

They were about twenty minutes before the game was set to start when Shane got a phone call.

Ilya watched him check the ID, brows furrowing as he looked at his screen. He answered the call right away and Ilya’s stomach dropped.

Uh oh.

“Mom?”

Ilya watched Shane walk down the hall to take the call, concerned.

“Where’s Holly going?” Max asked.

Ilya shook his head, still watching the hallway Shane had walked down. He didn’t know what was going on and he didn’t want to start rumors by accident.

“I’ll be right back,” Ilya said and went down the hall, stopping as he saw Shane coming toward him.

He looked pale. Scared.

“What happened?” Ilya asked immediately, resting his hands on Shane’s arms when he was close enough to touch.

Shane was shaking his head, looking like he was processing what he’d been told.

“My dad is in the hospital,” he said, his voice tight. “A heart attack? I don’t know, I didn’t get all the details. I—” He looked up at Ilya with tears in his eyes. He was terrified. Ilya could see it. “I have to go.”

“Yes. Let me get my keys. Take my car.”

Shane didn’t even protest. He just nodded and Ilya moved to Shane’s side, putting an arm around him as they hustled back down the way they’d come.

“I’ll take care of things. You go.”

Shane nodded and Ilya grabbed his keys, shoving them into Shane’s hands.

“Go.”

“Okay. Yeah. Okay.” Shane turned on his heel and started jogging toward the exit.

“What’s going on?” Bood asked.

“Is he okay?” that was Hazy.

Ilya watched after Shane until he disappeared, before he turned to his staff, one hand on his hip, fingers massaging his forehead.

“Shane has a family emergency, he’s out for the game.”

“Jesus... is everything okay?” Max asked.

“I don’t know.” Ilya shook his head. He checked his watch and swore in Russian. “Okay. I need all of your hands.”

No one even corrected him about that not being the right idiom, they just listened and locked in, which was exactly what he needed from them.

Ilya divvied up tasks to make things go as smoothly as he could since they had seconds before the game would start.

Max and Wyatt went to talk to the team, Bood went to tell the rest of the staff, while Ilya hunted down Abby.

It was a whirlwind of chaos but Ilya appreciated Abby’s cool head. She was able to make sure that the media was made aware of the situation and putting out a statement to respect the Hollanders’ privacy at this time.

Ilya tried to calm the team down a bit, all of them worried, but there wasn’t much that could be done. It would be something he would better address after first period.

For now, they needed to get out on the ice and play a good game.

Ilya had Bood take Shane’s place and he checked his phone, just in case Shane had texted him.

Nothing.

The first period was a little... off.

Not horrible. They managed to keep Nashville off the board and they went into intermission with no points for either team.

“Is everything okay with Coach?” Luca asked, Captain and mouthpiece for the rest of the team.

“Yes. He is fine. I don’t know all the information but his father is in the hospital.”

There were worried murmurs from all the guys and Ilya felt bad for their worry but also so appreciative of their empathy. They were an extremely supportive group and it just showed how much they adored Shane and his presence and guidance.

Things seemed to settle a bit once the guys learned all they could. Shane's absence was felt but Ilya also thought it was a good push.

Win the game for coach.

It was actually quite sweet.

Ilya didn't really have much time to worry, which was probably a good thing, though every lull during a commercial break or intermission had him thinking about Shane, seeing his fear-stricken face, his glassy eyes.

Ilya checked his phone. Still nothing.

He hoped everything was okay...

In the end, the team managed to come out the other side victorious with a 3-2 win.

The locker room was very celebratory and Ilya made sure the guys all knew how proud of them he was, how proud Shane would be of them.

But he was caught between wanting to leave the arena as soon as possible to get to Shane but not wanting to draw unwanted attention to himself.

So he waited until people started clearing out, wishing everyone a good night, not deviating from his usual routine.

He texted Shane, asking how things were, if he was okay.

He was surprised when he got a text back only a few minutes later.

Shane: things are okay. Dad is okay. Stable.

Shane: we're at Ottawa hospital

Shane: I have your keys! I'm sorry!

Shane: I think I'd like a hug...

Ilya re-read the text, his heart aching. He wanted to be there for Shane but he also didn't want to intrude. He was sure that it was a lot for everyone involved...

Fuck it.

Ilya closed out of their text exchanged and went to call a car.

Most of the game day traffic had cleared by the time Ilya was on the way to the hospital and he texted Shane.

Ilya: On my way

He arrived and went to the front desk, inquiring there about Shane and his family.

Shane must have called them ahead of time because he got the all clear and instructions on where to go.

It took Ilya almost ten minutes to get to where Shane was, in the cardiac and pulmonology wing.

Ilya stood at the door to their room, taking a breath, before knocking.

Shane answered and Ilya watched the way his face cracked.

“Shane...”

Shane was already in his arms and Ilya wrapped around him as tight as possible, holding him in the hallway.

“Thank you for coming,” Shane breathed, his voice a bit wobbly, and Ilya shushed him gently, kissing into his hair.

“Of course.”

They held onto each other for a long time, breathing together, before Shane finally pulled away, wiping at his face. He was wearing his button down, his sleeves rolled up to the elbows, his tie and jacket long discarded.

Ilya smiled softly at him. He hated seeing him upset... but he did love seeing him.

“Do you want, uh, I can get your keys...?”

“I don’t want to interrupt.”

“Dad’s sleeping and it’s just me and mom. Um, one sec...”

Ilya watched Shane peek back into the room, having a hushed conversation, before he turned back to Ilya.

“It’s okay. Come in.”

Ilya stepped into the room, staying by the door. He wasn’t often uncomfortable in social situations but this was very much out of his depth.

This was a private family concern for Shane and his parents. He didn’t want to overstep, as much as he wanted to offer Shane comfort and reassurance.

“Oh Ilya...” Yuna Hollander stood up from where she had been sitting next to the hospital bed where David Hollander was hooked up to various machines, sound asleep.

Ilya smiled politely.

“I’m sorry,” he said, about his presence, about the circumstances, about disrupting.

Mrs. Hollander smiled back at him, tired but kind. She stood by Shane while Shane rummaged through his pockets.

“It’s okay. It’s so kind of you to come and to have let Shane use your car.”

“No problem. Happy to help.”

Mrs. Hollander looked at him for a moment longer, still smiling, before she turned her attention back to her son.

“You should go home, Shane.”

“What? No, Mom. No way.”

“You have a game in two days and practice...”

“I’ll miss it. It’s fine.”

Ilya didn’t say anything, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible.

“Ilya.”

Ilya snapped to attention, looking at Mrs. Hollander.

“Yes?”

“Will you take Shane home, please? I know he’ll be able to miss work because of all of this but... he should go home.”

“Mom. Come on.”

Ilya wondered if he should leave the room, watching as mother and son quietly argued about whether or not Shane should stay or go.

Ilya very quietly snuck back out into the hall, deciding that that was better than being a relatively unwilling audience to such private affairs.

It wasn’t that he didn’t want to be present. He did. He wanted to be whatever Shane needed him to be in moments like this, but they weren’t... partners. Boyfriends. Whatever.

They were exploring and he didn’t think that he had the right to be so involved. Not yet anyway.

A few minutes later, Mrs. Hollander peered out from behind the hospital room door.

“Thank you so much for coming,” she said softly. “For taking care of Shane...”

Ilya turned toward her and nodded. “Of course.”

She looked at him, her expression was soft and sad and gentle. Maternal. It had been a long time since anyone had looked at Ilya like that.

“Really, Ilya. Thank you.”

Ilya nodded and Shane appeared, slipping passed his mom, dressed for the cold.

“Okay,” he murmured.

“Let me know when you get home, honey.”

Shane nodded and hugged his mother. “I will. Let me know if anything changes with Dad. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“I know. I will. Okay. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

The Hollanders parted and Mrs. Hollander looked back at Ilya.

“Get home safe. Thank you again.”

“We will. Of course.”

Ilya looked at Shane. He looked exhausted.

“Ready?” he asked softly, resting a hand on Shane’s back.

Shane nodded. “Yeah.”

They said their last few goodbyes to Shane's mother and walked down the hall to the elevators.

It wasn’t until they were in the car that Shane relaxed, his head tilted back on the head rest, eyes closed, shoulders sagged.

Ilya reached out to gently touch his cheek.

Shane opened his eyes and turned his head to look at Ilya.

“Let’s go home,” Ilya murmured and Shane nodded.

He drove them back to his place, which Shane didn’t object to. Inside, Ilya let Shane make himself comfortable while he took care of Anya.

When Ilya had finished he found Shane in his kitchen, wearing Ilya’s sweatpants, rolled at the ankles, and Ilya’s t-shirt. He had his hands in his pockets, hair pulled up in a messy bun.

He looked so fucking good. Ilya loved seeing Shane in his clothes, loved seeing him in his space, fitting right in.

Ilya toed off his shoes and hung up his coat, watching Anya and Shane together as she went to get more pets from him.

He took off his jacket and tie, resting them on one of the bar stools at the kitchen island.

Shane played with the dog for a few minutes and Ilya grabbed them some waters, before Anya went off to her bed, and they were left alone.

“How’d they do?” Shane asked as Ilya handed him a glass.

“Good,” Ilya replied, leaning on the counter. “We won, three to two. The boys were worried about you.”

Shane nodded, sipping from his glass. “Proud of them. And they don’t need to be worrying about me.”

“Of course they do. They love you.”

Shane smiled a little, nodding. “Yeah.”

Ilya tilted his head, watching Shane. They had never been like this before, having to manage these kinds of events, and struggles.

It wasn’t lost on Ilya how much trust it took to allow yourself to have someone be with you in moments like this.

Ilya wished that Shane had been accessible to him after his father had died. He hadn’t been alone, of course, but Ilya still thought about having that with Shane. Like a normal couple might.

It seemed impossible that that would have been something they could have had at that time but not so much now.

“Are you okay?” Ilya asked softly, placing his glass down, and moving to stand in front of Shane.

“I don’t know,” Shane replied, letting out a long breath.

He set his own glass down and pushed himself up onto the counter so he was sitting. Ilya smiled, stepping between his legs, and allowing Shane to wrap his arms around him. Ilya held him, propping his chin on Shane’s shoulder, rubbing his back.

“My dad’s going to be fine. It was a heart attack but he doesn’t need surgery or anything. They’re going to put him on some medication and they’re keeping him for observation. It was like, the best case scenario for something like this.” Shane turned his head into Ilya’s neck. “But now I have to worry about it, too, because they think there’s some genetic stuff happening. They’re surprised my dad’s done so well without any issues. He’s in his seventies...”

Ilya just smoothed his hand up and down Shane’s spine and kissed his temple.

“Thank you for all of this. For the car and coming to the hospital and taking me home...”

Ilya smiled. “Is fine. No problem at all. This was scary for you. I want to support you.”

Shane nodded, nuzzling his face against Ilya’s neck, and then leaned back to look at him properly.

“You wanna know something?” Shane asked.

“What?” Ilya replied, watching him.

Shane licked his lips, his eyes tearing up, and Ilya’s heart lurched. He brushed a finger over Shane’s cheek. No one had the right to look so perfect when they were all emotional. Shane was always so earnest, wearing his heart on his sleeve.

It was one of the many things Ilya loved and admired about him.

“Um.” Shane swallowed, glancing away, and Ilya waited, not wanting him to feel rushed.

“I just wanted you to know that you’ve always made me feel safe. Since the very beginning. I always knew I could trust you and you would do your best to make sure that I was okay.” Shane sniffled, shaking his head. “I’m sorry that I ever doubted that.”

He looked at Ilya, a single tear escaping down his cheek. “I know you would have protected me the best you could, if we had come out earlier.”

Ilya wasn’t expecting to hear that. He hadn’t necessarily expected that kind of acknowledgment, in fact, he hoped that it was simply unspoken. He had always done his best to make his sexual partners feel comfortable but especially Shane, when it had been obvious how nervous he was, how much was bubbling under the surface.

Ilya was a little surprised that Shane still thought about it.

“I would have. I still will,” Ilya replied honestly because he believed that. If he and Shane had had the chance to be together before, in their twenties, he would have done whatever he could to protect him and make him feel safe.

And he most certainly would endeavor to do that now.

“I know.”

Shane tucked himself back into Ilya and Ilya held him, kissing into Shane’s hair. Not expecting this moment of rawness but trying not to shy away from it.

Slowly they were untangling things between them, having conversations, even things like this coming out in fits and spurts.

It was good. Ilya was glad Shane felt safe, that he trusted Ilya. He wanted that for him.

They hadn't said 'I love you' since Boston and Ilya was tempted to say it now but he stayed quiet, just offering Shane comfort and safety.

"We should sleep," Ilya murmured, pressing a few more kisses into Shane's hair. "Is late."

"Yeah. Okay."

Shane sat up and Ilya stepped back so he could slide from the counter.

They hugged some more and Ilya kissed Shane's cheek, before letting him go. Shane went to Ilya's room and Ilya turned off all the lights, made sure the door was locked, and checked on the dog.

This all felt weirdly normal and also so huge at the same time. Taking care of Shane like this, like a partner would.

This slow unraveling felt good but also strange and Ilya was caught between rushing it along and just allowing things to come naturally.

One step at a time, Rozanov.

He walked down the hall to his room, light spilling into the hall, the sound of running water, a continual note of Shane's presence.

It was grounding, almost, knowing he was here.

Ilya changed, joining Shane in the bathroom to brush his teeth, and wash his face. Shane already had a toothbrush here and while Ilya did love seeing Shane in his clothes, he wondered if maybe he should just clear out a drawer or two for him... maybe some space in the closet for a suit or two...

He could worry about that later.

Right now, they needed to get some sleep. It had been quite the eventful day and they both needed the rest, plus there was practice tomorrow. Then they'd get a nice day off for everyone before their next game.

Finally, they both crawled into bed, Ilya spooning up against Shane's back, Shane curling against him automatically, tangling their fingers.

"Thank you," Shane breathed and Ilya hummed.

He nuzzled and kissed the freckles at the back of Shane's neck. "You're welcome."

He settled his nose against Shane's skin, waiting for his breathing to even out, before Ilya finally drifted off, too.

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Ilya takes care of Shane and Shane takes care of Ilya

Chapter Notes

Ilya and Shane talk about Ilya's family, a general warning about vague discussions of abuse and suicide

The next morning

“Do you want me to drive you to the hospital?” Ilya asked after he and Shane had come back from their run.

Ilya had made coffee and breakfast for them, trying to keep things as normal and routine as possible, even though none of this was normal or routine.

They'd woken up together and had had maybe the best slow, sleepy sex that Ilya had ever had, gone for their run, and were now having breakfast and coffee. Together. In Ilya's home.

It felt like a dream. Everything was comforting and nice and it felt good to just be *together*. Especially after yesterday, leaving Shane a little more fragile than he was letting on.

He smiled at Ilya over the lip of his mug, taking a sip of coffee.

“I would love you to, but I think it'll be easier if I take myself.”

“I could pick you up.”

Shane chuckled. “I know but I don't know how long I'll need to be there. I don't want to hold you up.”

Ilya shrugged. “I don't mind.”

And it was true, he didn't.

“That's very kind, Ilya. But I'll drive myself. I'll be okay.”

“Okay.” Ilya conceded. “You are welcome to come back tonight. If you want. No practice tomorrow, no game.”

Shane smiled. “You wouldn’t mind?”

Ilya shook his head. “No.”

He didn’t mind at all. He kind of didn’t mind the idea of Shane moving in, if he wanted. Ilya brought his mug to his lips and sipped his own coffee, preventing himself from saying more.

“I’d like that. If it’s not too much trouble.” Shane cheeks were pink.

“No trouble. Just text me. I’ll cook.”

“You cook?”

“Yes.”

Shane laughed. “Maybe we can cook together sometime.”

“Sure. Okay. Whenever you want.”

Anya came up to Shane at that moment, looking for pets, and Shane leaned down to run his hand over her head.

“Strumpet,” Ilya said, shaking his head, and Shane laughed.

Ilya's alarm went off on his phone, reminding him to take his medication. Ilya turned off the alarm and went to the counter. He grabbed a glass, filled it with water, and pulled the pill bottle out from where it was tucked away by the toaster oven.

Shane seemed preoccupied by Anya, though Ilya didn't care if he saw Ilya taking his meds. He uncapped the bottle, shook out a pill, and took it with water.

"You okay?" Shane asked.

"Fine," Ilya replied nonchalantly.

Shane watched him for a moment, before looking back down at Anya, and smiling.

They finished their coffee and breakfast and Ilya let Shane shower without joining him, though it was extremely tempting. Maybe tomorrow...

Shane finished showering, dressed back in his suit, wearing a pair of Ilya’s briefs, which was oddly sexy to think about.

Ilya walked Shane to the door when he was finished dressing.

“You sure you are okay?” Ilya asked as Shane put on his coat.

Shane nodded. “Yeah. I’m okay. Just tired. It was a lot yesterday but it helps knowing that my dad’ll be fine. I’m just going to have to be more on top of my parents. It’s hard seeing them get old...”

Ilya nodded a little and Shane’s eyes went wide.

“I’m sorry, I just mean—”

“Is okay, Shane,” Ilya soothed because it was. He had had a long time to grieve his parents in the ways he had needed to grieve them.

He didn’t miss his father, though he wished things could have been different between them. He missed his mother every day.

While he would never see his mother get old, he had watched his father deteriorate, trying to care for him while being in North America, and getting very little help or support from his brother or stepmother.

But Shane’s situation was very different.

Shane had a good relationship with his parents, the age gap was closer to thirty years rather than the nearly fifty that had been between Ilya and his own father, and both Shane’s parents still had all their faculties.

It was hard watching a parent age, yes, but perhaps it was also a blessing.

Ilya understood Shane’s concern.

“Watching your parents struggle, when they are supposed to be, mm,” Ilya tried to think of the right words in English. “Always strong, is hard.”

“Yeah, exactly.”

Ilya nodded again and Shane looked away, smiling a little.

“Thank you. Really. I’m glad that you’re here.” Shane looked back up at Ilya and Ilya offered him a smile.

“Me, too.”

They kissed goodbye at the door, soft and lingering.

“You are sure I cannot drive you?”

Shane laughed, kissing Ilya some more, his hand fisted in Ilya’s t-shirt. “Mhm.”

“You are a bad liar.”

“Fuck off, Rozanov.”

Ilya chuckled and kissed Shane, a hand on his hip. They kissed for a few more long moments before Shane finally pulled away.

“I’ll see you tonight,” Shane said, waving goodbye.

Ilya just sighed and watched him go, before closing the door. He needed to get ready for work but he knew he would be thinking about Shane all day.

Which was absolutely true.

Of course everyone was asking about him once Ilya got to the arena, wanting updates.

Max, Bood, and Hazy had all reached out to to him, some of the players, too. Ilya was informed that flowers would be sent to Shane’s parents’ home from the team.

Ilya was happy to offer vague updates and hear about what Shane had said to everyone, which was mostly just ‘thank you so much for thinking of me and my family. I’ll be back on the ice soon.’

Ilya wanted to tease Shane about it, so he sent him a single text about Shane being a good Canadian boy, and then leaving him alone, because Ilya knew he would have a lot on his plate.

Practice went well overall and the day off tomorrow was well-earned.

Ilya spent some time with the other coaches, just catching up about day-to-day things, shooting the shit, talking about their upcoming schedule.

There was the All-Star break just around the corner which everyone was looking forward to.

They’d learned that Luca and Andy would be going to the game, which would be fun and exciting for them. Apparently they were going to do a whole social media thing about telling them they’d been chosen and Ilya got to deliver the news.

The games were in Sunshine, Florida and while Ilya intended to go someplace warm over the break, it wouldn’t be Florida. He kind of wanted to stay out of the hockey orbit for a bit.

He’d been thinking maybe somewhere in California...

He had been thinking about maybe asking Shane if he would want to take a trip. That it might be nice for them to do something like that together.

Sveta was always saying that the best way to tell if a couple was truly compatible was how they traveled together.

Which just made Ilya curious. He wanted to know if he and Shane were good at traveling together.

It was one of the many things he wondered about them.

After practice Ilya made a stop at the grocery store, picking up some items for dinner; fresh vegetables, organic farro, some salmon. He picked up some ginger ale, too.

He checked his phone, smiling at the texts from Shane.

Shane: Fuck off

Shane: Dad was released from the hospital we're home now and I can be by you in like, an hour?

Shane: let me know if that's okay if not I can just stay with my parents so don't worry

Ilya typed out his reply.

Ilya: I'm glad he's home

Ilya: an hour is fine let me know when you are on your way

Ilya: ❤️

Shane was always very self-effacing but Ilya found it very interesting to see how flexible he tried to be, not wanting to cause stress. He wasn't sure exactly what to do with this information, just something he noticed.

Perhaps because they were still figuring each other out, still trying to settle into a rhythm, and circling around the idea of a relationship before fully committing.

Ilya was trying to be less distant, allowing Shane in, knowing that putting up barriers wouldn't allow them to explore together.

They both wanted this to work.

Ilya paid for his groceries and made his way home.

He played with Anya for a bit, took her out, and fed her, before starting in on dinner so it would be ready by the time Shane arrived.

Shane texted him, letting him know he was on his way. Ilya smiled to himself, filled with a kind of youthful excitement at knowing Shane was coming over.

Liking someone and being intimate with them was such a strange experience. There was the joy and excitement and wonder of being around the person and talking with them and kissing and having sex and all of that and then the other part was just doubt about whether or not what was happening between you was real and that eventually the person would see your true self and no longer like you.

Crazy shit.

It was difficult at times to lean into allowing himself to be perceived, especially when the last time he'd done that, Shane had run away. But so far that hadn't happened.

Shane was patient and kind, genuinely interested in Ilya and his life. He was sweet and earnest and extremely willing.

He was everything Ilya could want in a partner. It was wild to think that they had maybe both known that from the start. And maybe they'd needed the intervening years to help them learn and grow before they could come together again.

Whatever the reason, Ilya knew he wanted this to last, so he needed to be less guarded, and he was starting to really trust that Shane would stay.

But this evening wasn't about him. This was about making sure that Shane felt supported. Ilya could only imagine the stress of having to navigate health concerns with his parents. Shane was an only child so all of the responsibility fell on him.

That was a difficult and stressful burden to bear and if Ilya could help lighten the load, he would.

And he would start with dinner.

He was pulling the salmon from the oven when Shane arrived, setting the tray on the stovetop before buzzing Shane in. Ilya set out the ingredients to make the farro bowls, answering the door when Shane knocked.

Anya was excited about the idea of any visitor and then went completely bonkers at realizing it was Shane.

Ilya just laughed, allowing Shane and Anya to have their moment while he went back to the kitchen to finish attending to dinner.

"Smells good," Shane said, a backpack slung over his shoulder as he meandered into the kitchen.

He was dressed much more casually, in jeans and a long sleeved shirt with socks.

Ilya wiped his hands on a dishtowel and held an arm out. Shane came, pressing against Ilya's side, arms wrapped around him. They kissed hello and Shane rested his head on Ilya's shoulder.

"Are you hungry?" Ilya asked, pressing tiny kisses to Shane's forehead.

Shane hummed, just leaning into Ilya for a moment, eyes closed, before he replied. Ilya enjoyed the quiet moment, happy just to have Shane in his arms. He was a simple man. Just having Shane close like this grounded him.

"I could definitely eat."

"Good. Food is ready."

Shane sighed, squeezing Ilya a little, his face tucking against his neck. "I'll put my bag down and be right back."

“Okay,” Ilya chuckled.

Shane made to move away, kissing Ilya again, just because, and walked around the kitchen island. Anya followed and Ilya watched after them, smiling, as Shane talked softly to her, walking down the hall to Ilya’s bedroom.

Ilya went back to making the bowls, unable to help the fluttery feeling inside of him, pleased with the warmth he felt from how domestic this all was.

It was something he’d talked about quite a bit with Galina, around the time that Ilya was nearing forty, that all he really wanted was to be a husband. He wanted to create a domestic life with his partner that was peaceful and loving.

He wanted everything he couldn’t have as a child.

The stability and tenderness and understanding that his mother had always deserved and never received.

Being with Shane like this made him think that maybe that was possible.

Ilya finished assembling the salmon and farro bowls by the time Shane came back to the kitchen. Shane walked around to Ilya’s side of the island, sliding an arm around his waist. Ilya wrapped his around Shane’s shoulders and kissed the side of his head.

It was comfortable being like this. Almost second nature. As if they’d been doing this longer than they actually had.

“Looks really good,” Shane said. “What’s in them?”

“Salmon, farro, onion, zucchini, green pepper, carrots, and spinach.”

“Pretty good.”

“Try it and then tell me.”

Shane laughed. “Okay.”

“I bought ginger ale for you,” he said, giving Shane’s head one more kiss before turning to grab utensils from the drawer behind him.

“Oh thanks. You didn’t have to do that.”

“I wanted to,” Ilya replied.

Shane went to the fridge, pulling out a ginger ale and a coke, bringing them both to the island.

They sat and Ilya watched as Shane took a forkful of food. He looked up at Ilya and started laughing.

“Are you just gonna watch me eat it?”

“Yes. I need to know if I nailed it.”

Shane chuckled and shook his head, eating the forkful of salmon, farro, and vegetables.

Shane looked up at the ceiling, thinking as he chewed.

“This is good,” he said, looking at Ilya. “It’s delicious.”

Ilya narrowed his eyes at him. “Are you just saying that?”

“No! I like it!”

“Hmm. But you are very Canadian and polite...”

Shane’s face scrunched up unhappily. “Oh shut the fuck up.” Ilya laughed and Shane did, too. “You’re such an asshole.”

Ilya snickered and took his own forkful of food. It was actually very good. He’d *totally* nailed it.

“How are you parents?” Ilya asked as he opened his can of coke.

“They’re okay,” Shane replied. “They’re tired. It was a lot the past twenty-four hours. I think they were freaked out which makes sense. But they’re home now and thankfully the course of treatment after this is just medication and a few check ups in the coming weeks and months. Dad has a cardiologist now so that’s fun.”

“How are you?”

Shane sighed, long and heavy, his shoulders heaving. “I’m exhausted honestly. They scared the shit out of me. They’ve always been healthy and in good shape. So it was just kind of shocking. I’m glad that it wasn’t anything more serious but I’m worried. I’m glad I moved closer, honestly. If this had happened while I was in Montreal, I think I would have moved them out there to be closer to me but...” He shrugged. “I’m glad it happened while I’m here. We’re gonna have to start talking about what to do as they really begin to age. Like... home healthcare or assisted living...”

Shane ran a hand over his face.

“I’m sorry. We don’t need to be talking about this.”

“Is okay. You can. I am happy to listen.”

Shane offered him a tired smile. “Thanks. I appreciate that.”

Ilya nodded. “Was... a little similar with my father. When he was sick.”

“Your dad was sick?” Shane's brows furrowed.

Ilya nodded. "Alzheimer's."

"Oh, Ilya. I'm so sorry."

"Is okay. I was in the States so was harder to figure things out but, I understand the feeling."

Shane nodded. "We never really talked about our families, did we?"

Ilya shook his head. "Not really."

"Do you... want to...?"

Ilya smiled a little. "Mm. Complicated question."

"I know. I'm sorry. We don't have to—"

"No, no. We can. Is just complicated for me," Ilya said. He took another bite of food. "I will tell you later. We can eat first."

"You don't have to if you don't want to."

Ilya huffed a laugh, reaching for Shane's hand. "Shane."

"Yeah?"

"You are very sweet but if we are going to do this then we should talk about my parents."

Ilya met his eyes and Shane looked back. "Okay. Yeah. Absolutely."

Ilya laughed, squeezing his hand. "Cute," he murmured in Russian.

He didn't really want to talk about it. It was depressing and sad and he didn't want to bring down the mood. But it was true. If they were going to be together, Shane deserved to hear everything, though Ilya appreciated that Shane was trying to be so sensitive.

Shane blushed. "Can I know what you're saying or...?"

Ilya smiled. "Maybe I am trying to be mysterious."

"Or maybe you're calling me a slut."

"Well, you are sometimes."

That got Shane and he started laughing, clapping his hands together. "Oh my god, you are such a fucking asshole. That hasn't changed about you."

"You love my wit," Ilya grinned, winking at Shane.

"Fuck you so much."

"Later."

Shane shoved a forkful of food into his mouth, trying not to smile.

“You’re so easy, Hollander,” Ilya chuckled. “That hasn’t changed about *you*. ”

They were both snickering and went back to eating dinner, things feeling a little better, the mood lifted. They talked some more about Shane’s plans for his parents, figuring out their care, but Shane didn’t seem as stressed.

After they'd finished eating, Ilya brought their dirty bowls and utensils to the sink and Shane followed, helping him rinse things, while Ilya placed them in the dishwasher.

“They’re, overall, in really great shape. I just want to make sure that they’re okay. I have extended family and stuff but it’s just me and I want to take care of them.”

“Of course. I think talking to them will be good to start. Make a plan. You are a good planner.”

“I am, yeah. Thanks.”

Ilya chuckled and Shane bumped his hip against Ilya’s. Ilya bumped him back. They exchanged soft smiles and giggles.

“Thanks for listening to me,” Shane sighed when they were done.

“No problem.”

Shane hugged him and Ilya hummed, wrapping his arms around him, kissing the top of his head before resting his cheek there.

“I really do appreciate it.”

“Any time.”

They kept hugging, lapsing into comfortable, companionable silence. Ilya rocked them a little and then Anya came padding over, wanting to join in.

Ilya scooped her up and held her while Shane gave her some pets.

“She needs to go on her walk.”

“Can I come?” Shane asked.

“Sure. If you want to.”

“I would.”

It was a simple thing but it made Ilya’s heart flip.

Ilya placed Anya down and got her all geared up, then slid into his own boots and coat and toque. They left the condo and went out into the cold, walking down the street while Anya sniffed at the snow.

Shane surprised Ilya by taking his hand and it was nice, walking together with the dog, idly chatting about work things as Ilya caught Shane up about work.

“Oh! We got all the flowers,” Shane said. “They were at the house. I texted everyone back, they were all very kind.”

“They’re good boys,” Ilya chuckled.

“They are.”

They did a loop around the block, not as long as Anya’s usual walks, but it was cold, and she had no interest in being out for longer than necessary.

They headed back inside after Ilya tossed Anya’s poop bag and they would be in for the rest of the night.

Ilya washed his hands and Shane played with Anya in the living room for a bit.

Ilya leaned against the doorframe and watched, tempted to take out his phone, snapping pictures or getting some video, but they weren’t quite at that stage yet.

Still, Ilya liked seeing Shane in his home, he liked the way he got along so well with Anya, and how he made the place feel so much warmer.

Ilya could imagine nights like this, maybe making dinner together, having a glass of wine or some beers, teasing each other and laughing, playing with the dog, anthropomorphizing her. Maybe some cuddling on the couch under a blanket, watching a show or a movie.

And definitely sex.

Ilya was disrupted from his reverie as Anya came to him with a toy in her mouth.

“Is this for me?” he asked her, reaching down to grab the toy, which initiated some vicious tug-of-war.

This continued on until Anya finally surrendered, going to her bed, her head perched on the edge.

“Are you all tired out?” Shane asked her. “Yeah, you’re pooped, huh?”

Ilya laughed, watching Shane pet her head, before getting to his feet, sliding his hands into his pockets, and shuffling closer to Ilya.

“I’m gonna change,” he said to Ilya and Ilya nodded, leaning down to very gently kiss Shane’s mouth.

“Me, too.”

Shane smiled and Ilya cupped his face in his hand, kissing him some more. It was such a wonderful, simple pleasure to kiss Shane and Ilya would happily kiss him all day if he had

the opportunity to.

Eventually, they went to Ilya's bedroom together and changed into pajamas.

Shane put his hair up into a messy bun, carding some of the strands behind his ears, looking so comfortable in his baggy sweatshirt and well-worn sweats and socks.

"Do you want tea?" Ilya asked as they went back toward the living room.

"Sure. You have anything decaffeinated?"

Ilya nodded and went into his pantry, bringing out his organized containers of tea, courtesy of Sveta.

"Are you a tea guy?" Shane asked, genuinely curious.

"Sort of. Is more cultural. Black tea solves all problems for Russians."

Shane chuckled. "Is that so? I thought it was vodka."

"Yes," Ilya replied and Shane snorted.

Ilya could remember his mother making tea, the smell of it in the kitchen, the sound of her spoon on the mug as she stirred milk and sugar into hers.

Ilya choose an herbal tea, ginger and maple, and Shane chose chamomile.

"Where are your mugs?" Shane asked.

Ilya furrowed his brows. "No. Sit."

Shane smiled. "If we're going to do this, Ilya..."

Ilya made a face at him and Shane laughed.

"Mugs." Ilya pointed at the right cabinet and Shane grabbed them as Ilya filled his kettle and set it on the stove.

He leaned back against the counter and Shane came over to him once he'd finished placing the tea bags in the mugs.

"Do you still want to talk about your parents?" Shane asked.

Ilya nodded.

"You know about my mother yes?"

"A little. Just what had been released to the press."

Ilya nodded again.

Shane stepped closer, taking Ilya's hands. "I'm sorry it's difficult..."

"Is okay," Ilya replied. "I have had a lot of time to make peace with my parents. But... is not a happy story, not like your family."

"That's okay," Shane replied. "It doesn't have to be. I want to listen and understand."

Shane's face was set, determined, though his eyes were soft. It had been a long time since anyone had made space for Ilya like this and he appreciated that Shane was so willing.

"Okay," Ilya murmured and Shane smiled small.

"Okay."

The kettle started to whistle so Ilya turned off the burner, pouring water into the mugs.

They made up their tea and then went into the living room to sit.

Ilya covered them with a throw blanket and they sat close, knees touching, mugs cooling on the side table behind Shane.

Shane offered a hand and Ilya took it, Shane's sandwiching it between both of his.

Ilya considered where to start.

"In my family, it was my father, Grigori, my mother, Irina, my older brother, Andrei, and me. I grew up in Moscow. My father was in the military and then a police man. He was head of police. My mother was a ballet dancer and she retired to marry my father. I don't know their story. How they met or anything. My father was almost fifty when I was born, so, big age difference between them."

Shane nodded along as he listened.

"How many years between you and Andrei?" he asked.

"Four. My mother was twenty-four, I think, when I was born."

Shane whistled and Ilya smiled ruefully.

"I was very close to my mother," Ilya said. "I am much like her. We look similar, the same hair and eyes... the face. She was so funny and beautiful. She would watch me play hockey and tell me that I was so good and would go so far. We were almost always together."

Ilya closed his eyes, remembering laughing with his mother in the kitchen making pelmeni together. He opened his eyes and turned to Shane.

Shane smiled. "Did she work? Or was she home with you and your brother?"

"At home with us. My father didn't let her do many things. He was very controlling. Very hard on her. On all of us."

Ilya chewed on the inside of his cheek, considering what next to tell Shane. They weren't easy things to hear and while Ilya was desensitized to them now, it was still a lot.

"My father was... abusive, to my mother. More with words but sometimes actions. Always saying she was cheating or that she would leave him. He did not let her have friends and if she left the house, it was for limited amounts of time. She was not allowed to work. She was very sad all the time and I wanted her to be happy."

Shane squeezed his hand but didn't say anything, which Ilya appreciated.

"She died when I was twelve. Taking a bottle of sleeping pills. My father told me that it was an accident. That was the story to tell everyone. But I knew it was a lie. I had found her."

"Oh god, Ilya." Shane reached for Ilya's second hand, squeezing them both in his. "I'm so sorry. You were so young..."

Ilya took a steadying breath. "Yes. Was hard. And strange. I don't remember a lot from that time but..."

He closed his eyes and sighed.

"My father was very strict. Very old fashioned. When coaches said that I could go far in hockey, I became his... project. Everything was about hockey. The best teams, the best coaches, everything..."

"Was he... proud of you?"

Ilya considered the question, opening his eyes. "I don't know. I think my talents were about him. I was his son and so I was reflection on him. He was not kind. I was not to speak with coaches or teams, I was told I was lazy, and needed to work harder. He wanted me to stay in the KHL but I went to America instead. I think he would have been more upset with me if it wasn't for the money I was making."

Ilya chewed on his bottom lip. "I supported my whole family. My father, my brother, my stepmother. I was told to be a good son, a good brother, I must do these things. Everything was perfect. The food, the clothes, and still... never enough."

Ilya shook his head, as if trying to clear the memories from his mind. "I was the one who helped get my father diagnosed and taken care of. I paid for everything. His doctors, medications, nurses. I paid my brother to be there for him. And then he died and I went home for his funeral, I stopped speaking to my family."

Ilya looked at Shane. "My father called me, when you were with me in Boston..."

Shane's eyes scanned Ilya's face, lips parted, brows furrowed. Ilya could tell he was breaking Shane's heart and he felt bad for that, knowing that his past was a heavy burden. Ilya wished he had a happier tale to tell. He didn't want Shane to feel weighed down by any of this.

"Really? That was the phone call?"

Ilya nodded.

“Ilya, I am so sorry.”

“Is okay,” he assured.

“It’s not though.”

Shane sat up on his knees, letting go of Ilya’s hands to cup his face in his own warm, slightly calloused ones instead.

“You have been through so much. I’m sorry I never knew. I’m sorry you didn’t have better support. I’m sorry your dad and brother suck.”

Ilya laughed a little and Shane was looking at him so seriously. It wasn’t pity in his face but a kind of deep empathy, an understanding, or as well as Shane could understand an experience he had never had.

“You are the bravest, gentlest person I know.”

Ilya closed his eyes for a moment and hummed, surprisingly moved by the words. “Thank you.”

“I mean it.”

Ilya wrapped his fingers around Shane’s wrists, holding him carefully. He could feel Shane’s pulse under his touch. “I know.”

Shane nodded and swallowed, leaning closer to rest his forehead against Ilya’s.

“Your mother sounds like a wonderful person.”

“She was,” Ilya breathed. “Every good part of me was hers first.”

Shane let out a wobbly breath, his nose brushing against Ilya’s. Ilya closed his eyes and just allowed himself to have this moment.

He’d told Shane about his family and Shane had been nothing but understanding and kind and comforting. His eyes stung a little. He wasn’t used to this kind of tenderness, wasn’t sure if he was worthy of it.

“I know this is...a lot...”

“No. It’s okay. I want to know. I want to understand you and know you. It’s important to me. Thank you for telling me. For trusting me.”

“I do trust you,” Ilya murmured and found that he meant it, deeply.

“I’m glad.”

Shane's thumbs slid over Ilya's cheeks bones gently as they just stayed like that, breathing together.

Ilya swallowed and Shane sighed, rubbing his nose against Ilya's. "Come here."

Shane shifted onto his butt and went to lay back against the arm of the couch, pulling Ilya with him. Ilya went, letting Shane hold him.

Ilya closed his eyes, Shane's fingers carding through his curls, pressing soft kisses to Ilya's forehead.

"I think my mother would have loved you," Ilya murmured.

"I wish I could have met her..."

Ilya just nodded. He wished that, too. But he wished for many things...

He wasn't sure how long he and Shane lay on the couch, Shane's hand in his hair, or running up and down his back soothingly.

"Now that I told you about my trauma, do you still want to fuck me?" Ilya sighed overdramatically.

Shane started laughing and Ilya looked at him, smiling.

"Yeah, actually," Shane chuckled, brushing his hand into Ilya's curls, pushing them back from his face. "Thank you for telling me."

Ilya nodded, leaning into Shane's hand as it cupped his cheek. "Thank you for listening."

"Literally any time. Seriously."

Shane's thumb brushed over Ilya's cheek, his expression going soft and tender, and it made Ilya's heart wobble.

"It would make me very happy to know you. All of you. Even the difficult parts."

Ilya blinked. The words weren't necessarily surprising but they moved him. Someone voluntarily wanting to hear the good and the bad. And especially Shane, who was being so present.

Ilya closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again. "Me, too. I want to know you, too."

Shane smiled and nodded.

"I think it's a deal."

"Yes. A deal."

Ilya pressed his face into Shane's chest and Shane hummed, wrapping his arms and legs around him squeezing him close. He allowed himself to be held and comforted.

Shane knew and he was still here and that was more than Ilya could have asked for.

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Shane has Ilya and Anya over to his

February

Shane checked his fridge for the third time that day, closing the door, and rubbing the heels of his hands into his eyeballs.

“Get a fucking grip, Hollander. It’s fine,” he huffed at himself and turned away from the appliance, going to the living room, and resisting the urge to straighten the throw pillows. Again.

He shouldn’t be anxious, he knew that.

Ilya was coming over with Anya. They were going to cook together and Ilya was going to stay over and they would go to practice together tomorrow. Unless they were snowed in, as was being reported.

Shane was excited to have Ilya over. They had been spending a lot of time at Ilya’s place so it only seemed fair that he came by Shane. And Shane didn’t mind having Anya around. She was a very well-behaved dog.

He’d even gotten her some toys and things.

He’d stocked the fridge, he’d had the same agency he used for biweekly house cleaning come in to do a deep clean of the place prior to Ilya’s arrival. Everything was sparkling and fresh, the sheets on the bed changed and made.

Everything was perfect.

Not that Ilya needed things to be but Shane wanted that for him.

Things were going so well between them and he wanted to just keep that momentum going.

Shane was happy. He was glad that Ilya was opening up to him, that they were getting deep with each other.

He’d been thinking more and more about them just making it official.

Which was maybe where his anxiety was stemming from. He was pretty sure Ilya was on the same page but he wouldn’t know until he asked and that was terrifying.

As wonderful as everything was between them, it still felt scary to take that leap, to ask if Ilya wanted to commit to him, especially with their history.

Shane took a deep breath. He'd talked to pretty much all of his friends about this and all of them had said that it was normal to be nervous but that it seemed unlikely that Ilya would say no.

But the only way Shane would know for sure was if he asked.

So that was the plan, at some point.

Shane was startled from his thoughts as his phone vibrated in his pocket. Ilya had texted him. It was a picture of himself and Anya, all bundled up against the cold, along with a text that said, 'we are here!'

Shane smiled, biting his lip as he saved the photo to his phone.

They actually hadn't sent a lot of photos to one another. He had a few of Anya but not many of Ilya. One or two selfies he'd sent that Shane had immediately saved. Ilya was unfairly sexy with his glasses and gray sweatpants.

Shane buzzed them into the building and laughed softly as he heard the sound of paws on carpet and the jingling of dog tags a few minutes later. Ilya's soft voice accompanied the noises as he spoke to Anya.

Shane opened the door, stepping into the hall. Ilya and Anya were only a few feet away and Ilya dropped Anya's leash, letting her run to Shane.

"Hi sweet girl!" Shane cooed, crouching down, arms open as Anya ran to him, licking at his face, and trying to get as close as possible.

"She is obsessed with you," Ilya laughed.

"I guess I have that effect on people whose names end in 'ya'," Shane said, smiling up at Ilya.

"So clever," Ilya said, standing up with Anya's leash wrapped around his wrist.

"I can be sometimes."

"And so pretty."

"Is that so?"

Ilya nodded and Shane smiled as they leaned in to kiss. He slid an arm over Ilya's shoulders, both of Ilya's hands going to his waist, as he'd dropped everything he was carrying to the floor.

The kiss was slow and deep, full of promise for later. Shane loved the way Ilya kissed, so commanding and tender. He made Shane's insides turn to goo. He'd happily kiss Ilya forever

if he could.

They broke apart and Shane needed a second to catch his breath.

“Come in,” he said after a moment, his whole body warm.

Ilya chuckled, picking up Anya’s doggy bed, and a bag, and followed Shane inside.

Shane closed the door and helped Anya out of her booties, harness, and leash, as Ilya took off his boots, hanging up his coat and scarf.

“I think we will get more snow,” he said.

“Yeah, I heard,” Shane replied, watching as Anya went off to explore. “I bought plenty of food just in case we get snowed in.”

“Mm. Might be nice.”

Shane looked at Ilya. “What? To get snowed in together?”

“I think so, no?”

“I think it would be nice, yeah.”

Ilya smiled and kissed Shane’s cheek. “I brought her things.” Ilya turned, picking up a backpack. “Bowls, food, some toys, bed.”

Shane laughed. “I can help get her all set up.”

They spent a few minutes figuring out where to set everything up for Anya while she came to investigate, and was an adorable menace, discovering the toys Shane had gotten her.

“So spoiled!” Ilya laughed.

Once Anya was all set and ready to go, Shane gave Ilya a tour. Living room, kitchen, trophy room/office, one full bathroom, guest bedroom, and second guest bedroom.

They ended at Shane’s bedroom and Shane held out a hand, letting Ilya step inside. “Make yourself at home.”

Ilya looked around the room, placing his bags down on an armchair. He opened one bag up and pulled out a bottle of wine.

“I brought wine,” he said, a little self-consciously, sidling up to Shane.

Shane smiled at him. “You didn’t have to bring anything.”

“I wanted to.”

“Thank you. That’s very nice.”

Shane looked at the bottle, smiling, recognizing the label.

“Is this one of the wines we had during our first, like, real date?”

“Yes. You liked it so...” Ilya shrugged and Shane’s heart wobbled in his chest.

Ilya was almost always so confident and seeing him like this, a little shy and uncertain, it just made Shane love him more.

“You’re so sweet.”

Shane moved a little closer, resting his free hand on Ilya’s arm. Ilya looked at him, brushing the back of a finger over Shane’s cheek, before holding Shane’s chin between index finger and thumb.

“Don’t tell anyone,” Ilya murmured, holding him still as he kissed him.

It was another deep kiss, warm and thorough. Shane sighed into it, resting his hand at the back of Ilya’s head, in his soft curls. Ilya broke the kiss before it could get more heated and Shane heard himself make a little noise of disappointment.

Ilya was smiling, hazel eyes sparkling with amusement and perhaps some tenderness. He brushed his thumb over Shane’s bottom lip and said, “later. We need to cook.”

Shane sighed. “Yeah. Right. Dinner.”

Ilya chuckled and kissed Shane once more, before pulling away. Shane took Ilya’s hand and they went back to the kitchen, Anya having apparently settled right in, laying in her dog bed, watching.

“What are we making tonight?” Ilya asked.

“*Coq au vin*,” Shane replied, placing the bottle on the counter. “A French style chicken stew, basically.”

“Say it again,” Ilya said.

“Coq au vin.”

“One more time, please.”

Shane furrowed his brows, confused. “Coq au vin?”

Ilya smiled mischievously. “What was that first word again...?”

“I am *not* saying it again,” Shane laughed, rolling his eyes, and Ilya snickered. “Get your head out of the gutter, Rozanov.”

“Oh you like it,” Ilya cooed and Shane huffed, though he couldn’t help smiling. He did like it in all honesty.

He loved being teased by Ilya, joking about sex, laughing with him. It made Shane feel included and special. And he felt like it spoke to the trust that was growing between them. That they could poke at each other and know that it was meant in jest... and love.

“So what do we need then?” Ilya asked, putting on his glasses, and rubbing his hands together.

It took Shane a moment to register Ilya was speaking. He looked so good in glasses. It was extremely distracting.

“Um, right. The recipe.”

Shane grabbed his tablet and pulled up the ingredients. Ilya looked over his shoulder, resting one hand on the counter, the other settling comfortably on Shane’s hip. Shane could smell his cologne and feel the warmth of him against his back, comforting and familiar.

Shane smiled to himself, his cheeks going warm. He put on his own glasses, delighting in how cozy this all felt. Domestic. He could get used to this.

He went over the ingredients with Ilya and they divvied up the tasks of *mise en place*.

Shane opened the bottle of wine Ilya had brought, pouring two glasses, then opened another bottle for the chicken, and they got to work.

Shane laid out all the ingredients, instructed Ilya on where to find bowls and utensils and cutting boards.

They set everything up on the kitchen island, placing the chicken into a bowl, adding the wine, chicken stock, and brandy, allowing it all to sit while they started prepping bacon, onion, carrots, garlic, mushrooms, and pearl onions.

At some point, Ilya put on some music, the two of them talking intermittently as they started cooking.

They moved around one another easily in the kitchen, working as a pretty good team. Shane was the one manning the stove because it was his condo, but it helped to have Ilya hand him ingredients.

Four hands were definitely better than just two.

Shane topped the finished coq au vin with cooked bacon and mushrooms while Ilya sliced some crusty bread. The kitchen smelled delicious and while the sink was full with all manner of cooking detritus, the rest of the kitchen was fairly spotless.

Ilya had been cleaning as they went, which was so helpful, and neither of them had ever had an empty glass of wine.

“Smells good,” Ilya said, leaning over the pan, his glasses perched on top of his head, holding back his curls.

“Yeah,” Shane said, just looking at Ilya’s profile. “It does.”

Ilya looked at Shane and smiled, winking at him. Shane felt his cheeks warm and he smiled, too, glancing away, body fizzing with simple delight at sharing all this with Ilya.

He grabbed some bowls, adding the stew to them, setting them on the kitchen island with utensils and the bread, while Ilya checked on Anya.

“She is asleep,” he said. “She likes the fireplace.”

Shane smiled. “I turned it on just for her.”

“So nice of you,” Ilya said, genuinely, as he sat at the island with Shane.

“It’s no trouble at all. I really am glad you’re both here.”

“Yes. Me, too. Is nice.”

“It is.”

Ilya filled their glasses again, the bottle empty, and they clinked glasses.

“How is it?” Shane asked as Ilya went to try the coq au vin.

“Delicious,” he said. “Perfect for the cold. Have you made this before?”

Shane shook his head. “First time. But I like cooking. I used to do it a lot with my parents growing up.” He tried his own bowl and Ilya was right. It *was* delicious.

“This is great. We did a good job.”

“*You* did a good job. I helped.”

Shane huffed a laugh. “It was a team effort.”

Ilya chuckled and nodded. “Okay.”

“Did you cook a lot with Svetlana?” Shane asked casually as they ate.

“Not really,” Ilya replied, finishing a bite of bread. “She doesn’t enjoy cooking. I learned because I needed a hobby.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes. Retirement was not easy in the beginning.”

Shane nodded as he listened. He had always wondered what had happened to Ilya after his retirement, when he had gone radio silent. He wanted to ask but he also didn’t want to cross any boundaries.

“Retirement is hard. No one really prepares you for it. I was bored out of my mind after just three months,” Shane confessed.

Ilya hummed, having more of the stew. Shane did the same, eyes on Ilya.

“You, um, you disappeared for a while. After you retired,” Shane said tentatively, after a few moments. “Was there... something going on? Or...?”

“Mm,” Ilya hummed, a wry smile pulling his lips up in the corner. “I was... struggling.”

“Oh Ilya...”

Ilya picked up his wine glass, leaning back in his chair.

“You want to know?”

Shane nodded. “Of course.”

He did. Even if it was hard. Shane was getting the impression that Ilya had really been through the wringer and he had had no idea. He wasn’t sure that anyone knew, besides Svetlana.

And that made him feel even worse.

“Okay.” Ilya dragged his thumb over his bottom lip. “Things were... not good, in the few years before I retired. You left and things went bad from there.”

Shane’s heart dropped into his feet at hearing that. He remembered Ilya going through a brief but intense resurgence of his party boy phase before he’d kind of fixed his act but Shane didn’t know anything about that time.

Only rumors from other players and the media since he and Ilya weren’t talking.

“The walls were closing in. I felt trapped. I was not doing well. I was sad all the time. And it only got worse.” Ilya sipped from his wine glass, chewing the inside of his cheek. “I decided that I could not continue with hockey and I retired.”

Shane felt like there was a lead weight in his stomach.

"Five years of all that?"

Ilya nodded.

"Jesus, Ilya. That's horrible."

Ilya shrugged. "I did not know what else to do. No one had taught me how to deal with my feelings. I knew nothing. So I just did what I knew and it wasn't working. So...I retired."

"And it didn't get better..."

Ilya shook his head. “I was not motivated to do anything. I locked myself in my penthouse. Didn’t talk to anyone, not even Sveta. I didn’t want to exist any more. It was like everything I had tried not to think about after my mother died was pressing down on me and on top of that, I wasn’t out.”

“Ilya...” Shane murmured, reaching out for his hand. Ilya took it, holding it lightly in his, brows furrowed.

Shane’s heart hurt as he thought about the pain Ilya must have been experiencing, how badly things must have been for him and in a way... he had been a cause.

“I needed help. So, I went to a program, day treatment. I was diagnosed with depression, PTSD. I went on medication, went to therapy. It was difficult few months but was good, in the end. I needed to face things and understand why I felt this way. My mother had depression, it made sense I would, too.”

“I’m so sorry...” Shane said, unsure what else he could possibly say. He couldn’t even fathom how awful Ilya must have been feeling. He had always wondered if something was going on, for Ilya to retire so early, and just... disappear without a trace. It all made sense now.

Shane bit his bottom lip. “Was this... did I...?”

He couldn’t help his thoughts from spiraling, wondering if what had happened in Boston had caused all of this.

“No, Shane.” Ilya shook his head, reaching out to take Shane’s hand. “I have always had depression. I was very good at pretending it did not exist. And then I couldn’t any more.”

He sighed. “I think, that night in Boston, triggered things, and it just got worse. But if it was not that, it would have been something else.”

Shane could hear what it was that Ilya was saying but he was having a hard time believing that to be true. He felt a horrible guilt re-emerge, twisting his insides up as he thought about causing Ilya so much pain.

He knew he had but now he was understanding the extend of it. He had caused *harm*.
Damage.

“Shane...”

Shane barely even registered that Ilya had gotten up from the kitchen island and come around to Shane's side. He rested his hands on Shane’s knees, crouching down, and Shane looked at him, though his vision was all blurry.

“Shane,” he said firmly. “This was not your fault.”

Shane blinked, swallowing, nodding his head, though he felt sick to his stomach.

“We were kids,” Ilya continued, reaching up to brush his thumb over Shane’s cheeks. “You didn’t know. I know you were scared.”

Ilya sighed and murmured something in Russian.

“Sweetheart,” he soothed, voice gentle, and it was the pet name that shocked Shane a bit. He sniffled and Ilya wiped away his tears. “Shane. I forgive you.”

Shane swallowed past the horrible lump in his throat, the words almost startling him. “You do?”

Ilya nodded. “I should have said so sooner. You have been doing so much and being so good. I love being with you and I’m ready to do this with you. I’m sorry I didn’t make it more clear.”

Shane closed his eyes and nodded, relief flooding through him in a way he hadn’t anticipated. He hadn’t registered that that was what he needed to hear, that he simply needed to know that Ilya had forgiven him, that everything was okay between them. *They* were okay.

“Come here.” Ilya tugged Shane into his arms and Shane went willingly, letting Ilya hold him, his face tucked into Ilya’s shoulder.

“I love you,” Ilya said, rubbing Shane’s back. “Everything is okay. I forgive you.”

Shane nodded and just let himself cry, the feeling cathartic. He clung to Ilya, feeling like an enormous weight had been lifted off of him.

He’d been so concerned about how Ilya felt and if he resented Shane or was still angry. It felt good to know that he was absolved.

When he’d finished crying, he leaned away, wiping his face, and Ilya brought him a napkin.

“Thank you,” he sighed. “I love you. I’m sorry.”

“No. Is okay. There is a lot between us but maybe... we leave it in the past. I’m sorry, too. For hurting you. For running away...”

“I forgive you, too. I know we’ve both been hurt. I’d like to, just, do it better this time.”

“Yes. Me, too.”

Shane nodded, looking at Ilya, feeling ridiculous, but Ilya just smiled warmly at him, brushing a careful thumb under Shane’s eye, the back of his hand smoothing over Shane’s cheek.

“Better?”

Shane let out a self-conscious laugh. “Yeah. A lot better.”

“Good.”

Ilya kissed him, warm and gentle, stroking his hair.

“I’m sorry,” Shane sighed. “You were being so open and I made it about me.”

“Shane,” Ilya said, firm but kind. Shane licked his lips. “Is okay. Is a lot. Fifteen years worth of shit all inside. Better to let it out than hold it in, yes?”

Shane huffed a laugh, reaching out to gently play with one of Ilya’s curls. “When did you get so wise?”

Ilya hummed and kissed Shane once more. “Come.”

He tugged Shane gently from his chair and took his hand, walking to the living room. He got Shane settled on the couch, found his throw blankets, and tucked them both underneath one, cuddling up together in the corner of the couch.

It was snowing outside, the fireplace warm and casting moody shadows across the walls.

Shane felt lighter. Snuggled up against Ilya like this he felt like they’d knocked down the final wall between them. He could breathe. He felt more open, like moving into this next phase was possible. Slotting the perfect puzzle piece into place.

“I went to therapy, too,” Shane murmured. “A few years before I retired. I was so anxious and burnt out. It helped, especially when it came to being gay. I got a lot of support... it was good.”

“Good,” Ilya replied, fingers smoothing through Shane’s hair. “We were under a lot of pressure. Stress. You especially.”

Shane sighed, closing his eyes. “I love hockey. I’m proud of my career. But it took a lot from me, too.”

It felt good to say. It wasn’t something he talked about and he’d only really talked about it with his old therapist. But there were a lot of complicated feelings where hockey was concerned. It had brought a lot of amazing things into Shane’s life but it had stolen many things from him as well.

“Yes,” Ilya whispered in agreement.

“Have things been... okay? After getting help and everything?”

“Mm. Things have been good for a long time. I still see a therapist but less now and medication helps. There are bad days sometimes but not like they were. And I know what to do.”

“Will you teach me how to help you?” Shane plucked a little at Ilya’s shirt.

“Of course. I want to help you, too. Support you.”

Shane was happy to hear it. He wanted to help however he could and he appreciated the reciprocation. "Thank you."

Shane turned to him, lifting his head. He studied Ilya's face, both familiar and new to him, but still beloved and cherished.

Shane couldn't believe how long this man had had his heart and he'd been so blind.

"I have a question for you."

"Okay."

"Do you want to be my boyfriend?"

Ilya looked like he hadn't been expecting that question, slightly taken aback. Shane's heart sank, wondering if maybe that had been a step too far given how vulnerable Ilya had been and then Shane getting all upset and...

"Yes," Ilya replied. "Please."

"Wait. Really?"

"Yes, Shane. Of course."

"Oh. Thank fuck."

Shane let his forehead thunk onto Ilya's chest, laughing, eyes prickling with tears again. Ilya laughed, too, hugging Shane close.

"I love you so much. I want to be with you for real," Shane breathed.

"I love you, too. Very much. Yes. For real this time. I think we've waited long enough."

"Yeah. We have."

"Will it be a secret?" Ilya asked, his voice neutral, which probably meant he was unsure about Shane's response.

Shane shook his head, lifting it. "No. I don't want it to be. We can tell people."

"Yes. I want that. To tell people. We can make a plan but... no more hiding." He touched Shane's face and Shane leaned into it, holding Ilya's hand to his cheek.

"No more hiding. I love you. Truly. I'm sorry for making you wait."

Ilya sighed, stroking his thumb over Shane's cheekbone. "You were well worth the wait, Hollander."

Shane whined, squishing his face against Ilya's, and Ilya chuckled, rubbing his cheek against Shane's.

He lifted his hand, taking his glasses from the top of his head, and placing them on the side table behind him, settling back down.

Shane went boneless against him and Ilya chuckled again, kissing into his hair.

“I love you,” Shane sighed.

“I love you, too.”

They just held each other into the quiet of Shane’s living room, all the remaining tension between them melted away.

“We should probably clean up the kitchen.”

“Probably.”

“And you gotta take Anya out.”

“Mm. Yes.”

Neither of them made any attempt to move and Ilya just held Shane tight.

Shane lifted his head, looking at his brand new boyfriend, and Ilya looked back. Shane kissed him, sighing softly into it, relieved and happy.

He opened his mouth as Ilya’s tongue brushed against his lips, Ilya’s hands sliding into the back pockets of Shane’s jeans, squeezing his ass.

Shane ground against him and Ilya made an approving noise, grinding back up against him.

He felt a little like a teenager, simply chasing pleasure without any real plan, and while it would be embarrassing to come in his pants, he didn’t really want to stop.

“Wait, wait,” Ilya breathed, breaking their kiss. He removed his hands from Shane’s pockets, undoing Shane’s fly, and Shane got the hint, working at Ilya’s pants, tugging them down just enough to get at his dick.

Ilya pulled his shirt up to his chin and Shane squeezed one muscular pec in his hand, unable to help himself. He gasped as Ilya wrapped his hand around them together, one of Shane’s hands planted on the couch beside Ilya’s head.

Ilya stroked them fast, his grip firm, a little rough, but Ilya ran his thumb over the head of Shane’s cock, humming in approval.

“I love how wet you get,” he purred and Shane moaned helplessly, his forehead dropping against Ilya’s. He wasn’t going to last long *at all*.

“Oh fuck, Ilya. I’m close...”

“Me, too. Come on. Together.”

Shane whined and panted into Ilya's mouth, both of them breathing hard. Shane could feel his orgasm cresting before it washed over him, his body rocking in Ilya's grip as Ilya came, too.

"Fuck, Ilya," Shane sighed at the same time Ilya breathed out, "Shane."

Ilya chuckled breathlessly and Shane kissed him for a long moment. The kiss broke and Ilya kissed the corner of his mouth, soft and tender. Shane rubbed their noses together, kissing Ilya full on once more because he couldn't help it.

Shane looked at him, even though he was all blurry this close up, noses squished together, both of them laughing softly.

"Love you."

"I love you, too."

Shane closed his eyes and hummed, basking in the closeness, before leaning away. They'd made a mess all over Ilya's belly, and Shane pulled off of him carefully, fixing his pants, and went to get a dishtowel to clean Ilya up.

They laughed and kissed some more as Shane wiped Ilya down, both of them happy and sated.

After, they cleaned the kitchen together, pausing to kiss, bumping hips, laughing. Things felt so light and airy, like they'd finally pulled back the curtains to let the sunshine in. Shane felt almost giddy.

He dried his hands as he watched Ilya put on Anya's booties. She was very well-behaved and got pets for her good behavior.

Shane smiled and walked over, straightening Ilya's coat and scarf, handing Ilya a set of keys to the condo.

"Be careful out there."

"I will, don't worry," he said, stealing a kiss, and pocketing the keys. Shane smiled, watching him and Anya head out so Anya could do her business before bed.

Shane stood in the entry for a second, looking back at the cleaned kitchen, dishwasher running, Anya's toys and her doggy bed strewn about the living room, and Ilya's glasses perched on the side table.

He liked his condo. It was a perfectly cromulent place to live. It was spacious but not too spacious. It was well decorated and furnished because a designer had come in to do it.

Shane had been slowly adding his own touch to things here and there but this was the first time the place had felt like *home*.

He walked through the living room, to the window, peeking outside. It was snowing pretty steadily but he could see Ilya and Anya out front, making their way back inside, and they hadn't been gone for ten minutes but Shane wanted them back already.

About three minutes later they were coming in the door, Ilya careful not to track snow everywhere, and keeping Anya in check so he could take off all her gear, before she ran to Shane as if they'd been apart for days rather than minutes.

"I know, Anya. Hi! How was your walk in the snow, hm? All cold?"

Shane got on the floor with the dog, rubbing her belly, and watched as Ilya slid off his boots, his coat already hung up. His cheeks and nose were red from the cold, his curls all mussed from his hat.

Shane love him more than he could ever express.

"She loves the snow," Ilya said as he joined them both on the floor, petting Anya, then playing some fetch, and then she went to drink some water before flopping into her bed.

"What would you like to do with the rest of our evening?" Shane asked, brushing a stray curl from Ilya's face.

Ilya puckered his lips in thought, his eyes scanning Shane from his head to his lap, then back up again.

"Keep you in bed until tomorrow," he finally replied.

Shane laughed. "I wouldn't mind that at all."

Ilya hummed, leaning in expectantly. Shane kissed him, cupping his cheek.

They pulled themselves off the floor and Shane turned off the lights and the fireplace.

"Will she be okay out here?" Nodding toward Anya.

"She will be fine," Ilya replied, taking Shane's hands, and walked backwards towards Shane's bedroom.

Ilya was true to his word, keeping Shane in bed the rest of the evening and into the wee hours of the morning.

They were both curled up together, sleepy and sated, exchanging intermittent kisses and touches.

"Want to make a bet?" Ilya asked, running his hand over Shane's thigh in soothing caresses.

"About what?" Shane asked, stifling a yawn.

"That the snow will be heavy enough that we can delay practice. Maybe even make it optional?"

Shane snorted and Ilya kissed his neck. "Well you're the head coach so... I think that's cheating..."

Ilya's response was to bite Shane.

"Ow! Fuck!"

Ilya cackled, kissing the bite and Shane tugged unhappily at his curls.

Ilya murmured something in Russian.

"What?"

Ilya leaned away to look at Shane. "I love you."

Shane smiled, fizzing with happiness. "I love you, too."

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Ilya meets Shane's parents

The next morning

“Do you want to meet my parents?” Shane asked as he sat on the kitchen island, swinging his legs a little.

Ilya was making his coffee and turned to look at his new boyfriend over his shoulder, mid-stir. Shane was wearing boxer briefs and Ilya’s t-shirt, and Ilya could see some of the bite marks he’d left all over the insides of Shane’s thighs. It made him smile.

“I met your parents.”

Shane’s cheeks went pink and he looked shy, holding his coffee mug up close by his face. “I meant, like, as my boyfriend. Coming over to meet them for dinner.”

Ilya turned back to his mug and finished with his coffee. He placed his spoon in the sink. He had wondered if Shane would want that. He supposed he would, given that they were serious about each other and continuing to build this relationship. The idea made Ilya both nervous and excited.

He picked up his mug and turned to Shane, walking toward him, and stood between his legs. He smiled at him, tucking some of his hair behind his ear.

“You want me to meet your parents as your boyfriend?”

Shane nodded. “Yeah. Of course I do.”

Ilya’s smile widened and he leaned in to steal a kiss.

“I would like that.”

Shane grinned, his face all crinkled up in happiness, and Ilya couldn’t help but kiss him again, making him laugh.

“Yeah?”

“Yes. Do they know about us?”

“They know how I feel about you, that we started seeing each other, but that’s about it.”

Ilya nodded. “Do they approve?”

“I’m pretty sure they do,” Shane replied. “They were very supportive and hopeful that we would work something out so, I think they’re happy. And I know they want to get to know you as a person. My mom really appreciated you showing up when my dad was in the hospital.”

“Important to have Yuna Hollander’s approval.” And he meant that. Ilya was aware of how close Shane was with his mom, with both of his parents. He wanted them to like him and to approve of him as a partner for Shane.

Shane fiddled with Ilya’s crucifix. “She approves already.”

“Does she?”

Shane nodded.

“We will see. I will have to be very respectable boyfriend.”

Shane laughed, looping a finger through Ilya’s chain to pull him closer, resting their foreheads together, and touching their noses.

“It’ll be fine. I want them to meet you and know you. I’ve wanted that for a long time.”

“Have you?” The words made Ilya all warm inside, thinking about Shane thinking about Ilya meeting his parents. It was sweet.

“Yeah.”

Ilya kissed Shane’s forehead. “I would like that, too.”

“I’m glad.”

Ilya hummed, leaning into Shane’s hand as it cupped his cheek. He turned his head, kissing his palm.

“I have a question, too.”

“Okay,” Shane chuckled.

“I have been thinking... do you want to go away with me? During All-Star break?”

“Like, on a trip?”

“Yes,” Ilya replied, leaning away to sip his coffee. “I was thinking California.”

“I would love to travel with you,” Shane replied, smiling brightly. “I wouldn’t mind going some place warm.”

Ilya smiled happily, stealing another kiss, sliding a hand up Shane’s thighs, fingers pushed up under the hem of his briefs. “I want to have time just for us, away from hockey.”

“Okay. Yeah! That sounds great! Will Anya be okay?”

“Yes. I have a place she stays when we travel. She likes it there and they are very good to her.”

“Good. As long as she’ll be okay.”

Ilya nodded, kissing the tip of Shane’s nose.

It had snowed fairly heavily last night so Ilya had delayed practice and made it optional, which meant he and Shane got to enjoy a languid morning together.

They would have to get going eventually but this was nice. *Cozy. Domestic.*

Ilya loved it.

He loved that he and Shane seemed to have finally found their footing. He was excited about where things went from here, what things would look like.

He was a little nervous, too, now that things were real.

It would be good for them to talk about relationship things and their future... and then how they would break the news at work.

But it certainly felt like they were finally on the same page, wanting the same things.

The idea of having eight days alone with Shane with no schedule to keep sounded heavenly. It would be nice for them to fully unwind and relax together for once.

Ilya wanted to see Shane soaking wet in a bathing suit. He wanted to walk with him hand in hand on a beach. He wanted to go out with him on a nice hike or to a vineyard and just enjoy his company.

Normal couple-y things.

The idea was incredibly appealing. It was something Ilya was looking forward to.

Anya came pattering into the kitchen with a toy in her mouth, tail wagging, looking up expectantly at Shane and Ilya.

“You’re being summoned,” Shane chuckled.

Ilya looked down and sighed. “Apparently.”

“Okay. You want to play?” he asked Anya, grabbing the toy, and initiating some tug-of-war. Ilya moved them into the living room and Shane followed with his coffee.

Ilya played with Anya for a bit, Shane joining in, until the dog was properly tired out. There had been too much snow and it was far too cold to have her go on her usual long walk, so getting some extra play time seemed reasonable to burn off her energy.

“You wanna start planning now?” Shane asked as they sat on the couch together.

Ilya turned to him. “What? The trip?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t have my laptop.” He hadn’t even thought of bringing it.

“I have mine,” Shane said. “Hang on.”

He got up from the couch and went toward the trophy room/office and came back with his laptop and glasses.

“You left yours on the table,” Shane said, motioning at the side table by the couch. Ilya turned, his glasses resting there.

“Thank you,” he said, grabbing them, and put them on.

Shane opened his laptop.

“Where did you want to go?”

“I don’t know,” Ilya chuckled. “Somewhere warm. By the water.”

Shane nodded. “Should we stay at a hotel or rent somewhere?”

“Rent.”

Shane chuckled. “Okay.”

They started looking at houses and found one they both loved in a small California town called Manchester.

It was a three and a half hour drive from the nearest international airport (San Francisco) but neither of them minded the idea of a scenic coastal drive.

“I can see if Rose is around if you’d want to meet her in person?”

Ilya considered the offer. He knew that Rose was important to Shane and if they were leaving things in the past, then he needed to let go of whatever uncomfortable feelings he felt toward Rose Landry.

“Okay. I would like to.”

Shane looked so pleased at Ilya’s answer and Ilya could manage his discomfort if it meant making Shane so happy. He always wanted to make him happy.

They booked the house, got plane tickets, rented a car, and two hotel rooms (one in San Francisco and one in Los Angeles), arguing over who was going to pay, and then ultimately splitting the cost between them.

Ilya watched fondly as Shane put the information in his calendar, blocking off the time. He closed his laptop and looked at Ilya, adjusting his glasses.

"We should probably get ready for the day, eh?"

"Probably," Ilya sighed and kissed Shane's temple, excited about their plans.

It was going to be a whirlwind of a day but he wouldn't mind doing it all with Shane.

It would probably be hard to hide this thing but Ilya would do his best.

Wyatt was very perceptive and he wondered if Max was on to them, too.

Ilya wanted to tell people but he did like the idea of just having this for himself and Shane for right now.

The idea of traveling together and blocking out the world and having the time just for themselves was so appealing to Ilya.

He wanted that. Just to feel that sureness. That solidity. Relaxing together without any obligations for those eight days.

"You okay?" Shane asked and Ilya smiled, taking his hand, and kissed it.

"Yes. Let's get ready."

Thursday

Ilya stood in front of his mirror, debating whether or not he should put on a tie.

He and Shane were going to Shane's parents' house for dinner and Ilya wanted to look presentable and respectable.

He had never met a partner's family before and he was nervous. He wanted to make a good impression.

Shane had said that his parents knew about Shane's feelings for Ilya and Shane had told them that they had had a *situationship* for a few years.

He supposed the context would help but Ilya had no idea how they perceived him knowing this information.

Were they leery because Ilya had a storied history with women and was now divorced? Would they be upset having learned their son was hooking up with his biggest rival for a large portion of their careers?

Ilya supposed things were different now. They were older, had more life experience. He hoped that the Hollanders understood that neither Ilya nor Shane would have tried again if

there hadn't been something *real* there in the first place.

“Shane!” Ilya called.

“Coming!” Shane called back, and Ilya could hear his steps as he walked down the hall to Ilya’s bedroom. “Where are you?”

“Closet.”

“Oh.”

Shane appeared in the doorway to Ilya’s walk-in, dressed in a warm looking sweater and jeans. He’d come over after work so they could get ready and leave together, with the intention of going back to Shane’s after dinner. He looked at Ilya with warm amusement and stepped into the closet.

“You don’t have to be all dressed up,” he said. “This is *super* casual.”

Ilya pressed his lips together, pulled down in the corner, giving Shane a dubious look. Shane rested his hands on Ilya’s arms, rubbing them soothingly.

“It’s really fine. I promise. No tie. You don’t even need slacks. Like, a nice sweater and jeans.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m positive. You have great style! It’ll be totally fine.” He smiled softly up at Ilya, touching his cheek. “My parents know that I’ve loved you for a very long time and that I wanted to try and be together. They already love you and just want to know you.”

Ilya licked his lips and nodded, looking down as Shane held his hands in his own.

“Want me to pick something out for you?”

Ilya wrinkled his nose and shook his head. “No. You have no fashion sense.”

“Hey!”

Ilya smiled a little, squeezing Shane’s hand. “I have an idea. Tell me what you think.”

“Okay.”

Ilya went back to his dresser, he pulled out a pair of his nicest, dark wash jeans, and a polo sweater.

“This?” he asked Shane.

“That’s perfect.”

“Okay.”

Ilya changed out of the slacks and button down he'd put on, into the jeans and sweater, giving Shane a three-sixty view.

"You look great," Shane said, taking Ilya's hands again. "Very handsome. Very respectable boyfriend."

Ilya huffed a laugh and Shane smiled wider, leaning into kiss Ilya softly.

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

"And my parents are going to love you."

"If you say so."

"I do." Shane kissed him once more, lingering. "Ready?"

"Almost."

Ilya let go of Shane's and went to put on a nice watch and some cologne. "Okay. Ready now."

Shane chuckled and held out his hand. Ilya took it and let Shane lead him back out into the condo.

They said goodbye to Anya and Ilya told her to be good for her babysitter. They slid into their boots and coats and Ilya grabbed his bag, the two of them heading out to Shane's car.

His parents were about twenty minutes away, which wasn't bad at all but the drive felt like forever.

Ilya chewed on his thumbnail, leg bouncing.

"Hey," Shane said, touching his knee. "Relax."

"Sorry..."

"It's okay. I know meeting the parents is a lot but I really mean it when I said my parents already love you. My mom is making chicken parmesan because she knows that it's your favorite."

Ilya looked at Shane behind the wheel. "She is?"

"Yeah," Shane laughed, glancing at Ilya.

That actually did make him feel better.

"I wouldn't lie to you," Shane said, more serious. "You'll see for yourself when we get there."

Ilya smiled, taking Shane's free hand, and holding it in both of his.

“Do they have pictures of you everywhere?”

Ilya watched Shane’s cheeks go pink. “I mean, yeah. I’m an only child so...”

Ilya grinned. “Baby pictures?”

Shane let out a long exhale. “Yes.”

Ilya was practically giddy hearing that. He wanted to see those pictures. He wanted to see Shane in all his iterations. He wanted to ask Shane's parents to tell him all the most embarrassing stories about Shane as a kid.

He wanted as much information as possible that he could tease Shane with. And also because he wanted to have the privilege of knowing that information.

“And this is the house you grew up in,” Ilya said.

“Yup.”

“Can I see your room?”

“My childhood bedroom?”

“Yes! What other room, Shane?”

Shane laughed. “It’s basically storage for my parents but... sure. If you want.”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” Shane chuckled. “We can do that.”

Shane pulled onto a quiet suburban street, everything was quaint and idyllic in the snow, with the street lights on.

Ilya looked out the window, imagining what it was like for Shane growing up here. He was kind of excited now, wanting to learn more about the man he loved from the people who had raised him, and felt a small pang of sadness that he wouldn’t be able to return the favor.

Shane would never get to see Russia or meet Ilya’s mother.

Ilya was disrupted from his melancholic thoughts as Shane pulled into a driveway, parking the car outside the garage that belonged to a very respectable looking two story house.

“Here we are,” Shane said.

Ilya looked at Shane and Shane smiled, bringing Ilya’s hand to his mouth, kissing his knuckles.

“Ready?”

Ilya nodded. “You?”

“Yeah. I’m really happy you’re here.”

Ilya smiled, his heart wobbling in his chest at Shane’s sweet words. He leaned over the center console and kissed Shane, deep and warm and full of adoration.

“Let’s go.”

Ilya picked up the bottle of wine between his feet and slid out of the car. He met Shane on the other side and they walked up the shoveled path to Shane’s parents’ door, hand in hand.

Shane didn’t knock or ring the bell, he simply took out his keys, and unlocked the door, pushing it open.

“Hi! It’s me! Shane!” he called into the house.

Ilya watched from behind Shane as both his parents peeked out from the kitchen, big smiles on their faces.

“Hi, honey!” Mrs. Hollander called.

They came into the house and Shane took off his boots, so Ilya did the same. They were given a moment to hang up their coats and everything, Ilya making sure the door was closed behind them, before Shane was being embraced by his mother.

“Oh Ilya!” Mrs. Hollander said, looking over Shane’s shoulder.

Ilya smiled. “Hi.”

Shane smiled at his mom, then at Ilya, before turning to his father, and then all of a sudden Mrs. Hollander was giving him an enormous hug.

“It is so nice to finally, *finally* meet you,” she said.

“You, too,” Ilya replied, hugging her back. “Shane has told me so much about you.”

Mrs. Hollander leaned away, her hands on his arms, taking his measure, a little smile on her face.

“He’s told us a lot about you, too,” she replied, her voice warm. “We’re so glad you came for dinner.”

“Thank you for having me. I, ah, brought wine?”

Mrs. Hollander chuckled, accepting the bottle. “You’re so sweet.” She rested a hand on her chest. “Call me Yuna. No formalities here.”

Ilya nodded. “Okay.”

“And you can call me David,” said David Hollander from slightly behind his wife.

Yuna shifted out of the way and David held out a hand. Ilya shook it.

“So nice to have you, Ilya.”

“Thank you for being so hospitable. I hope you’re feeling better.”

David nodded, sliding his hands into his pockets, much like his son. “Oh I’m fine. Right as rain. A little tired but on the mend. Thanks for asking. You know, Yuna and I really appreciate you being there for Shane.”

“Of course. Happy to do what I can. I know he was worried about you.”

David chuckled. “Yeah. He does that. He takes after his mother.”

Ilya smiled and David shrugged. “Come on in. Can I get you anything to drink?”

Ilya followed David to the kitchen where Shane was already with his mother, Yuna having opened the bottle of wine, pouring glasses.

“We have wine, beer, ginger ale, coke, seltzer, water. Whatever you like.”

“Wine is okay,” Ilya replied, wanting to be as unobtrusive as possible.

“You can have whatever you like,” Shane chuckled, coming up against Ilya’s side, hand on his lower back.

“I know. Wine is good.”

“Okay.”

Shane rubbed his back and smiled at him and Ilya tried to relax a little, smiling in return.

Mrs. Hollander... Yuna, handed out wine glasses and they chatted for a bit in the kitchen about David’s health and how he was doing and what next steps were.

“I’m gonna take Ilya on a tour,” Shane said, taking Ilya’s hand, after a little while of chit-chat.

“Dinner will be ready soon!” David replied.

“We won’t be long,” Shane said as he tugged Ilya out of the kitchen, into the dining room, where a table that could seat six was made up for four.

“Dining room,” Shane said, chuckling, walking through the room with Ilya following behind.

“Living room.” He held out the hand that held his wine glass and Ilya took a moment to look around.

There were pictures on the walls and mantel. He stopped to look and really take everything in.

“My parents,” Shane said, sliding his arm across Ilya’s waist. “When they were in college.”

Ilya smiled, looking at a picture of a much younger Yuna and David, arms wrapped around one another, smiling wide.

“My dad played for McGill’s hockey team and my mom was the student manager. The first woman to ever manage the team.”

“Cute,” Ilya chuckled. “Hockey is important in your family.”

“Mm. Or at least in how we meet the people we fall in love with...”

Ilya looked at Shane, who was all pink under his freckles. He was looking back at Ilya, unflinching, and Ilya’s heart fluttered, his whole body fizzy with warmth.

He wanted to back Shane into the wall and kiss him extremely thoroughly in reply but settled on a lingering forehead kiss instead.

They looked at all of the pictures Shane’s parents had. Pictures of them as they dated and got married. A few pictures of a pregnant Yuna and the rest were family pictures with Shane as a baby and as he grew up or just pictures of Shane alone.

“This is you,” Ilya said, picking up a small heart-shaped frame with a photo of a newborn in it.

“That’s me,” Shane chuckled.

“So cute.”

“I was pretty adorable.”

Ilya laughed softly, looking at Shane's tiny round face, the full head of dark hair, before he put the frame back.

There were tons of pictures of Shane as he aged in various hockey uniforms, smiling with missing teeth, following the trajectory of his childhood.

Ilya paused at one photo. It was Shane in the snow at about seventeen.

“That was right before Juniors,” Shane said softly and Ilya nodded. “Right before we met.”

Ilya looked at that smiling face. He remembered it, the way Shane had looked at him, in that parking lot in Saskatchewan.

“Yes.”

There were other pictures, collages almost, of Shane’s career. A few of his official portraits from the Voyageurs, his time on the Canadian National Men’s Hockey Team at the Olympics and IIHF.

It was obvious how much the Hollanders loved their son. How much they loved each other.

Ilya couldn't remember family photos like this. He remembered a few family portraits and that was all. He had so few photos of his life and childhood. Whatever he had had was confined to a small photo album he'd managed to steal and bring to the States.

It wasn't much... but it was the only pictures of his mother that he had.

Maybe he would show Shane sometime soon.

"Here. I'll show you upstairs."

Ilya shook his head a little, coming back to reality, and allowed Shane to lead him.

"Where is your room?" Ilya asked.

"You'll see," Shane huffed.

There were even more pictures on the walls here, school photos taken from kindergarten through high school.

Shane pointed out his parents' room, the office, the only full bathroom (there was a half-bath downstairs), and his old bedroom.

"Prepare to be underwhelmed," Shane said as they stood in front of a plain wooden door. No posters or signs or anything, which seemed very much like Shane.

Shane opened the door and he pulled Ilya inside.

"Here it is."

The room was moderately sized, with what looked like a full sized bed, a desk, a dresser, and a closet. It was cluttered, as Shane had said, with storage bins and other detritus that his parents had stored here, but there were still trophies and medals on the dresser and desk.

Ilya saw a framed jersey for Pierre Montembeault on the wall, one of the best forwards in Ottawa Centaurs' history, and some old posters of other popular players from the 90's and early 00's.

Ilya let go of Shane's hand to inspect the medals and trophies. He knew Shane had been staying here while he'd looked for a place of his own and Ilya wasn't having a very difficult time imagining Shane here as a child.

He walked around as much of the room as he could and then sat on Shane's bed. Shane sat next to him, taking his hand, and kissed the back of Ilya's hand again.

"You wanna know something?"

Ilya smiled, huffing a soft laugh. "Obviously."

Shane smiled and chuckled. His cheeks and ears were pink and Ilya wanted to bite them.

“I’ve never had a guy in here before. I’ve had friends in here, sure, but like, no boys that I liked. It never happened because it took me so long to figure myself out but... I kind of like that I can have you here now. A little something for my younger self, I guess.”

Ilya looked at Shane, then the door of his room, then back to Shane. “Do you think we have enough time before dinner?”

Shane’s brows furrowed. “For what?”

Ilya wagged his brows and Shane smacked his arm with the back of his hand. “No! Absolutely not!”

“Ow,” Ilya laughed. “Why not? You come so quick...”

“Ilya!”

“It will be like true teenage experience!”

“Shh! Shut up!” Shane hissed, covering Ilya’s mouth. Ilya laughed and licked Shane’s palm.

“Eugh! Gross!”

Ilya laughed and Shane couldn’t help but laugh, too.

“You’re disgusting.”

“Oh you love it,” Ilya cooed, leaning in and making kissing noises at Shane.

Shane leaned away and they wrestled for a little, laughing.

“No, Ilya,” Shane huffed as Ilya kisses his neck. “We can’t, we can’t...”

Ilya sighed. “Fine, fine.”

He leaned away and stood up, straightening out his sweater.

Shane shook his head at him, his face all flushed, but he was smiling. He fixed his hair and his shirt, reaching out to fix Ilya’s curls a little.

“You’re no fun, Hollander,” Ilya sighed.

“When we get back to my place, you can do whatever you want with me,” Shane hummed, resting his hands on Ilya’s chest.

“Is that so?”

Shane nodded. “I’ll be so good for you, promise.”

Ilya practically growled, hands on Shane’s ass, pulling him closer. And then he did kiss him like he’d wanted to, deep and adoring and very, very thorough.

They broke apart, a bit out of breath.

“Jesus, Ilya.”

“For later.”

Shane smiled. “C’mon.”

Ilya smacked his ass as Shane walked out the door and Shane laughed, waving his hand behind him as if that would scare Ilya off.

“Enough.”

Ilya chuckled, blowing Shane a kiss.

They got back downstairs, David and Yuna watching them both fondly. Ilya was sure they’d heard them laughing upstairs and maybe that wasn’t unwelcome...

He and Shane were on their best behavior through the rest of the evening with Shane’s parents and Ilya found himself more relaxed than he would have thought.

He enjoyed watching the Hollander family dynamic, seeing how they interacted with one another. Shane and Yuna were very much alike, in physical appearance and personality, where David was more laid back and calm.

Ilya liked his energy. So different from his own father’s, who he had never been able to be close to. But Ilya could imagine sitting on the patio drinking a beer with David.

He liked Yuna, too. She was very engaging and excited and she kept bringing Ilya into the conversation, which he appreciated.

Yuna and David were both very welcoming and curious. They asked questions about Ilya and his time coaching, both in college and with the Cens.

“And things between you two...” Yuna asked over dessert, motioning between them with her wine glass. It was a gentle question but Ilya and Shane looked at each other.

Ilya nodded and Shane answered. “We’re, um, together. Boyfriends, I guess.”

Ilya watched David and Yuna exchange looks, both of them brightening.

“That’s great, boys,” David said with a warm smile and approving nod.

“We’re so happy for you,” Yuna added, smiling softly, her eyes a little shimmery.

“Are you going to tell people or...?” David asked.

“We’ll tell the organization and stuff,” Shane replied. “We have to figure out what we’re going to say but that’s the plan.”

“And until then?” Yuna asked.

“Keep things to ourselves. I’m not gonna lie, it’s kind of nice to just have this for us. For a little while anyway.”

Shane glanced at Ilya as he said it, tangling his pinky with Ilya’s under the table, and Ilya smiled at him, nodding.

“Yes. It is,” Ilya agreed.

“We’re going to travel together, over the All-Star break,” Shane continued.

“Oh how lovely! Where to?”

“California,” Ilya answered.

David chuckled. “Get a break from this cold and the snow.”

“That is the plan,” Ilya agreed.

They talked a little more about traveling and how David and Yuna wanted to go someplace warm but low-key, particularly because David was still recovering.

Eventually Yuna started cleaning up and both Shane and Ilya stood to help.

“Oh don’t worry, Ilya. Sit, sit,” Yuna encouraged.

Ilya looked at Shane, who nodded and Ilya sat back down, watching Shane disappear into the kitchen, leaving Ilya alone with David.

David looked over his shoulder, smiling and shaking his head a little.

“She probably wants to talk to him alone,” he said softly.

Ilya smiled a little. “Should I be worried?”

“No,” David said, face screwed up the same way Shane’s did when he was dismissing an idea. “Not at all. You would know if Yuna didn’t like you, believe me.”

Ilya chuckled and David joined in.

“Shane hasn’t told us much but, what he has told us, we’re both glad that things worked out for both of you. That you got a second chance.”

Ilya nodded, a little surprised, but glad to hear the support.

“Thank you. Yes. Me, too. I love Shane and I am happy we can be together.”

David smiled warmly. “You both deserve that, especially after everything you’ve gone through. The League can be an incredible place but it’ll chew you up and spit you out, too.”

David wasn’t wrong.

“It was hard, yes. But we are working to make it better.”

“And you two should be proud of that. You’re doing amazing work. I’m glad that things are good between you.”

“Thank you.”

And Ilya truly meant it. He appreciated David being so warm and welcoming. No threats or anything like that. Just acceptance and a desire for them both to be happy.

It was... nice.

David and Ilya talked some more about general hockey things and Ilya asked about stories about Shane from when he was young. David did not disappoint.

Yuna and Shane came out of the kitchen a little while later. Shane walked around behind Ilya’s chair, resting his hands on Ilya’s shoulders, and kissed the top of his head.

“What did I miss?”

"Your dad was telling me about your childhood."

"Oh no," Shane groaned.

"You were a cute kid!" David chimed and Ilya laughed.

“I’m sure I’m gonna get teased about it later.”

"Yes," Ilya hummed happily.

“I was hoping I might be able to pick the head coach’s brain,” Yuna said, changing the subject.

“Any time,” Ilya replied.

“Oh don’t give her that much permission...” Shane warned.

Yuna gave her son a look and Ilya tilted his head back to see Shane shrugged.

“He’s not wrong, honey,” David chuckled.

“Mom is obsessed with hockey.”

“Honestly, both of you. I would be extremely respectful of Ilya’s time.”

“Don’t give her your number,” Shane stage whispered.

“Shane!”

Everyone laughed, including Yuna.

“We should probably head out,” Shane said, lightly squeezing Ilya’s shoulders.

They said their goodbyes to Shane’s parents, getting hugs and kisses and promising to come by again soon, and that they would be at the next home game.

“Drive safe!” Yuna said at the door.

“Text when you get home!” David added.

“We will!” Shane replied, both he and Ilya waving goodbye as they got to the car.

They took a few minutes to settle. Shane started the car, turning on the heat and the seat warmers.

He let out a breath and turned to look at Ilya, resting a hand on his knee.

“You good?”

“Yes. Was a good time. I like your parents.”

“And they like you.”

“I’m glad. But we should get home.”

“Yeah? Tired?”

“Mm, not really. Someone promised me that I can do anything I want to them when we get home.”

“*Oh.*”

Ilya could see Shane’s cheeks flush even in the dim light from the street lamps.

“Yeah. We should get home then...”

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Shane is as good as his word

They got to Shane's apartment and Ilya pressed himself against Shane's back, nuzzling his face under Shane's collar to kiss at his neck.

"Ilya," Shane hissed, though Ilya could hear the smile in his voice, his head tilting to the side to try to deter him, but he simply switched to the other side of Shane's neck.

Shane giggled, trying to get his key into the lock.

"Give it to me," Ilya laughed, taking the keys from Shane's hand, and sliding it into the lock.

"Show off," Shane huffed, turning in Ilya's arms as Ilya pushed the door open.

"Always."

Shane walked backwards and Ilya followed, wrapping an arm around Shane to kiss him, closing the door with his foot.

Ilya dropped his bag on the floor, kicking his boots off unceremoniously, dropping his coat, hat, and scarf on top of his bag. Shane, always meticulous, did the same, both of them eager to get their hands back on each other.

Shane slid his hands into Ilya's curls and Ilya pushed his hands up under Shane's sweater, touching skin, kissing him hungrily. They got half way into the condo before Ilya just tugged at Shane's legs and Shane hopped into his arms, wrapping around him as Ilya carried him to the bedroom.

Tonight had been such a great night. Meeting Shane's parents had gone so well. Ilya liked them and apparently they liked him. And now he was going to have amazing sex with his *boyfriend*.

What a gift.

Ilya stopped in the middle of Shane's room, placing him down, and Shane's hands immediately went to the fly of Ilya's jeans.

"Wait," Ilya said, wrapping his hands around Shane's wrists, holding him gently.

Shane looked at him with big brown eyes, lips red and kiss-swollen, cheeks flushed.

“Do you have plans for me?” Shane asked, breathless.

Ilya nodded. He did have a plan. He’d been thinking about it as soon as Shane had mentioned it. They’d never done anything quite like this before, though Ilya had always wondered.

Shane had been incredibly bold to say that he would let Ilya do whatever he wanted to him, that he would be so good for him. Ilya wasn’t going to do anything crazy but he wanted to explore a bit.

Shane had always been a bit slutty, always so eager for whatever Ilya gave him, and Ilya wasn’t surprised that being told what to do and doing it well, being reward for that, would do it for Shane.

It was so hot though. Being trusted like this. Ilya wanted to be sure that he made it good for Shane as much as for himself.

Ilya licked his lips, running his thumb over Shane’s mouth, watching Shane’s eyes dip closed for a moment, a small sigh wisping against Ilya’s skin.

“Yes. Do you promise to be good for me?”

Shane nodded, eyes still closed, opening slowly to look at Ilya again. “Yes.”

Ilya hummed, stroking the back of his hand along Shane’s cheek. “Nothing you do not want, okay? You can say you don’t like something, ask to stop.”

Ilya met Shane’s eyes and Shane looked back, nodding again, leaning into Ilya’s touch. “Okay.”

“Okay. Good. Now take off your clothes.”

Shane swallowed, taking a step back to start taking off his clothes. Ilya watched him because how could he not?

He loved the slow reveal of skin, the way Shane neatly placed his clothes onto the bench at the foot of his bed. The *obedience*.

“Everything,” Ilya said, motioning at Shane as he stood in his boxer briefs.

Shane obeyed, taking off his underwear, too, and heat flooded anew through Ilya.

Shane was so gorgeous. Still fit and strong. His body had changed a little with age, but Ilya’s had, too. He could look at Shane all day, exploring every inch, and not get bored.

Ilya’s eyes drifted to Shane’s half-hard dick and then back up to his face.

“Stay,” Ilya instructed, then turned, going to one of the armchairs Shane kept in his room. He grabbed some lube and a condom from the bedside table, lube in hand, condom tossed on top of the table.

Ilya dragged the armchair to the center of the room, a few feet from Shane, and dropped the lube into the corner. He turned to Shane, stripping off his sweater, tossing it aside. He undid the fly of his jeans, shimmying out of them, kicking them aside, then took off his socks. He left only his briefs on.

Shane was watching with slightly parted lips, hands at his sides, and Ilya smirked at seeing his dick now fully at attention. Still all neat and tidy, just like the rest of him.

Ilya sat in the chair, legs spread, leaning a casual elbow on one armrest, his cheek resting on his fist. He slid his palm over his mostly hard cock.

“Is this what you want?” he asked Shane.

Shane blinked and nodded. “Yes.”

“Will you do what I ask to get it?”

“Yes,” Shane answered, voice all breathy.

“Good.” Ilya palmed himself again, watching the way Shane’s eyes followed the motion. He was taut as a bowstring.

“Come here,” Ilya said. “On your hands and knees.”

Shane didn’t even hesitate. He got on his hands and knees and crawled to Ilya, the sight mindbogglingly sexy. Shane got to him, immediately nuzzling his face against the bulge in Ilya’s briefs, cheek pressed against the inside of Ilya’s thigh.

“Fuck,” Ilya murmured in Russian, reaching for Shane and pulling him up, crashing their mouths together. He wanted to devour him. They’d barely started and Ilya couldn’t let himself unravel yet.

Shane’s obedience was just so delicious. More than Ilya had anticipated.

He rubbed his hands into Shane’s hair, scratching at his scalp, before fisting into the silky strands and tugging Shane’s head back.

Shane made an involuntary moaning noise, surprised, and Ilya purred, kissing his neck.

“Look at you, my good little slut. So eager.”

Shane made a soft noise, breathing a bit ragged. “Wanna be good for you...”

“Mm, you are so far,” Ilya sighed, kissing Shane’s jaw, the corner of his mouth. “Can you keep it up?”

“Yes. I’ll show you...”

Ilya nipped Shane’s ear. “That is what I like to hear.”

He let go of Shane's hair, holding his face in his hand, thumb pressing into the hinge of Shane's jaw as he kissed him again. Shane's hands rested on Ilya's thighs, digging into his quads.

When Ilya broke the kiss, he held Shane still.

"I want you to suck me while you open yourself for me and if you are good, I'll fuck you. Can you do that?"

Shane nodded his head, licking his lips, biting his bottom lip. "Yes."

"Good." Ilya handed Shane the lube. "I don't want you to come until I'm inside you."

Shane nodded and smiled a little. "Okay. Easy."

Ilya arched a brow at him. "So cocky."

"Disciplined."

Ilya chuckled and stroked his thumb over Shane's cheek, leaning in. "I want you begging for me," he murmured, their noses touching.

He watched Shane's eyes flutter closed as he let out a tiny sigh and then Ilya kissed him, Shane's hands gripping Ilya's shoulders.

Ilya released him, leaning back in the chair, and Shane got to work. He slid his fingers into Ilya's briefs, tugging them down, Ilya lifting his hips to make it easier.

He smiled as Shane tossed the briefs away haphazardly. He reached for the lube, coating his fingers, and Ilya watched with interest as Shane reached back.

He leaned in close, pressing tentative kisses and kitten-licks to Ilya's dick, gasping softly as he undoubtedly slid a finger into himself. Ilya just watched the show with interest.

"You're so beautiful like this," Ilya said, in Russian. "On your knees for me."

And it was true. Ilya enjoyed the way Shane looked, strong and masculine but so very willing and pliant. Ilya was hesitant to say submissive exactly because that wasn't quite right. Shane liked being proficient. He liked pleasing.

Ilya liked giving him what he wanted. That had always been true. Even when they'd been kids.

Some things never changed.

Shane sighed dreamily, his eyes closed, sucking under the head of Ilya's cock. He was going slow, which Ilya didn't mind, and having to multi-task like this wasn't easy.

He did love how hard Shane tried, how good he wanted to be for Ilya.

Shane leaned away slightly, swearing under his breath as he slid another finger into himself, head falling back slightly, and Ilya wanted to bite his neck, leaving marks all over that pretty skin.

Once Shane had settled a bit, he met Ilya's eyes, wrapping his mouth around the head of Ilya's cock, sucking. His free hand slid up Ilya's torso, squeezing a pec and Ilya rested his hand over it.

"Yes, Shane," Ilya encouraged, sliding his other hand into Shane's hair, pushing it back to better see Shane's face. He lowered his eyes and concentrated on sucking and fingering himself, making the hottest little needy noises, and Ilya wasn't sure how long he would be able to last.

The tableau before him was just intoxicating; Shane's cheeks flushed, on his knees like this for Ilya, opening himself up, mouth around him.

Shane took him a little deeper, humming around Ilya, and he stroked his hand over Shane's cheek, praising him in both English and Russian, noticing Shane fucking himself with his fingers a little faster.

He hadn't touched his own cock though, his free hand dragging back down to rest on Ilya's quad.

Ilya let him suck for a few more moments before tugging at his hair and Shane pulled off of him. He looked up at Ilya with almost bleary, half-lidded, sex drunk eyes, his lips wet and slack.

"You have been so good," Ilya hummed. "Are you ready for me?"

Shane nodded his head vigorously, licking his lips.

Ilya held Shane's chin with his thumb and forefinger, brushing his thumb gently over Shane's lips. "Tell me, lyubimyy."

"Yes. Please. Want you in me."

"Good boy," Ilya cooed, patting Shane's cheek. "On the bed."

Shane made a soft whimpery noise, getting to his feet, and going to the bed. Ilya watched him, wanting to sink his teeth into Shane's perfect ass as much as he wanted to slide right into him.

He got into bed and Ilya stood, grabbing the lube, and followed after him, standing at the end of the bed.

Shane glanced over his shoulder and Ilya spun his finger. "Face me."

He did as he was told, sitting on his feet, hands on his thighs. Ilya walked to the side of the bed, crawling into it, and got behind Shane.

They were facing the large mirror attached to Shane's dresser and Shane seemed to realize what Ilya had in mind.

"Ilya..."

Ilya carefully carded Shane's hair away from his neck, nuzzling him there, pressing soft kisses down across his freckled shoulder.

"We do not have to," he murmured. "But I want you to see how beautiful you look."

"Oh," Shane breathed, the sound almost helpless, and Ilya looked up, watching Shane in the mirror.

Shane leaned back into him, Ilya's hands coming to rest on his chest and stomach, fingers teasing over a nipple, making Shane hiss and gasp as Ilya pinched it.

"I want you to watch while I fuck you."

Shane shivered and moaned and Ilya bit his ear.

"Fuck. Yeah. Okay."

Ilya hummed, pleased, sliding his hand back into Shane's hair, scratching along his scalp, before grabbing his hair carefully and pulling his head back. He kissed Shane, messy and almost desperate, releasing him only to grab the condom and lube.

He sat up on his knees, pushing Shane onto his hands and knees. Shane went and Ilya slicked his fingers with lube, before pressing two of them into Shane.

Shane moaned, long and loud, though there was little resistance.

"Watch," Ilya said, hand in Shane's hair again, pulling his head up so he was forced to look at himself in the mirror as Ilya finger fucked him.

"You are so beautiful like this. So free."

Shane made a helpless noise, doing his best to keep his eyes opening, but having to close them. Ilya wasn't going to force him, letting his hair go, allowing him to relax for a moment.

Ilya slid on the condom and slicked himself, carefully tugging Shane up so that his back was to Ilya's chest. Ilya rested an arm across Shane's chest, Shane's hands gripped his forearm for stability as Ilya pressed into him.

"Jesus," Shane breathed, his head back on Ilya's shoulder.

"Okay?" Ilya asked, pressing an open mouthed kiss to Shane's cheek.

"Yeah, fuck. Give me a second."

“Take your time,” Ilya sighed, trying to relax, watching Shane in the mirror. His eyes were closed and he was taking some calming breaths.

Ilya nuzzled the side of Shane’s face, ran a hand up and down his torso in soothing, somewhat teasing caresses. He pressed a few kisses to Shane’s shoulder.

“I love your freckles...”

“Yeah?”

“Mm, yes. On your face, your shoulders and back, your neck.”

Shane huffed softly. “I used to hate them.”

“No,” Ilya lamented, mouth pressed to Shane’s shoulder. “They are stunning.”

“Stunning?”

“Yes. Very beautiful. Breathtaking.”

“Well... alright.”

Ilya smiled, sliding his mouth across Shane’s shoulder to his neck, to his ear, nipping his earlobe.

“Are you still going to be good for me?” Ilya breathed against Shane’s ear, pulling out just a little and pressing back in, making Shane hum.

“Yes.”

“You are going to watch,” he said, turning his gaze toward the mirror, waiting for Shane to meet his eyes. He did, looking uncertain, and Ilya gave him a little squeeze.

“You are gorgeous, Shane,” he murmured. “I want you to see how beautiful you look when you are gone for me.”

Shane bit his lip and Ilya kissed his shoulder, nipping it lightly, before he pulled almost all the way out, and pushed back in.

“Fuck!” Shane gasped and Ilya hummed.

He started a steady rhythm, letting Shane sink into the pleasure of it. Ilya watched in the mirror, allowing Shane to just get lost for a bit, for him to be less self-conscious.

He was so lovely, face flushed, eyes half-lidded and hazy with lust, lips parted and red.

“I love being with you like this, seeing you like this,” Ilya told Shane in Russian, then switching to English, “you feel incredible. So perfect.”

He teased Shane’s nipples with his fingers until they were hard and sensitive and Shane was moaning, pressing his ass back to meet Ilya’s thrusts.

Shane reached an arm back, looping it around Ilya's neck, and Ilya kissed him, all tongue, messy and urgent.

"Watch," Ilya told him when they parted and Shane let out a helpless noise, turning his gaze toward the mirror once more.

Ilya wrapped his hand around Shane's cock and started to stroke.

"Fuck. Ilya. Oh god. So fucking good. Don't stop."

Ilya hummed, not at all intending to stop, his face tucked against Shane's neck, eyes lifted to watch. He could tell that Shane was close, could see it in the way his brows furrowed, his breathing shifted.

He could see Shane's abdominal muscles tighten, thighs starting to tremble.

"Mm, you're so close, I can tell, sweetheart. I want you to see it. Show me."

"Yes. Yeah. Oh shit. *Ilya*. I'm gonna come, I'm gonna—!"

Watching Shane Hollander orgasm was maybe one of Ilya's favorite things to watch. Full stop. Come spurting all over Ilya's hand and the bed, body tight and trembling, rocking with pleasure. And to his credit, he kept his eyes open as well as he could, which Ilya delighted in.

He fucked Shane through his orgasm, his body clenching so perfectly around Ilya, and he came only a moment later, holding Shane tight. They both kind of slumped backwards, Ilya sitting back on his heels, Shane leaning against him.

"Holy shit," Shane laughed and Ilya chuckled, kissing his shoulder again.

"Good?"

"Fucking incredible."

"Mm, yes." Ilya nuzzled his face against Shane's neck, wiping his hand on Shane's belly.

"Gross..."

Ilya laughed and Shane sighed. Ilya held him for a few minutes before Shane shifted off of him and out of bed.

"C'mon," he said, holding out a hand. "Let's get cleaned up."

Ilya took Shane's hand and let Shane tug him to the bathroom. They cleaned up and basically started getting ready for bed. When they'd finished, Ilya watched Shane fuss around, changing the sheets, though he didn't allow Ilya to help.

Instead, Ilya just watched, leaning against the bathroom doorframe until Shane was just about finished. He took slow, careful steps until he was standing right behind Shane, sliding his arms around him, holding him close, burying his face in Shane's hair.

“Can we cuddle now?” Ilya sighed and Shane laughed.

Ilya lifted Shane up slightly and fell into bed with him, both of them laughing.

They snuggled up together under the blankets, face to face.

“Did you like it?” Ilya asked, tucking some of Shane’s hair behind his ear.

“I did,” Shane replied, blushing. “I, um, I like performing. Having a task and doing it well. Being disciplined and... good.”

Ilya nodded in understanding, smiling. “I like giving you what you want.”

Shane smiled back, looking shy, and pleased. “Yeah?”

“Yes.”

“I’m glad. It feels good... with you.”

“For me, too.”

Shane rested a hand on Ilya’s chest, meeting his eyes. “I’m glad. I don’t just want this to be all about me or anything though. I want this to be good for you, too.”

“It is,” Ilya replied. “I like to provide. And you are very sexy when your brain is turned off.”

Shane laughed, his whole face going red, but he didn’t seem too self-conscious. “Thanks, I guess.”

Ilya hummed and nodded, shifting closer to kiss Shane gently.

“Thank you for everything today,” Shane murmured. “For coming to meet my parents and, um, the other stuff...”

Ilya huffed a laugh. “Of course. My pleasure. I like your parents. They are very nice.”

“They like you a lot. Really.”

Ilya nodded. He was sure that Shane was telling the truth and he was open to getting to know Shane’s parents more as their relationship, hopefully, progressed.

Shane’s fingers slid from Ilya’s chest, toying with his crucifix and chain, something he seemed to do absently.

“Was this your mother’s?” Shane asked gently, meeting Ilya’s eyes.

“It was.”

Shane nodded a little. “I would have loved to have met her.”

Ilya swallowed, eyes stinging. He licked his lips. “She would have loved you.”

“Will you tell me about her?” Shane asked, his eyes all glassy, too.

“Of course,” Ilya sniffled.

“It doesn’t have to be now,” Shane assured. “But... when you’re ready. I would love to learn all about her.”

“Yes. Okay. I would like that... to tell you.”

“Me, too.” Shane chuckled softly, cupping Ilya’s face in his palm. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you...”

“No, no. Is fine. Just...” Ilya swallowed and sighed. He closed his eyes for a moment, not wanting to cry all over Shane at the moment. “It means a lot to me, that you would ask.”

“She was important to you. I want to know her as well as I can. And... I want to know you better.”

Ilya opened his eyes to look at Shane, nodding his agreement. “I want to know you better, too.”

Shane smiled, pressing their faces together, thumb brushing over Ilya’s cheek bone. “I think we can manage that.”

“I think so, too.”

Shane turned his head slightly to kiss Ilya, just a firm press of lips, and Ilya wrapped an arm around him, holding him close.

When they broke the kiss, Shane rubbed their noses.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya start their All-Star Break trip

Shane smothered a yawn as he and Ilya waited in the Maple Leaf Lounge at Pearson International Airport. They had this layover in Toronto and then they'd be on their way to San Francisco.

It had been a while since Shane had flown commercial but the experience so far had been great.

He and Ilya were both seasoned travelers, having been on and off airplanes for the entirety of their careers.

Shane had spent the night at Ilya's so they could leave for the airport together and while they'd gone to bed at a decent hour, Shane hadn't slept well the night before.

He'd been too filled with anticipatory excitement (and a little worry) about the trip.

He'd been looking forward to this. He wanted to have private time alone with Ilya, just them, away from prying eyes and busy schedules.

He didn't want to jump too far ahead into the future. While he wanted to tell people about his and Ilya's relationship, he also wanted to just enjoy the relationship *with Ilya*. Things were still new and Shane wanted this time for them to just relax and be together.

Shane and Ilya had decided not to disclose that they were going on a private, romantic getaway to California together, but instead telling anyone who asked that they were traveling together so Shane could visit Rose Landry and Ilya could get some warmth and sun.

Neither of them doubted that they would be spotted at the airport and on the plane, so having some kind of story helped, and it wasn't completely untrue.

No one batted an eye at the explanation and Shane was surprised to find that he wasn't really worried about any of it.

He was an adult man in his forties. He was already out. He didn't think that he and Ilya needed to be as careful as they had to be when they were younger.

"You are sure you don't want coffee?" Ilya asked, disturbing Shane from his thoughts. Shane smothered another yawn and shook his head.

“I’m just gonna sleep on the plane,” he replied.

Ilya shrugged and went to go get himself coffee. Shane smiled, watching after him. He was dressed in black Adidas sweats and a zip up hoodie. His curls were handsomely tousled, his stubble a bit thicker than usual, not quite in beard territory though.

Shane had rather liked the burn of it against the insides of his thighs last night and wouldn’t mind experiencing that again at some point during their vacation.

He bit his lip, eyes trailing down to Ilya’s ass, before he turned to his phone, knuckles pressed to his mouth, still smiling.

Shane had never traveled with a partner before. Not like this.

Even with the previous guys he’d dated, they’d only gone to places within driving distance. This felt like a whole new kind of adventure.

And Shane was truly looking forward to being with Ilya in private.

He was, generally, a private guy, and quite the homebody.

He liked having and keeping things for himself, doing his own thing. He liked having things that were just his, that he didn’t have to share with other people.

He didn’t want to keep Ilya or their relationship a secret. But it was new and he wanted time to just enjoy it for himself, before sharing it with anyone else.

They would have to talk about it more but Shane hoped that Ilya would understand that there would be things he would want just for them, that he didn’t want publicity to touch.

Shane had had enough of that during his hockey playing career.

Ilya returned to the comfortable, luxurious booth they were holed up in with coffee and various food items.

Shane watched curiously as he set everything on the table; his coffee, two muffins, and a plate of fresh fruit.

“I know you like fruit so…” Ilya said as he sat back down.

Shane grinned, all warm and fuzzy inside, knowing that Ilya had been thinking of him, and had brought him food.

“What?” Ilya asked, picking up his coffee.

“Nothing,” Shane replied. “You’re cute.”

Ilya made a face to suggest that he was no such thing and Shane just giggled, resting his head on his arms on the table between them. “You really are.”

“I am not cute.”

Shane just hummed, closing his eyes. “Yeah you are.”

Ilya made an annoyed sound and Shane chuckled. He opened his eyes, settling his chin on his arms so he could look at Ilya.

“Are you excited?”

Ilya nodded. “Yes. Will be nice.”

“I’m excited to relax with you.”

“Is that what we will do? Relax together?” Ilya smiled his sexy, crooked smile at Shane and Shane kicked him lightly under the table.

“I would hope so.”

Ilya chuckled, sipping his coffee, and Shane reached out, stealing a blueberry.

About twenty minutes before their flight was set to board they left the lounge and headed to their gate.

They were some of the first people to board, settling into their business class seats next to one another. Shane had the window and Ilya had the aisle.

Ilya pulled out his headphones, getting comfortable. The flight attendant came around asking for drink orders and they both got waters.

Shane waited until they were in the air to recline his seat, pulling his hoodie up, and hunkered down to sleep, while Ilya browsed movies.

He watched him for a moment and Ilya turned his head as if he felt Shane’s eyes on him. He smiled at him, winking, and reached out to grab his knee, shaking it a little.

“Sleep,” he said and Shane nodded, closing his eyes.

He’d never had any problems sleeping on planes, or in any moving vehicle, which had always been helpful when it came to hockey travel. He was kind of glad that hadn’t changed all that much over the years, except for maybe the added neck cricks and stiffness. That was the downside of aging.

He settled in, Ilya a comforting presence next to him, and he fell asleep.

Shane was woken up an indeterminate amount of time later to Ilya’s hand on his arm, leaning over the armrest.

“Mm?”

“Food is coming.”

“Oh. Okay.” Shane sat up in his seat, shifting his head from side to side, rubbing his neck, trying to work out some stiffness.

The rest of the plane ride was pretty smooth, Shane and Ilya intermittently chatting, while watching their own movies or TV shows.

When they landed in San Francisco they collected their bags and went to get their rental car.

It was weird and lovely to be like any other normal couple on a trip together. Standing at the rental car counter, waiting for their keys, holding hands as they walked to their car.

Ilya drove them to the very swanky hotel they’d be staying at for the night before they headed out to Manchester the following day.

Ilya parked the car in the hotel lot and he and Shane headed into the building.

It was one of those hotels that had a particular kind of smell to it, pleasant, something floral and clean. Everything was very modern but with a kind of art deco spin and Shane could see why Ilya would like the vibe.

They went to the front desk and Shane watched as Ilya chatted with the person checking them in, making them laugh, charming them.

Ilya was so good with people. And Shane was enjoying watching him up close.

They got their room keys and headed to the elevator, stepping inside once it arrived. Shane leaned his head on Ilya’s shoulder, watching their reflection in the mirrored metal of the doors.

“Tired?”

“A little.”

“We can nap.”

“That sounds nice,” Shane sighed and Ilya chuckled, kissing into Shane’s scalp.

The elevator arrived at their floor and they walked out onto plush carpet, making their way down the hall to their room.

Ilya keyed them in, holding the door for Shane.

The room was spacious and luxurious and comfortable. Shane found an unobtrusive spot for his bags and Ilya placed his next to Shane’s, looking around the room.

“Nice, yes?”

“Very nice.”

Ilya nodded in approval and Shane was glad he was happy.

Shane has pretty plain in his tastes. He didn't mind bougie hotels necessarily, it was more than he was just more likely to be at his cottage, than traveling.

He grabbed a water bottle and sat in one of the very comfortable armchairs, watching Ilya unpack his carry on, which had his travel set of toiletries.

"Do you like traveling?" Shane asked.

"Depends," Ilya replied. "We traveled a lot when we played. We travel a lot now. I traveled a lot in the summer, between America and Russia..." Ilya paused, looking at Shane. "I like it when I am with someone, to have fun."

Shane smiled and nodded. "Yeah, that makes sense."

"You do not like travel."

Shane shrugged. "Not really. I'm good at it but I like being home, in my routine. But this is good. Like... there's no pressure. I like that."

Ilya smiled. "No pressure. Only fun."

Shane chuckled and watched as Ilya went into the bathroom. He peeked his head out a moment later.

"I am going to shower," he said, one hand wrapped around the door frame, waggling his eyebrows. Shane laughed and bit his lip.

"Information or invitation?"

Ilya grinned. "Invitation."

Besides the shower sex, it was nice to slough off the travel grossness, and then curl up into a ludicrously comfortable bed to nap.

Shane couldn't help his happiness at the simplicity of Ilya spooned up against him and knowing that they were going on this little adventure together.

They managed to sleep for about an hour before they got up to change and Ilya called down to the front desk to ask about reservations at the hotel's restaurant.

"We can go somewhere if you want to go somewhere," Shane said and Ilya shook his head.

"No. Is okay," he replied, resting a hand on Shane's arm as he kissed his temple. "I know you."

Shane smiled wryly. "What? That I'm boring?"

Ilya chuckled. "That, too. But we did a lot of traveling. More traveling tomorrow. This is easier."

Shane's heart flipped at Ilya's explanation. He was right and Shane hadn't even realized how it would feel to have someone just intuit what he preferred and making it happen.

He supposed that he and Ilya had been paying attention to one another in some capacity for a long time, even before this.

"Thank you."

"No problem. Easy."

Shane smiled and nodded, finished dressing, and waited for Ilya.

"Okay," he said, offering Shane his arm, and Shane laughed softly, sliding his through Ilya's.

Dinner was delicious and relaxing and Ilya kept holding Shane's hand on top of the table. They shared their food and laughed and had maybe one too many drinks, but it was wonderful.

Shane was in public, with his boyfriend. He was in love and having a great time and it was so nice. Nicer than he would have expected.

It wasn't like it was even a lot. It was just dinner and drinks and Ilya's warm, sunshine-y smile, and joyful laughter.

They did stop talking during their dessert to listen to the couple at the booth next to them when the lady asked, 'what are we?'

Shane had to press his lips together to prevent himself from laughing because of the faces Ilya kept making as the couple quietly went back and forth about the nature of their relationship.

The lady seemed to want more and the gentleman seemed unwilling, or unable, to commit.

Ilya kept mouthing, 'leave him,' and Shane had to agree.

Eventually the lady departed in a huff and the gentleman awkwardly sat there, ordered a double whiskey, neat, and paid the bill.

"She is better off without him," Ilya murmured once the man had left.

Shane nodded his head in agreement and looked at Ilya. Ilya lifted his eyes, finishing his bite of dessert.

"We are boyfriends, Shane," he said, matter-of-fact, and Shane laughed.

"Okay. Good. Just checking."

Ilya chuckled, taking his hand, and kissed the back of it, meeting Shane's eyes. Shane felt his cheeks heat and he smiled, feeling as light as air.

After dinner they went back up to their room and got ready for bed. Ilya found a *Fast & Furious* movie that they sort of watched for maybe twenty minutes before they started making out and got off together before finally deciding they needed to sleep.

They would be checking out early tomorrow to hit the road before crazy traffic set in and after the all the travel today, it would be good to rest and reset.

Normally the time change would bother Shane but he was out cold in minutes.

The next morning was easy and smooth.

They showered, packed up, and were checked out and on the road slightly ahead of schedule. Not that they had a hard and fast timetable but they both wanted to get to the house in Manchester to completely, fully, unwind.

They sat in the car, Ilya connecting his phone to the Bluetooth so he could play his music.

“Okay,” he said, music coming through the speakers. He placed his phone in the space under the dashboard console and they were on their way.

Ilya was going to drive the first leg of the trip and then Shane would take the second leg, so he settled into the passenger seat, peeking over to look at Ilya’s phone to see the name of the song playing.

“Did you make a playlist for this trip?” Shane asked, smiling.

“Maybe.” Ilya didn’t even glance at Shane and Shane chuckled, his whole body fizzing with happiness. Ilya had totally made a playlist for this road trip.

Shane wasn’t a big music guy, though Ilya had started to get him into it with their daily runs.

Regardless, he found it incredibly sweet that Ilya had dedicated the time to putting music together for them to have on this trip. He picked up Ilya’s phone, looking at Ilya’s Spotify.

The playlist was called *Sex Machine*, which made Shane snort. He scrolled through the music, recognizing some of the songs and the artists from his and Ilya’s runs.

He put Ilya’s phone back, settling in his seat, leaning into the door a bit to look at Ilya.

“*Sex Machine*? Really?”

“Is a good title.”

“Is it supposed to be the theme of this trip?”

Ilya glanced at Shane. “I mean...”

Shane laughed. “I’m not complaining but I think we should definitely do more than just have sex.”

“Like what?”

Shane pushed at Ilya’s arm gently and Ilya snickered.

“Fine, fine. I won’t keep you in bed the whole week.”

“I appreciate that.”

Ilya shook his head but he was smiling and Shane smiled too. He loved bantering like this with Ilya, laughing and joking about sex. Their trip was off to a great start.

The drive was absolutely gorgeous.

They drove over the Golden Gate Bridge and along the coast, looking out over cliffs, the ocean, and expansive beaches.

Shane was sure that the route would look even more beautiful in the warmer months but it was still stunning even in the dead of winter.

Shane learned that Ilya liked to sing as he drove and that he had a pretty decent singing voice.

They made a pit stop about half way through the trip to pick up groceries and something to eat before continuing on, with Shane driving for the second half of the trip.

The weather was not as warm as either of them had anticipated, though certainly warmer than Canada, with temperatures hovering around fifteen to twenty degrees.

By the time they finally arrived at the house, it was dark, and misting.

Shane drove them up a long drive surrounded on both sides by beachgrass. There weren’t any lights and it was very dark so Shane drove carefully until they finally got to the house, the front light turned on, which was a relief.

“We made it,” he said, leaning back in his seat.

“Good job,” Ilya chuckled, patting his thigh.

“Fuck off,” Shane huffed, laughing a little. “We’ll get inside and then unpack?”

Ilya nodded in agreement, already gathering up their trash.

They went to the front door and he was looking at his phone, reading the code to unlock the door to Shane as he punched in the numbers.

The door unlocked and they stepped inside, finding a light switch.

There was a bedroom off to the right, by the front door, a set of steps that led down into the living/dining room, the kitchen, and a door that led out onto the back deck.

Ilya tossed their trash in the trash can in the kitchen and they toured the place, finding everything in order and ready for guests.

The house was beautiful and perfect for just the two of them. Shane was looking forward to the view of the ocean from the enormous windows that looked out over the beach at the back of the house.

They went back out to the car, bringing in the groceries, unpacking them, and then going back for their bags.

They got settled in the main bedroom, Shane unpacking his toiletries in the bathroom while Ilya went out to the kitchen, bringing back the binder that had information about the house.

They connected to the WiFi and Ilya immediately checked the live video from the dog hotel that showed Anya, fast asleep in her very swanky room.

It was sweet watching Ilya checking in on her and Shane was impressed that he hadn't been checking the video every half hour while they were on the road.

They made a quick dinner, simply reheating some things they'd picked up during their grocery run, then went to get ready for bed.

They showered together, though it was simply showering, both of them too tired for anything else, and wanting to wash off the travel before they went to sleep.

Shane couldn't stop yawning and eventually Ilya just herded him into bed.

He sank into the mattress, sprawled out, body relaxing. Ilya chuckled next to him, turning off the lights.

Shane held his arms out for him and Ilya came, settling against him, his face buried in Shane's chest.

Shane smiled and kissed into his curls, giving him a squeeze.

"Glad we made it," he murmured.

"Me, too."

Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Day 1 in California

The next day

It was raining and Shane and Ilya had been mostly in bed since they'd woken up, only leaving to do a quick bit of yoga, per Shane's request, before making coffee, and hopping back under the covers together.

Ilya looked up at Shane from where he was perched mostly on top of his boyfriend, Shane's legs bracketing him on either side, both of them naked, sweat still cooling on their skin.

Ilya pressed a kiss to Shane's smooth chest and Shane hummed, one hand behind his head, the other sliding through Ilya's curls, scratching his scalp, sometimes pausing to wrap a silver curl around his finger and releasing it.

"What were you saying before?" Shane asked softly.

"When?" Ilya replied.

"Before," Shane looked away, cheeks turning pink. "You were speaking in Russian. What were you saying?"

"Hmm," Ilya hummed, smiling, pressing another kiss to Shane's chest, before looking at him again. "I was saying how beautiful and perfect you are. How much I love you and how good it feels to be inside you..."

"Jesus," Shane murmured, squirming under Ilya, and Ilya chuckled.

"Is only the truth."

"Why say it in Russian?"

"Because you like it. And my accent."

Shane laughed, tugging lightly at Ilya's hair. "I mean yeah, but..." Shane shook his head, smiling softly. "I've been thinking about learning Russian."

"So you can know what I am saying during sex?"

"Shut up. Yes. But just in general. You say things to me in Russian all the time..."

Ilya chuckled again, watching Shane, so full of so much fondness for him it was almost difficult to contain. He liked being soft with Shane, affectionate, but it was possible he was using his native language as a way to belie some of that, perhaps still a little uncertain of Shane's reception of his affection.

"Sometimes."

Shane pouted a little. "I want to know what you're saying..."

Cute.

Perhaps Shane was more receptive than he had thought, going by this line of questioning.

Ilya hummed. "Mostly pet names."

"Like what?"

"Mm... moya lyubov is my love. Moy lyubimyy is my beloved."

"You say that one a lot..." Shane's voice was quiet, his cheeks all rosy, and he was looking at Ilya all shy and sweet, and Ilya loved him tremendously.

"Yes."

Shane nodded, still all pink, smiling happily, gently rubbing the back of his finger over Ilya's cheek. "What should I call you?"

Ilya huffed a soft laugh. "Whatever you want, sweetheart."

Shane rolled his eyes and Ilya chuckled some more, kissing his sternum a few times.

"Maybe... baby...?"

"Okay," Ilya replied warmly. In truth, Shane could call him whatever he wanted. It was enough to have him so anything else just felt like extra toppings on top of an already delicious cake.

But being called *baby* was sweet and very Shane and Ilya couldn't deny that hearing it made him all warm and fuzzy inside.

Shane smiled, still a bit shy. "Would you teach me Russian?"

"Yes but only useful phrases."

"Like what?"

"Like, *yes, sir and more, please.*"

"Oh my god, fuck off."

They both laughed and Ilya pushed himself up to lean over Shane, hovering his mouth just above his boyfriend's.

"I'm being serious."

"I know, moy lyubimyy."

Shane's expression softened. "Do you really think that about me?"

"Of course. I would not say it if I did not mean it."

Shane looked back, so soft, as if he couldn't quite believe Ilya meant it. He did though. Shane had always been beloved to him, even after everything. He couldn't help it. Shane had left an impression on Ilya's heart and he hadn't been able to ever let it go.

It was a relief that Shane hadn't been able to either.

"Do you want me to prove it?" Ilya asked.

Shane laughed and Ilya kissed him, both of them smiling into it, Shane's hands sliding into Ilya's curls, bunching them in his hands.

"I don't think I've had enough time to recover," Shane chortled as Ilya kissed his neck.

Ilya sighed, flopping on top of Shane, making him wheeze, and nuzzled his face against his neck.

"Me neither," he huffed.

Shane hummed, smoothing a hand up and down Ilya's back, and Ilya just enjoyed the warm comfort of him, his familiar smell.

"We should eat probably," Shane murmured.

"Yes. Probably."

"Come on." Shane patted Ilya's butt and Ilya sighed, peeling himself off of Shane.

There were several moments of creaking and popping bones, both of them laughing at each other, as they pulled clothes on. It was surprisingly chilly in the house so they were in sweats and hoodies. Shane even put on some socks.

"It's not as bad as Canada would be now," Shane said, looking out the large window that looked out at the beach and ocean below.

It was misty and foggy, so you could barely see the beach, but the rain seemed to have let up for a bit.

Ilya watched him from his vantage point by the fridge. Shane had his hands in the pocket of his hoodie, looking comfortable and boyish, his hair pulled up into a messy bun.

He turned to look at Ilya, smiling, making his way over.

“What should we make?” he asked, sliding his arms around Ilya, and Ilya put his arms around Shane in turn, kissing the side of his head.

“Eggs and toast? Maybe sausage?”

“Sure. Sounds great.”

Ilya chuckled, pulling Shane close and kissing into his hair again. He blew a raspberry against Shane's cheek, making him giggle.

They made breakfast together and sat at the table, watching the dreary weather.

Ilya had kind of hoped the weather would be nicer than this, he probably should have done better research, but it was certainly an improvement to all the snow they were undoubtedly getting back in Canada.

And he had an excuse to keep Shane in bed for the rest of the day...

They hadn't been on this vacation very long but Ilya felt like it was going well. He and Shane had eased into things fairly smoothly but their comfort with one another had always been easy.

Even after all this time and starting something new, once they'd taken the leap, it had been an exceptionally soft landing.

Ilya wasn't sure how things would go once they told people but he intended to enjoy the calm before the storm.

They cleaned up after breakfast, spending maybe ten minutes figuring out how the dishwasher worked.

“I'm guessing you have plans in mind for us given the weather,” Shane said.

“Maybe,” Ilya replied, leaning against the counter, arms crossed. “How does staying in bed all day sound to you?”

Shane chuckled. “Extremely indulgent.”

“We are on vacation.”

Shane closed his eyes for a moment, head toddling back and forth in concession. “That's true.”

“I will start teaching you Russian.”

Shane laughed. “Of course you will.”

Ilya reached for Shane, fingers in the pocket of his hoodie, pulling him closer, and Shane came easily, hands resting on Ilya's chest, smiling up at him.

Ilya smiled back, resting a proprietary hand on Shane's hip, getting under Shane's hoodie and t-shirt to touch skin. He reached up with his free hand, undoing Shane's hair tie, making him chuckle and shake out his hair.

Shane looked good with long hair. It made him seem a little freer and more confident than the short haircut he used to have back when they were younger.

"I love your long hair," Ilya murmured, in English, running his hands through it, watching Shane's eyes slide shut, lips parting, head falling back slightly, like a cat being pet.

Ilya watched him, taking in the relaxed brows, the long lashes against freckled cheeks, elegant, adorable nose, perfect pink lips, sharp jaw...

He slid his hand, palm flat to the back of Shane's head, and gripped his hair, tugging.

"Ah—!" the noise was involuntary, pulled from Shane's mouth, and he opened his eyes, looking at Ilya.

"Be good for me?" Ilya asked, holding Shane in place, brushing their mouths together in an almost kiss.

"Yes. Okay."

"Good boy."

Shane hummed and Ilya kissed him for real, slow and controlled, absolutely filthy yet adoring, leaving Shane panting.

They broke for only a moment, Shane hopping into Ilya's arms, an arm across Ilya's shoulders, the other hand at the back of Ilya's head as he walked them to the bedroom.

He dropped Shane on the bed, clothes stripped off and tossed aside. Shane shuffled back toward the pillows and Ilya followed after him, looming over him.

"Stay," he said, resting a careful hand on Shane's sternum, before sliding his palm to one side, squeezing a pec appreciatively, brushing his thumb over Shane's nipple. He bit his lip, making a soft little noise and Ilya wanted to crawl inside him.

Ilya brushed their noses together and Shane reached up to cup his cheek. Ilya pressed his cheek into his hand, turning his head to kiss his palm.

"We will go slow," he rumbled. "I want to look at you. Touch you. Kiss you. I want to take my time until you are dying for it."

"Jeez, Rozanov," Shane huffed, his cheeks all flushed, eyes dark with desire. "You really do like torturing me..."

Ilya chuckled. “Not torture. I like taking my time to appreciate you.”

Shane whined, squirming, as if the attention and compliments were too much. But too bad. Ilya wasn’t going to stop there.

He laughed softly, warmly, pressing soft, tender kisses to Shane’s forehead, between his eyes, the tip of his nose, the round of one perfect cheekbone, along the line of Shane’s freckles.

“I love your freckles,” he murmured, because he really did, and Shane whined again, making Ilya laugh.

He kissed Shane’s chin and jaw and throat, pausing to bite, making Shane gasp, his hand fisting into Ilya’s curls.

Ilya sucked a mark into his skin, wanting to be able to see it later. He wanted Shane all marked up.

Mine.

“*Fuck*, Ilya.”

“Mm. So beautiful.”

He knew he said he’d teach Shane Russian but if Shane wanted to know how Ilya felt, then he’d tell them. They could have a Russian lesson another time.

Ilya licked and kisses over the mark, making Shane shiver, before he moved on to kiss the hollow of Shane’s throat, the space where his neck met his shoulder on the other side and left another mark there, too.

Shane moaned and the sound was music to Ilya’s ears.

He continued on, pressing slow kisses to Shane’s chest, pausing to tease his nipples until they were hard and sensitive and Shane was panting, one hand gripped into Ilya’s hair, the other pressed to the headboard.

He worked his way down Shane’s belly, his groin, settling Shane’s legs over his shoulders, fingertips dancing up and down his quads, and leaving his inner thighs completely at Ilya’s mercy.

“Where is the lube?” Ilya asked, peeking up at Shane.

“Uh...” it took Shane a moment to come back to Earth, sitting up a bit, looking for the lube until he found it under Ilya’s pillow, and handed it to him.

Ilya could worry about a condom later, for now, he wanted to make a meal out of Shane’s thighs. They deserved all the attention and Ilya was maybe a little obsessed with them.

Well, he’d always been a little obsessed with Shane in general.

Shane hand slid into Ilya's hair, pushing his curls back, and Ilya hummed raising his eyes to look at Shane. His cock was hard, laying flat against his stomach, hoping for attention, but Ilya ignored it for now.

"I love the way you look down there," Shane murmured, his cheeks red.

"One of my favorite places," Ilya replied, fingers curling around Shane's quads, turning his head to kiss the inside of Shane's right thigh.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes. Why not? Your thighs are impressive and your dick and ass are always so eager for me."

Shane huffed a laugh. "Man, Rozanov. You really know how to sweet talk a man."

"You love it," Ilya cooed, rubbing his cheek against Shane's thigh, making Shane hum.

"I do," Shane murmured softly. "I love you. Everything about you..."

Ilya sighed, closing his eyes as he turned his head to brush his lips over the delicate skin, pressing light, open-mouthed kisses there. He could feel Shane shiver, his skin goose-pimpling.

"Okay?"

"Yeah. Sensitive. Feels good though."

"Good."

Ilya turned his attention to Shane's other inner thigh, lavishing the same attention there, until Shane was loose and relaxed, humming and sighing.

"What do you have planned for me?" Shane asked.

"You will see," Ilya replied, tightening his hold on Shane's thighs, and bit the inside of Shane's thigh.

"Ilya!" Shane exclaimed, gasping, as Ilya sucked hard on the sensitive skin.

He let Shane go, licking and kissing the bite and turned his head to leave another bite on the opposite thigh.

"*Mine*," Ilya practically growled and Shane melted into the mattress.

"Yours," he sighed dreamily.

Ilya reached for the lube, popping the cap, and Shane made a soft, needy noise.

Ilya wasted no time, slicking his fingers, stroking one against Shane's rim, and sucked under the head of Shane's cock.

“Oh, Ilya. Yes. Fuck yes. *Please.*”

Ilya hummed, sucking the head of Shane’s dick into his mouth as he pressed a finger into his tight warmth of his body, feeling Shane arch a bit, moaning long and loud.

It wasn’t going to take long to open Shane up. They’d been making good use of their time together and Shane always opened so beautifully for Ilya, surrendering himself into his hands so easily.

Ilya was three fingers deep into Shane, bobbing his head in time with his finger fucking, listening to Shane whine and pant above him, fingers tight in Ilya’s hair.

Ilya pulled off of Shane slowly, knowing that if he kept going Shane was going to come.

He gave him a second to come back from the edge a bit, waiting for Shane to open his eyes. They fluttered open after a few moments and Ilya kissed his knee.

“Please fuck me,” Shane said immediately. “*Please*, Ilya. Want you in me.”

Ilya leaned forward, kissing Shane, deep and messy, pressing his fingers as deep inside him as he could get, Shane’s hands clinging to him.

Ilya broke the kiss, nipping on Shane’s bottom lip.

“You on top,” he said, pulling his fingers slowly out of Shane, and rolling off of him. He grabbed a condom from the bedside table, propping up against the pillows, Shane crawling on top of him.

Ilya slid the condom on, and Shane reached back to slick him, the touch making Ilya grunt, too much and not nearly enough.

Shane had one hand on Ilya’s shoulder, the other holding Ilya in place as he shifted his weight back onto him, and sat down. Shane went slowly and Ilya couldn’t help but groan at slowly being encased in that tight, perfect heat.

“Shit, Hollander,” Ilya huffed, looking up at Shane.

“Hold on to something, baby,” he said and Ilya gripped Shane’s hips, heat flooding through him at that confident little look on Shane’s face, the pet name dropped so casually from his lips.

Shane rode Ilya hard. Ilya was a little surprised but mostly immensely turned on, watching Shane’s face, the way his perfect ass bounced on Ilya’s cock like he was made for it.

It was a struggle to keep his eyes open but Ilya didn’t want to look away. Shane had a hand planted on Ilya’s chest, the other gripping the headboard, the bed knocking against the wall.

“Love your dick,” Shane panted. “Love having you inside me.”

Shane adjusted his angle and started riding Ilya harder and Ilya was absolutely falling apart beneath Shane, unabashed and unembarrassed.

It was way too soon but he didn't even care. Shane was so sexy like this.

And then he stopped his ruthless bouncing, moving to a slow, controlled grind. Ilya swore in Russian.

"Not yet," Shane hummed, leaning forward to brush his mouth over Ilya's.

"Fuck, you are perfect," Ilya breathed, his hands going to Shane's ass, squeezing, one hand sliding a little lower so he could feel where they were connected.

Shane's eyes fluttered closed and he hummed, biting his bottom lip, rolling his hips almost lazily.

Ilya just watched him, his eyes opening again.

"You want me to fuck you properly?"

"Yes. God. Give it to me."

Ilya smiled, sliding an arm across Shane's back, holding tight, his other hand curved around one of Shane's ass cheeks. Ilya made sure his grip was secure before starting a hard rhythm, fucking up into Shane just like this.

"Oh shit," Shane gasped out, as Ilya fucked him hard.

Shane moaned, body trembling as Ilya pounded into him relentlessly, finally rolling Shane onto his back.

He reached down between them, stroking himself, eyes on Ilya, mouth slack, cheeks flushed, skin dewy.

"Don't stop. Shit. I'm coming, I'm coming, Ilya—!"

Shane came hard, come spurting up to his chest, his eyes struggling to stay open, body spasming around Ilya, and Ilya came, too, almost silent, unable to look away from Shane.

When it was over, he collapsed on top of Shane, uncaring of the mess between them, and Shane wrapped around him tight.

After a few moment, Ilya peppered soft, tender kisses to Shane's neck, over the marks he'd left, working his way to Shane's mouth.

"Love you," Shane sighed and Ilya smiled, kissing him softly.

"I love you."

They stayed like that until Ilya's softened dick slid out of Shane and then they went to the bathroom together to clean up.

"Jesus, Ilya," Shane said, standing by the sink, looking at the marks Ilya had left on his thighs, then examining the two on his neck in the mirror.

Ilya had to admit that the bruising and bites were impressive. Shane looked a little like he'd been mauled, which Ilya was quite proud of.

He wrapped his arms around Shane from behind, kissing his shoulder.

"Mine."

He didn't miss the little smile on Shane's lips, his hands coming to rest on Ilya's forearms.

"I just hope these fade by the time we get back to work."

"I hope you like turtlenecks..."

They both laughed and Shane turned in Ilya's arms, running his hands into Ilya's hair.

"God, you're so handsome," Shane sighed.

"Oh?" Ilya raised a brow, encouraging Shane to continue.

Shane laughed. "As if you're not aware of your own looks."

"Tell me anyway," Ilya chuckled.

Shane hummed, leaning away to look at Ilya. "I love your curls. I love this bit of silver here." He touched the silver curls that streaked through Ilya's hair.

"I love your smile." His fingers carefully brushing over Ilya's mouth. "How broad you are. How strong." Shane's fingers danced across his shoulder, down to his chest. "I love your height and being in your arms. I love how confident you are. How sweet and kind and gentle."

Ilya blinked, his heart skipping at Shane's words, not quite expecting them to be so... kind. But also unsurprised.

He let the words wash over him, allowing himself to sit with what Shane saw and experienced of him. He was grateful that it was all good things.

If Shane saw them, then they had to exist, and he was glad.

His warm hands cupped Ilya's face, tender thumbs brushing over his cheeks.

"I'm so glad I met you," he said softly. "I'm so glad we got a second chance."

Ilya pulled Shane close, foreheads pressed together. "Me, too."

They stood in the bathroom for a little while longer, before deciding that a shower might be a good idea, and they could move to the living room, maybe watch a few movies or bad TV.

Changed and settled together on the couch with some tea, they checked their phones, and Ilya looked at the updates about Anya, checking her live feed.

“How is she?” Shane asked.

“So cute,” Ilya sighed. “A very good girl.” He peeked up at Shane. “Do you want to see?”

Shane smiled indulgently. “Of course.”

Ilya showed her some of the photos that he’d been sent of Anya and then her on the live feed, enjoying a Kong full of Greek yogurt and blueberries.

“You miss her?” Shane asked, snuggling up against Ilya.

Ilya put his arm around him and kissed his forehead.

“Yes but this is nice, too. Being alone with you.”

Shane smiled, resting his head on Ilya’s shoulder. “It is nice. And you’re a great dog dad.”

“I try,” Ilya chuckled.

“You’re doing great.”

“Thank you, moy lyubimyy.”

“Mm. You owe me Russian lessons still.”

Ilya chuckled, placing his phone aside, and hugged Shane close. “Yes. I do.”

Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Day 4

Three days later

Shane and Ilya were walking along the beach, hand in hand.

They'd left their shoes back by the steps that led down to the sand and Shane had been nervous about leaving them but it wasn't like there was anyone else around.

Ilya had reminded him that it would be silly to steal someone's shoes and even if someone did, *'they probably need them more than us.'* And that was probably true.

It was cold on the beach, the wind whipping their clothes. It was a partly cloudy day, the sun peeking through, and slightly warmer than it had been.

They didn't walk in the surf but it was nice listening to the waves crash against the shore, cliffs huge and hulking in the distance and to their left, some houses perched atop.

The time they'd had alone so far had been incredible; relaxing and intimate in ways Shane hadn't expected but deeply appreciated.

They had no agenda or schedule, which would have made Shane anxious once upon a time, but now sounded immensely appealing. It was so nice to wake up together and go to sleep together, to laugh and banter and have as much sex as they wanted.

It felt good to know that they both liked and loved each other, enjoying one another's company, talking about life and their job and friends and things.

They were actually pretty compatible. Opposites in many ways but sharing a lot of the same experiences and perspective. Even in their differences, they were able to understand one another.

It had meant a lot to Shane to have Ilya open up more, to be vulnerable. It made Shane want to be vulnerable, too.

Ilya talked about his time in therapy, things he had unlearned, that he was still unlearning, and letting Shane in.

Shane didn't want Ilya to regret doing so. He wanted to make sure that Ilya never felt unloved or unsupported or unimportant ever again.

He appreciated how Ilya spoke about his mother in more detail, the memories he had of her, and what he had loved of the twelve years they were able to have together.

Irina Rozanova's memory was alive and well with her son. Shane had never known her but he could see her in Ilya.

Ilya was in a much better place mentally than his mother, who had never had the chance to get help, and telling Shane that Ilya lived his life for both of them had had Shane in tears.

He was just so impressed by Ilya's courage and strength. He loved seeing this soft part of him that loved so deeply, even beyond death.

It made Shane feel protective.

Ilya had promised to show him the few pictures he had of her back at his condo and Shane was excited to see them.

They'd taken some pictures of their own. Candid photos of one another and even some photos together. Nothing to share, yet. Just for them to have.

Ilya liked taking pictures, wanting to have memories, and who was Shane to deny him?

Shane looked at Ilya as they walked on the beach, his hood pulled up, some of his curly hair sticking out of the sides, his feet bare, sweats rolled up at the ankles like Shane's.

"Do you want to get married?" Shane asked.

Ilya turned his head to look at Shane, one brow raised in question. "Get married?"

"I don't mean now!" Shane exclaimed, his cheeks going hot. "I meant, like, in general. You were married before so... I didn't know if that was something you wanted again or..."

Ilya's mouth tilted up in the corner, brow relaxing, his face going fond. He laughed a little, amused.

"I would get married again, yes. The first time was not for love. I think it would be nice to marry for love. And, you know, protections."

Shane huffed a laugh. "Yeah."

"Do you?" Ilya asked. "Want to get married for love?"

Shane nodded, looking at his and Ilya's hands, rubbing his thumb against Ilya's index finger.

"I do. I think I've always wanted that, kind of. I mean, it's practical, right? Marriage is basically a business arrangement but... I would want the person I love to have legal protection and access to everything. Assets and hospital stays and kids and all of that..."

Ilya nodded. "Do you want kids?"

“I don’t know,” Shane replied. “I’ve kind of always wanted kids. I think I’d be a good dad. But it was hard to see a future where that was possible. It’s a lot harder for queer people, especially men, and I didn’t want to do it alone. I’m afraid maybe I’m too old now. Is it fair to raise a kid and know that you’re going to be so much older than them? That they’ll have to deal with things in their twenties that their peers don’t have to deal with?”

Shane glanced at Ilya.

“I’m sorry. I know that you—”

Ilya shook his head. “No. Is okay. I think the same. I like kids. I think I would be a good parent. Make life better for them than mine but also... my father died when I was twenty-six. Of Alzheimer’s. He was almost eighty.”

“That’s a lot for a kid in their twenties.”

“Yes.”

“Most parents don’t have to deal with that until they’re in their fifties or sixties.”

Ilya nodded and hummed in agreement.

"I do not want to do that to someone else. If we do this, get married in two, maybe three years, then have kids a few years after that. I would be almost fifty..." He made a face and shook his head and Shane's heart constricted.

“Would you be okay with that? Not having kids, I mean.”

Ilya looked up at the sky. “I think I would make peace with it.”

Shane nodded, stomach tumbling with anxiety. He was afraid that maybe that was a dealbreaker. Maybe things wouldn’t work for them because they wouldn’t be able to have what they wanted together because so much time had passed and they were older now and...

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

“Shane.”

Ilya had stopped them walking, turning to him so they were looking at one another. He was still holding Shane’s hand and touched his cheek.

“Is okay.”

“What? Yeah. I mean...”

“Deep breaths,” Ilya said, smiling small. Shane did as he was told, taking a few deep breaths, calming himself, squeezing Ilya’s hand.

“We are okay,” Ilya assured. “Relax.”

Ilya held both of his hands and Shane bit his bottom lip, breathing through his nose and then out his mouth.

“Is easy to tell when you are spiraling,” Ilya murmured, sounding fond.

“I’m sorry. I just...” he shook his head and Ilya brushed his thumbs over Shane’s knuckles.

“Is okay. Come here.”

He pulled Shane into his arms and Shane went, letting Ilya hold him, and holding him back, allowing himself to be held and comforted.

“Is okay if we don’t have kids,” Ilya murmured. “Doesn’t Hayden Pike have like, ten?”

Shane fluttered at hearing Ilya say *we*, the acknowledgment of them doing life together making Shane happy and fizzy with delight.

“He has four.”

“Is a lot of kids.”

Shane laughed. “Four is a lot, yeah. The twins are eighteen now... I remember when they were born. Got to hold them and everything.”

“You are like their uncle, yes?”

“Yeah.”

“So... maybe that is enough.”

Shane sighed, lifting his head to look at Ilya.

“I’m sorry...”

“Why?” Ilya chuckled. “Don’t be.” He kissed Shane’s forehead. “You worry too much.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“I love you,” Ilya continued, his face pressed into Shane’s hair as Shane rested his head back on Ilya’s chest. “And I want to be with you, kids or no kids.”

“Really?” Shane asked, looking up at Ilya again because he couldn’t not be looking at him when they talked about this. A future. For real.

Ilya looked back, amused, and maybe a little exasperated. “Yes.”

He didn’t hesitate and Shane’s eyes stung with unbidden tears, his heart so full.

“You want, like, a future?”

“Yes, Shane,” Ilya said, carding some of Shane’s hair behind his ear as it was whipped by the ocean breeze. “Of course.”

“I want that, too. Marriage and... everything.”

Ilya nodded and Shane swallowed.

“I love you so much,” Shane breathed.

They hugged again, holding each other tight.

“I love you, too. Very much.” Ilya lifted Shane off the sand, swinging him around, making him laugh, clutching to Ilya tight, and kissing him, both of them smiling and laughing into it.

“Okay?” Ilya asked, pressing their faces together.

“Okay,” Shane sighed, petting Ilya’s face, smiling so hard his cheeks hurt. Was it possible to be happier than this? Knowing that Ilya wanted forever with him... it was all he could have wanted after everything.

An impossible dream. But all his.

“Okay.”

Ilya kissed him again and set him down and Shane couldn’t help but giggle, taking Ilya’s hand once more, leaning into him as they kept walking down the beach.

“We still have to make a plan of how to tell management,” Shane said a few moments later.

“Mm. We should tell them when we are back from the break.”

“Yeah?”

Ilya nodded. “We are doing this thing so...”

“True. Better that they know sooner rather than later.”

Ilya hummed. “We could talk to our agents.”

“I was gonna say we could ask my mom...”

Ilya laughed. “Maybe all three.”

“I love a plan.”

“You do.”

Shane was surprised that he wasn’t as anxious as he thought he’d be about the prospect of telling his job that he was technically dating his boss.

Maybe because he knew he'd be okay. Even if management didn't agree, Shane would happily resign if it meant that he got to have Ilya. He could find a job doing something else in hockey. Like consulting or commentating...

Ilya was more important to him than an assistant coach position.

"If worst comes to worst," Shane said, resting his free hand on Ilya's arm. "I'll resign."

Ilya looked at him, brows furrowed. "What? No."

"Yeah. It's okay. I can always get another job working for Sportsnet. Or ESPN. I know that there are opportunities out there for me. It would suck to not work together but... I would rather have you than the job."

Ilya stopped walking again, forcing Shane to stop, too. He looked at Shane so seriously, Ilya's eyes trailing his face, before he cupped Shane's face in his hands and kissed him within an inch of his life.

"Wow," Shane breathed once the kiss had ended, his hands on Ilya's ribs, Ilya's hands in his hair. "This is turning out to be some walk..."

They both laughed and hugged some more, Ilya rocking them back and forth in a circle.

"I want you to keep your job," Ilya said. "But... thank you."

"Of course. I just want you to know that you're most important. You're the priority."

Ilya looked at Shane, swallowing, and he felt a little better that he wasn't the only one getting emotional on this beach adventure.

"I mean it."

"I know."

Shane brushed his thumb over Ilya's cheek and kissed him very gently. "I'm sorry your family made you feel like you weren't important. But you are to me. Truly."

Ilya closed his eyes, his mouth tight, but Shane wasn't finished yet. He wanted Ilya to know how serious he was about this. About *them*. Even if it was embarrassingly earnest.

"I waited fifteen years for this. You're more than worth it."

Ilya huffed out a laugh. "Shane..."

He opened his eyes, shimmering with tears and Shane kissed him some more, pulling him close, resting his hand on the back of Ilya's head.

"I really, *really* mean it."

"I know you do. You're you."

They both laughed again, wet and sniffly.

Shane was so glad to be with Ilya. Glad they had talked about this. That they were on the same page. Even if it meant that they were crying on the beach.

“Maybe we should head back,” Shane chuckled, both of them wiping their eyes and noses on their sleeves.

“Yes. Okay.”

They wrapped their arms around one another, walking back the way they’d come like a drunken four legged creature.

They got back to the stairs, their shoes will there, and climbed back up to the house.

Clouds had rolled in and it looked like rain.

“I should have done better research,” Ilya sighed and Shane chuckled.

“I don’t know. I like how cozy it’s been. And I like that no one knows us here. It’s just us.”

“Mm. That’s true. I like it, too.” He lifted Shane’s hand to his mouth, kissing the back of it, and Shane leaned into his side humming happily, so glad that they could have this time.

Whatever the future held, he was glad that he and Ilya were going to do it together.

That evening

Shane was sitting at the kitchen island on his laptop, glasses on, working on a spreadsheet, while Ilya made dinner.

They’d decided to call both their agents, setting up a call between them to discuss the fact that Shane and Ilya were together and how to proceed with telling management and then the fan base at large.

It had turned into a very busy afternoon and while Ilya would have been a little more annoyed about work interrupting his and Shane’s sexcation, he had enjoyed watching Shane whip up a spreadsheet and take notes, while also listening to two very capable agents collaborate on how to approach the announcement.

The gist was that they would talk to their staff first, then the guys, then management. Depending on what management said, they would then proceed with social media posts about their relationship.

Victoria, Ilya’s agent, had advocated for her and Farah to be present at the management meeting but both he and Shane had decided to try just talking to management on their own and involve the agents later.

“The plan is good, no?” Ilya asked over his shoulder at Shane.

“The plan is great, yeah,” Shane replied, eyes scanning his screen. “Just want to make sure I got everything.”

Ilya chuckled. “Okay.”

He’d made cacio e pepe for them, something simple, but warming, since the weather had cooled significantly and it was raining again.

Ilya added cracked pepper to the top of the pasta resting on their plates, bringing them over to the table.

“Eat with me,” he said, tapping his finger against the top of Shane’s laptop.

Shane looked at him and smiled. “Sorry. Yeah. Let me just save these.”

Ilya uncorked a bottle of wine and Shane stashed his laptop away, glasses still on, which Ilya appreciated.

“Let me help,” he huffed, grabbing wine glasses, setting them down for Ilya to pour into. “Thank you for making dinner.”

He pressed a kiss to Ilya’s cheek and Ilya smiled. “No problem.”

They sat at the table and Ilya started an impromptu Russian lesson, confusing Shane for a moment before he caught on. He taught him the words for pasta, glass, wine, plate, fork, and other random things around them at the table.

Shane seemed to be enjoying it, which was unsurprising, he loved a challenge, and Ilya thought it was sweet and adorable how he would ask how to pronounce something again, making sure he got it right.

“I found a few Russian language lesson podcasts,” Shane said as they dealt with the dishes. “Could be good.”

Ilya smiled, turning on some music, before going to the sink, passing dirty cutlery to Shane as he loaded the dishwasher.

“You really want to learn?”

“Yeah. I’d like you to feel like you can share stuff with me, in your first language. It’s easier, right?”

“Sometimes, yes.” Ilya looked at the sink, picking up a knife, carefully passing it to Shane. “I speak English more than Russian, except with Svetlana. But... feelings are easier in Russian.”

He looked at Shane, his face slightly pinched in the way it did every time Ilya mentioned Sveta. Shane had no reason to be jealous but Ilya was amused that he was.

“That makes sense,” he replied. “It’s how you first learned to express and understand yourself.”

“Yes.”

Shane nodded. “I’d like you to be able to talk to me... I want to understand.”

Ilya smiled. “You are doing more than enough, Shane.”

“I can always do more.”

Ilya laughed. “Of course you think that.”

Shane looked at Ilya. “Is that bad?”

“No.” Ilya shook his head. “Is very Shane Hollander. And you could learn Russian in a week. No accent.”

Shane smiled and Ilya smiled back. He really did love him so much. Once he’d stopped fighting it, the emotion had come so easily. Shane was so easy to love, with his earnestness and sweetness. He was so kind and gentle. Stubborn, too, dedicated and loyal.

Ilya was fully realizing how long Shane had held onto his own feelings, how he had resolved himself to go after what he wanted with Ilya, which was such a fucking *Shane* thing to do.

Ilya had never been at the center of such devotion and single-minded focus before.

But here Shane was, showing his heart, being vulnerable and trusting, and Ilya wanted to hold that all for him. He wanted to be vulnerable and trusting right back.

He wanted to love Shane as much as Shane loved him. Forever.

And it felt as easy as breathing.

Which should have been terrifying but was only comforting.

His heart had known all along.

Ilya washed his hands free of grease, drying it on a dishtowel, and took Shane’s hands. He placed one of Shane’s hands on his shoulder, the other he held. Ilya rested his hand on Shane’s hip and they danced in a little circle to the song coming from Ilya’s phone.

Shane blushed, looking up at Ilya with his big eyes, face crinkling up in happiness and Ilya kissed the tip of his adorable nose.

But even when I’m quiet / I love you, baby, I promise / And I hope I never see what your face looks like going / A face I swear that I could spend my whole life knowing / Here's to hoping

Ilya pressed their cheeks together and Shane sighed, leaning into him, the two of them gently rotating in a little circle. Shane turned his head, forehead pressed to Ilya’s cheek, and Ilya

rested his mouth against his skin.

They danced for the rest of the song and stopped when it ended, a very different, pop-dance song coming on, making them both laugh.

Ilya kissed Shane warmly, Shane's hands on his face, fingers scratching into his thick stubble.

"Let's finish this," Shane sighed. "And then I want to take you to bed..."

Ilya hummed, sliding his hands over Shane's waist, down to his perfect ass, squeezing the muscle in his hands.

"As you wish, lyubimyy."

Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Ilya meets Rose

Last few hours in Manchester

“You know what I just realized?” Shane said, pausing mid-fold as he stood on one side of the bed, suitcase open on the floor, clean clothes in a pile on the comforter.

“What?” Ilya asked, placing a rather neatly folded shirt to the side as he folded his own clothes from the clean pile.

“We didn’t watch any of the All-Star game stuff.”

Ilya looked at Shane, laughing and grimacing. “Oops.”

“Yeah,” Shane chuckled. “Not great.”

“We had other things to worry about,” Ilya said with a casual shrug, plucking a pair of sweats from the pile and folding them.

“We should at least have some idea of what happened before we go back. At least for Luca and Andy.”

“Of course. I am sure there will be highlights on YouTube.”

“Probably, yeah.”

Shane laughed, shaking his head, picking up a pair of jeans to fold. Besides talking about their respective jobs and then how to tell the staff, team, and management that they were together, hockey hadn’t really been discussed.

Which was a little weird for Shane but he supposed that Ilya was right. There were more important things they’d had to focus on and hash out. And he was glad they had.

He finished folding his jeans, then turned to grab his laptop. He went to YouTube and found several videos from the All-Star weekend and queued them up, setting the laptop on the pillows so they could both watch.

Ilya snorted but otherwise humored Shane as they finished folding their clothes and started packing.

Shane couldn't quite believe that their time was coming to an end already. They still had one more stop in LA to meet with Rose and then back to Ottawa to get right back into the season.

He wasn't really ready to leave their private little bubble.

He definitely didn't want to keep Ilya a secret, not like before, but he also didn't want people to know everything. He wanted things to be just for them. To maintain some boundary.

He had always been a private person, wanting to keep things for himself. It had been exhausting to be a hockey legend and the perfect representation in his sport.

He had felt overexposed in a lot of ways. He had needed things that were just *his*.

He had just never learned the balance.

Now that he and Ilya were thinking about all of this, Shane hoped that they could find it.

Showing the world who they were but maintaining privacy, too.

No one deserved to know every little thing about them.

"I can smell you thinking," Ilya said. "Like burning rubber."

"Shut up," Shane huffed, glancing at his boyfriend who was smiling snarkily.

"What are you thinking about?"

Shane shook his head and let out a sigh. "Us."

"What about us?"

"Our privacy," Shane replied. "I'm nervous that we'll tell everyone about us and then people will want to know everything. And I don't think I want that. I want our relationship to be ours. I want to find balance in how we show ourselves."

Ilya nodded, considering Shane's words.

"Not unreasonable." Ilya placed down a pair of socks he'd folded together.

Shane nodded, licking his lips, a little anxious. He didn't love the idea of such exposure. Not that he thought things would go poorly with the team and staff, maybe management, but all that he could handle. The internal stuff.

He was more nervous about the fan base at large. People on social media. Keyboard warriors and podcast hosts.

"One thing at a time, Shane," Ilya said and Shane looked at him. "We do not have to tell or show everyone everything." He sighed. "The internet and social media will be weird because it is a weird place but they do not need to know all the things."

Shane nodded. "You're right. I know. We've been lucky so far..."

“One thing at a time,” Ilya repeated and Shane huffed, nodding.

“Yeah. You’re right.”

They finished folding clothes and packing, then went around the house, making sure that everything was all cleaned up and put away and ready for their leaving.

They had their drive back to San Francisco and then their flight to LA, where they would be meeting Rose for dinner the following day.

Shane was excited to see her and formally introduce her to Ilya. Ilya seemed... neutral about the idea. He had been willing to meet Rose but it had been pretty clear that he had some feelings about her. Probably similar to how Shane felt about Svetlana.

It was maybe a little silly. Obviously they had only ever had eyes for each other, even through the fifteen years they’d spent apart.

Shane wasn’t going to harp on it or bother Ilya about it. He didn’t want Ilya to feel jealous or insecure. He had no reason to feel that way. Rose wasn’t a threat but Shane could understand maybe why it felt that way.

So he just tried to make it as clear as possible that Shane loved him and wanted to enjoy every bit of their remaining vacation together.

They were both in good moods, even leaving their private beach house retreat.

Shane drove the first leg back, Ilya holding his hand, playing more from his playlist, and the two of them talking about the future.

They weren’t talking about anything very deep, just vague ideas they had.

Neither of them wanted a large wedding (if they decided to have a wedding), they’d probably sell their individual condos in Ottawa and buy a house together.

Shane had sold his condo in Montreal and Ilya had sold his penthouse in Boston, as well as the vast majority of his sports car collection. So there wasn’t much to manage there.

“I want you to come to my cottage,” Shane said. “It’s my favorite place. And it’s really nice in the summer. Private and quiet.”

Ilya smiled. “I know.”

“You know?”

“Yes. You would talk about it all the time. Interviews and documentaries and things. Is cute.”

Shane’s cheeks went warm. “Thanks?”

Ilya laughed softly, kissing the back of Shane’s hand. “I would like to come to your cottage over the summer.”

Shane beamed. "It's a plan then."

It was thrilling to talk about these things, even if they were a bit abstract.

For a long time Shane had felt like he was behind. So many of his peers were married and settled, with houses and nearly grown kids and everything.

Being gay in the hockey world was incredibly constricting. Sneaking around and keeping things a secret was maybe sexy at first... and then it got exhausting. And it wasn't fair for anyone involved.

Shane had no idea how things would have gone for him and Ilya had things worked out between them the first time around but he was glad that they were figuring things out now.

They were older, yes, but there was more in their control. They didn't really have to hide all that much and that was relieving.

He was a bit anxious about them telling management and the team because who wouldn't be? But it would be okay.

Even if he ended up losing his job, he'd still have Ilya, and that was certainly a win in Shane's book.

Los Angeles

"Are you okay?" Shane asked as he and Ilya finished getting ready for their dinner with Rose in their hotel room.

"Fine," Ilya replied, adjusting the cuff of his shirt and blazer without looking at Shane.

He had been rather quiet the last few hours, which was unusual for Ilya, who always liked to chat. Shane was suspecting that it was nerves, though Ilya had no reason to be.

Shane watched him for a moment, taking him in.

He looked exceptionally handsome in dark, tailored trousers, a crisp button down, and fitted blazer. His curls were perfect coiffed, which had taken quite some time to do, but the effort had paid off.

It was like Ilya had stepped out of a fashion magazine, perfectly dressed, and looking like a very respectable boyfriend. He had always had an incredible sense of style, being named one of the best dressed men in the NHL pretty much every year during his playing career, and Shane had seen a few articles written about Ilya and his style even from his limited time behind the bench.

He always dressed so well in perfectly tailored suits.

If Ilya didn't have one already, Shane was going to suggest he find a way to get a deal with a fashion house, or at least some modeling gigs.

Shane remembered Ilya's Calvin Klein campaign and that had been insane. The ads had been unbelievably sexy and it had filled Shane with so much yearning and wanting and frustration; wanting something he couldn't have...

Shane shook his head. He couldn't digress. They weren't in the past any more and Ilya and his Calvins were all Shane's now, so no use getting worked up about something that didn't matter any more.

"You look gorgeous," he said, shifting closer to stand directly in front of Ilya, smoothing a light hand over his blazer.

Ilya looked at him, his hazel eyes almost gold in the low light of the room. "So do you."

Shane smiled. "Thanks."

Ilya nodded, though he wasn't smiling. He looked like he was gearing up to go toe-to-toe with a tiger or something.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes, Shane," Ilya replied, a little snappy. He seemed to catch himself, sighing, and Shane slid his fingers against Ilya's, brushing his thumbs over his knuckles.

"Are you nervous?"

"I don't know. Maybe? I don't know how I feel about meeting your very famous and very beautiful movie star ex-girlfriend."

Shane nodded, smiling a little, and looked down at his hand in Ilya's.

"You have no reason to be nervous or jealous," he assured gently. "I know that's easier said than done but it was never like that between us."

Shane lifted his gaze to look at his boyfriend and Ilya shifted his eyes to meet Shane's.

"I'm gay, Ilya."

"Not gay enough to not fuck Rose Landry."

Shane sighed.

"Rose is one of my best friends and I love her, but I never loved her the way I love you. Being with her was great, when we were talking and having fun. But... all the romantic, sexy parts of the relationship were really difficult because I just wasn't into it. And it was obvious. I'm not proud of how that went down, making excuses because I didn't want to admit how I really felt. She helped me come out. She was one of the first people to talk to me about being gay."

Ilya's brows furrowed and Shane took his other hand.

"We probably should have talked about this sooner and I'm sorry, it's basically the eleventh hour. I just didn't want to stress you out or anything..."

"No," Ilya replied, squeezing Shane's hands. "Is okay. I should have said something before."

"It's okay. We're figuring it out. But I mean it. You don't have anything to worry about. Things are very platonic between us. She's married now and has a kid. She's so excited to meet you and she's great. I think you're going to get along really well."

Ilya smiled small. "Okay."

Shane smiled back, leaning up on his toes to kiss Ilya. "You look really fucking good. Seriously."

Ilya laughed. "So do you. Really."

"Thanks."

They kissed again and Shane released Ilya's hands. Ilya reached up, sliding his hand into the collar of Shane's shirt, brushing his thumb over one of the marks he'd left that were only just hidden, and not quite faded yet.

Ilya's touch was warm and careful but proprietary and Shane couldn't help but shiver, heat pooling in his belly despite the fact that they needed to get moving if they were going to be on time for dinner.

"Mine," Ilya murmured and Shane's eyes fluttered closed as Ilya's hand cradled his face.

"Yours," Shane sighed and Ilya kissed him in that commanding, adoring way of his, flirting with the edge of filth.

"We should go," Ilya murmured against Shane's mouth when he broke the kiss, his thumb brushing over Shane's chin, just under his bottom lip. Shane's knees were a little weak.

"Yeah," Shane breathed, opening his eyes. "We should."

They managed to get themselves together and left the hotel room, their car already waiting for them downstairs.

Once they were on their way, Shane texted Rose.

Shane: we might be a minute or two late! I'm so sorry!

Rose: don't even worry about it! Glad you two are having fun 😊

Shane's cheeks went warm and he shook his head, phone face down on his thigh.

He turned to look at Ilya who was gazing contemplatively out the window. Shane reached out to take his hand, tangling their fingers and Ilya looked over at him, smiling. He brought Shane's hand to his mouth, pressing a lingering kiss to the back of it, and then kept Shane's hand to himself, holding it in both of his.

It made Shane smile.

They made it to the restaurant right on time, going down an alley to the back entrance, where the maître d' was waiting for them.

Shane was out of the car first, then Ilya. He took Ilya's hand and they were ushered inside, moving through the busy kitchen, and then into the restaurant itself, where they were led down a hallway to a private dining room.

Shane sometimes forgot how famous Rose was.

He and Ilya had their own level of fame but all things considered, hockey was extremely niche.

Shane was well-aware that they could walk down the street and go largely unnoticed in most places and most cases but Rose couldn't go anywhere without being followed by paparazzi and mobbed by fans.

She had worked hard to keep her life as private as possible, especially after Nico had been born, and it meant a lot to Shane for her to be out and about in public like this.

Even if they had to be sneaky.

The maître d' opened the door to a private dining room and Ilya and Shane stepped inside.

"Hi!" Rose greeted, standing up from the table.

She was dressed in cream colored, wide legged trousers, a matching v-neck blouse with billowy sleeves, blue pumps, and layered gold necklaces. She'd had her hair and make-up done and looked every bit the glamorous movie star she was.

"Hi!" Shane replied, coming to greet her, Ilya lingering slightly behind him.

"It's so good to see you," Rose said warmly, holding him tight. "I feel like it's been forever."

"It has."

They both leaned away to look at each other and Rose smiled brightly. "You look so handsome."

"Thanks. You look gorgeous."

Rose giggled, then glanced over Shane's shoulder, her eyes meeting his after a moment. "Are you going to introduce us?" she whispered.

“Of course,” Shane said, letting go of Rose and taking a slight step to the side.

Ilya looked like he was trying to be as unobtrusive as possible and Shane offered him a reassuring smile.

“Ilya this is Rose,” he said. “Rose this is Ilya.”

Ilya stepped forward a bit, holding out his hand.

“So nice to—” he started to say before Rose waved her hand, holding her arms out.

“Oh come here,” she said, pulling Ilya into a hug. “I’m a hugger.”

Ilya looked surprised but very smoothly hugged Rose back.

“Shane said you were a good hugger and that you smell amazing. He was not wrong. ”

Ilya looked at Shane, raising a brow, letting out a soft, surprised laugh, and Shane’s cheeks blazed, though he was smiling, happy to see two of his favorite people in the same space, finally meeting.

“It’s true. You’re a great hugger and you always smell nice,” Shane chuckled.

“Thank you.”

Rose leaned away to look at Ilya. “It is so nice to meet you in person, Ilya.”

“You as well. I am a huge fan of your work.”

“Oh thank you. I’m a fan of yours.”

Ilya nodded, smiling softly. “Thank you for always being so generous to the Irina Foundation.”

“It’s truly my pleasure.” Rose rested her hand over her heart. “It’s such a worthy charity and you’ve done some really amazing things with it.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course.” Rose smiled warmly, turning to Shane, pointing at Ilya. “He’s better in person!”

Shane laughed. “He’s great.”

Ilya chuckled softly and Shane shifted closer, resting his hand on Ilya’s arm as Rose pulled away.

“Sit, sit! Let’s order some drinks and you two can catch me up on everything!”

They sat at the table and a server came in a little while later after they’d had the chance to look at the menu.

Ilya ordered a martini, Shane ordered a light beer, and Rose ordered a cosmo.

Shane rested a hand on Ilya's thigh and smiled as Ilya wrapped his fingers around Shane's, holding his hand under the table.

"So," Rose said. "I want to know *everything*. When did you two decide to be a couple?"

Shane looked at Ilya and Ilya held out his free hand in Shane's direction, allowing Shane to take the floor.

"It's not very exciting," Shane replied.

"I think it is!" Rose rested her elbows on the table, chin perched on the backs of her interlaced hands. "He's the one who got away! It's romantic. A second chance! The stuff that movies and romance novels are made of."

Shane's cheeks were hot and Ilya chuckled beside him.

"Is a little like that, yes."

Rose turned her blue eyes to Ilya, leaning in a bit. "If Shane won't spill the beans, will you?"

Ilya smiled and laughed softly. "He is right. Is not very exciting. Was the beginning of February. Shane came over to my house, we made dinner, he asked me to be his boyfriend."

"Aww sweet! So brave, Shane!"

Shane wasn't sure that his face could get any hotter, the warmth spreading to his neck and ears. He wasn't used to this kind of attention. It was nice, talking about Ilya as his boyfriend, but it also made him all squirmy.

"What were you making?" Rose continued.

"Coq au vin."

Rose giggled, Ilya snickered, and Shane's whole face practically burst into flame.

"It was very nice," Ilya continued. "Quiet. Romantic. There was a lot of snow."

"That sounds so sweet."

Ilya looked at Shane. "It was."

Shane smiled at him, nodding in agreement, because it was true.

"Are you going to tell everyone? Like, the world or...?"

The server returned with their drinks and asked about appetizers and Rose asked them for some more time.

They looked at the menu and negotiated appetizers, before Rose sipped her cosmo and looked at them expectantly, waiting for them to continue the story.

Shane sipped his beer and glanced at Ilya. “We’re going to tell people. Friends and family, first, then the team and staff, then management. And then probably the public, during the summer, when things aren’t as crazy...”

Rose nodded. “You talk to your agents?”

“Yes. They are very supportive,” Ilya replied.

“That’s all you can ask for then.”

The server returned and they ordered their appetizers, deciding on entrées, before Rose went back to interrogating them about their relationship, which was still very new.

But Shane would be lying if he wasn’t enjoying talking about Ilya and how amazing he was and how happy they were to have finally figured things out.

Plus, Shane got to enjoy seeing two of his favorite people in the world interacting.

Ilya seemed to have gotten more comfortable and was absolutely charming the pants off of Rose. They talked about music and celebrity and her movies. They talked about her family and looked at pictures of Nico and Franco.

Shane listened raptly, eyes trained on Ilya as he spoke. He could listen to Ilya talk all day long and never get bored. His accent was so elegant, his voice deep and soothing. Rose kept stealing knowing glances at him and Shane had resigned himself to his cheeks being red for the entirety of their dinner.

They ate their appetizers and entrées and ordered a few more drinks.

Rose talked a little about some of her upcoming projects, mostly local things, seeing as she wanted to be closer to her family.

She was doing press for her newest movie and would be stateside for a while with a few weeks overseas in the UK.

“I’ll have to put you in touch with some people,” Rose said over dessert. “You would be great on camera. I’ve seen your commercials. If you ever decide you want to pivot...”

“Thank you,” Ilya laughed. “That means a lot coming from you.”

“Please don’t encourage him.”

“Oh come on, Shane! We’ve all seen those Dunks commercials! And Calvin Klein!” Rose smiled wickedly at him, blue eyes dancing. “I remember you keeping those ads...”

Ilya looked at Shane, delight written all over his face. “Really?”

“Shut up! Stop!” His face and neck and ears burned. Both Rose and Ilya looked like the cat who had eaten the canary. “Both of you are enjoying this too much.”

They both laughed and while Shane didn’t appreciate being ganged up on, he was glad to see Rose and Ilya getting along so well.

Rose paid for dinner, which was completely unnecessary, but she wasn’t hearing any of their arguments.

“We’ll say goodbye here,” she said and Shane nodded, getting up from the table and coming to hug her and kiss her cheek.

“I miss you,” she said. “Come visit again soon.”

“I miss you, too. I’ll try.”

Rose smiled, squeezing him. “I’ll text you.”

“Please do.”

They let go of each other slowly before Rose turned to Ilya.

“Ilya. It was an absolute pleasure. You’re a gem.”

Ilya smiled and hugged Rose. “It was so lovely to meet you, Rose. Thank you.”

“I’ll text you those contacts and you and Shane will have to come out to California more often.”

“It’s a deal.”

They both chuckled and parted.

“Bye! Love you!” Rose said, blowing kisses and Shane blew some back.

“Love you!”

They left first, hand in hand, going back down the hall, through the kitchen, out the back door, where a car waited for them to take them back to their room.

“She is a lovely person,” Ilya said as they sat in the car.

“She is.”

“I see why you like her so much.”

Shane smiled and Ilya kissed the back of Shane’s hand like before. Shane leaned into him.

"I love you."

Ilya huffed a fond laugh, holding Shane's hand in both of his.

"I love you, too."

The rest of the ride back to the hotel was quiet and relaxed. The night couldn't have gone any better.

Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Back at the hotel

They got back to the hotel room and Shane lingered slightly behind Ilya. He watched him walk into the room with his swaggered steps, always managing to look so elegant and confident, whether he was on the ice or off.

Shane followed the broad line of his shoulders, down his back, watched as Ilya took off his blazer, and dropped his wallet and keys onto the dresser. He slid off his shoes and brushed a hand through his curls.

Shane's heart flipped as he just looked, feeling so full of love and gratitude for him; being here, together, and how great the evening had been, and knowing that they could keep doing this.

Ilya turned to look at him and Shane smiled back, taking a few steps closer, hands in his pockets, leaning up to kiss Ilya's cheek.

"That wasn't so bad, right?"

Ilya turned fully, his hands resting on Shane's hips. "No. Not so bad."

Shane rested his hands on Ilya's chest, leaning up to kiss him, slowly undoing his buttons.

Ilya hummed, allowing himself to be kissed.

"Are you planning something?" Ilya murmured against Shane's mouth.

"Do I have to have a plan?"

"You always have a plan."

Shane made a face at Ilya, pausing in undressing him, and Ilya smiled, laughing, and kissed Shane's mouth.

"Maybe I can be spontaneous..." Shane felt his cheeks warming, going back to his task, untucking Ilya's shirt, and finishing the last of the buttons.

"Mm. Sure," Ilya purred, his own fingers working their way underneath Shane's shirt to touch skin, but allowing Shane to continue what he was doing.

Shane rolled his eyes, sliding his fingers into Ilya's shirt, brushing his pecs, pulling the shirt off his muscular shoulders, letting the shirt drop to the floor.

"Shut up."

Ilya laughed again and Shane couldn't help but laugh, too, shaking his head. He kissed Ilya, before taking off his own blazer, and tossing it onto the chair by the desk.

Ilya tugged at his shirt.

"And this?"

Shane took off his shirt, too, dropping it alongside Ilya's, before he crowded up into his boyfriend's space, hands on his chest, sliding them up to Ilya's shoulders, wrapping them around his neck.

"Hello," Ilya murmured, hands running across Shane's lower back, holding him.

"Hi," Shane replied, just looking at Ilya, smiling softly. "Thank you for doing all of this tonight. Meeting Rose and everything."

"No problem," Ilya replied. "She is very nice."

"She is," Shane chuckled. He leaned up to kiss Ilya again, tempered and sweet. "Are you... okay?"

Ilya blinked at him. "Yes." He was quiet for a moment and then shrugged. "I feel... silly, for worrying."

His cheeks went pink and Shane turned all gooey inside. He loved when Ilya was honest and vulnerable like this. It just meant so much to Shane that he trusted him. Shane wanted to bundle him up and make sure that nothing bad ever touched him ever again.

"It's okay. I get it. I feel the same about Svetlana. I know that she's important to you and that you're just friends but... I don't know. There's history and things there that I wish I'd been there for, too..."

Ilya nodded. "Yes. Exactly."

Shane smiled small, sliding his hand into Ilya's hair, and Ilya rested their foreheads together. "They're both important people to us but it's different than how we feel about each other."

"Mm."

"And I'm excited to be on this journey with you."

Ilya smiled and hummed. "You are very sweet."

Shane shrugged a little, his own cheeks warming. "It's just the truth, I guess."

“I know, sweetheart.”

Shane huffed a laugh and Ilya kissed him, deep and warm and full of affection.

It was just so easy to fall into this together. Slowly but surely they were creating this relationship, this safety.

It was a relief, having this. The security. The chemistry and the love. It really was everything that Shane could have ever wanted. He didn't want to let it slip through his fingers again. He wanted to protect and nurture it.

He was just glad that Ilya was letting him. That he was in it, too.

They made out in the middle of the hotel room for a long time, before they started tugging off the rest of their clothes, smiling against one another's mouths.

They fell into bed together, kissing and laughing, and Shane had never felt so happy, his whole body fizzing wonderfully.

He'd wanted this for so long, hoped beyond hope that he might have a second chance, fearing that Ilya would be the one that got away, and no one else would ever match up.

But this was his life now. It was real.

“Okay?” Ilya asked, touching his face with a careful thumb, sliding along his freckles.

“Yeah,” Shane replied. “More than okay.”

Ilya nodded, searching Shane's face for a moment, as if wanting to be sure that Shane meant it, before kissing him again.

Shane tossed his leg over Ilya's hip, wanting to be close, running his hand down Ilya's chest, through his chest hair, wrapping his arm around him, wanting to be close.

They kissed for a while, not really escalating, occasionally touching. There was no rushing and while Shane was pretty keen on Ilya fucking him at some point, it was nice to just go slow.

Ilya's palm ran up and down Shane's thigh a few times in a soothing caress, before he palmed Shane's ass, sliding a finger between his cheeks to tap his hole.

Shane hummed, a hand fisted in Ilya's curls as Ilya broke their kisses, his mouth dragging over Shane's cheek and jaw, open mouthed kisses trailed to his neck.

“Do you want?” he asked, sucking a mark into Shane's skin, just above his clavicle, making Shane gasp.

“Yes. Please. Want to be as close to you as possible.”

“Me, too,” Ilya murmured, kissing over the mark he’d left, before leaning away to grab the lube and condoms they’d stashed away for this very moment.

He tossed the items onto the bed within easy reach and tugged Shane on top of him. Shane laughed but went easily, straddling Ilya, looking down at him.

“Mm, I love looking at you,” Ilya purred, running his hands over Shane’s thighs.

Shane grinned, face all scrunched up. “Oh yeah?”

“Of course. You are very beautiful.”

“Not so bad yourself.”

Ilya chuckled and Shane leaned over to kiss him, shamelessly squeezing his pecs. Ilya squeezed one ass cheek in reply and Shane heard the pop of the lube cap as Ilya grabbed it one-handed.

A slick finger teased and circled Shane’s rim, sliding inside, and Shane gasped softly at the intrusion.

He let his head fall back a little, moaning as Ilya nudged up against his prostate, finding a slow, easy rhythm.

It was easy for Shane to place himself into Ilya’s capable hands, focusing on opening for him, which was no hardship. Ilya had always been so skilled at this, knowing exactly what Shane wanted. What he liked.

Shane sighed and breathed into the sensations, relaxing as Ilya fingered him, adding two more fingers, murmuring sweet nothings to Shane in both English and Russian.

“I feel like I should be telling you all this,” Shane said.

“Tell me what?” Ilya asked, his free hand squeezing his pec, thumb brushing over his nipple.

Shane whimpered. “That you’re perfect and handsome and fuck—!” Ilya pinched Shane’s nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

“Is nice to hear but... I like doing this for you.”

“I’d like to return the favor.”

Ilya smiled softly. “I will keep that in mind.”

“Good,” Shane replied and then gasped as Ilya pushed his fingers as deep inside him as he could. “Fucking hell.”

Ilya chuckled, withdrawing his fingers then, and Shane sighed with relief. “Fucking finally.”

“So impatient for my dick,” Ilya mused.

“Love your dick. Love having you inside me.”

Ilya flipped Shane onto his back, looming over him. “I love being inside you.”

He kissed Shane then, slow and adoring, making Shane’s toes curl and brain buzz pleasantly, free of any worry or anxiety. He was so present and it was an incredible feeling

Ilya pulled away to slide on a condom, slicking himself.

Shane relaxed back against the pillows and Ilya lowered himself carefully over Shane’s body, entering him slow and careful.

Shane watched Ilya’s face, the way his hazel eyes widened, as if he was surprised that he was permitted this at all. As if he didn’t belong right here, with Shane.

“Come here,” Shane murmured, wrapping his arms around Ilya’s neck, kissing him. “I love you so much...”

Ilya peppered gentle kisses to Shane’s face and Shane pulled his knees to his chest, urging Ilya deeper. He rested an arm by Shane’s shoulder for leverage, his hand resting at the top of Shane’s head, his other arm sliding behind one of Shane’s calves, hand curved around an ass cheek.

It was an intimate position, pressed close, able to kiss and hold each other. Shane loved the way Ilya felt inside him and against him, warm and solid.

He loved how careful Ilya was being, every touch and kiss tender, even the way he pulled out and pressed back in, slow and easy, finding a rhythm that would slowly build.

It was too much and not enough.

Shane let his fingers tangle in the curls at the back of Ilya’s neck, his free hand resting against Ilya’s neck, pleased whines and pants falling from his lips.

“I love this, Shane. I love you. You are perfect.” Ilya kissed the corner of his mouth.
“Perfect.”

“I love it, too,” Shane panted. “Feels so good, baby. Always so good.”

And it was true. It always had been, right from the start.

“Yes,” Ilya agreed. “I love that I can have you. That we can have this.”

Shane knew that Ilya wasn’t just talking about the sex. He was talking about each other, having a relationship.

Being in love.

Shane knew how impossible it had felt for them both. Wanting it and yearning for it and breaking themselves apart over it.

Shane knew that Ilya had always been comfortable with being bisexual but coming out wasn't an option. Shane had twisted himself into knots over being gay and unlearning his internalized homophobia had been a journey. It still was sometimes.

But Shane was so glad they'd gotten here. Even if it had taken fifteen years.

They were here and together. They loved each other.

"You're everything I could have ever wanted," Shane whispered, cupping Ilya's face in his palm. "I love you."

Ilya smiled small and kissed Shane so sweetly. "I love you, too."

They fucked long and slow for what felt like ages and Shane couldn't even complain. He loved holding Ilya and kissing him and feeling like they were as close as they could possibly get.

It was vulnerable and sweeter than the other sex they'd been having, but just as good. It felt more emotionally charged, like they were each sharing a larger piece of themselves than they had before.

"Stroke yourself," Ilya said and Shane obeyed, reaching between them to wrap a hand around himself. "Together?"

Shane nodded, wrapping his legs around Ilya, hooked at the ankles. "Yeah."

Ilya fucked him a little harder, faster, his eyes never leaving Shane's. Shane could feel his orgasm building, knew he was making whiny, needy noises. He wanted it so badly. He wanted them to come together, for Ilya to fill him up, and it was the first time that Shane regretted using a condom.

"Oh fuck. Ilya... are you—?"

"Da. Yes. Come on."

Shane made a punched out noise as he came, his release washing over him, leaving him almost dizzy with pleasure, eyes forced open so he could watch as Ilya came, too.

It was just the two of them, locked in the moment, everything perfect and harmonious and beautiful.

Shane had never had this kind of experience with anyone before.

Ilya had always been so in tune with Shane, even in the beginning. Reading and knowing him so well, even if it had just been sex at first.

That hadn't changed, even with time and distance.

They just got each other, vibrating on the same frequency.

It was magical and Shane didn't really believe in that kind of thing. But it had always been different with Ilya. Better.

"Come here," Shane sighed, pulling Ilya flush, not even caring about the mess between them.

Ilya tucked his face against Shane's neck, one hand in Shane's hair, and Shane just held him, eyes stinging a bit.

He wasn't upset. He was maybe a little overwhelmed. Just amazed that Ilya was his and they could have this. Maybe forever. Probably forever.

He swallowed, stroking Ilya's curls, and turned his head to kiss his temple.

"I love you so much," he whispered.

"I love you, too," Ilya replied immediately. "Very much, Shane."

Shane closed his eyes and they stayed like that until Ilya's softened dick slipped out of him.

"Okay?" Ilya asked as he'd pulled away, brushing one stray tear from Shane's cheek.

"I'm okay," he nodded.

Ilya watched him for a moment, before kissing him gently. They went to clean up in the bathroom together and then went back to bed, curling up under the covers.

Shane brushed his fingers lightly over Ilya's pec, tucked tightly against him.

Ilya was playing with Shane's hair, the gesture soothing, making him very sleepy. He wished they could have a little more time, just them, but he would take it.

"Shane..."

"Mm?"

Shane yawned and forced his eyes open, leaning back a little to look at Ilya.

"When we are in Boston, would you like to meet Svetlana again? As my boyfriend?"

Shane blinked, much more awake at the question. He wasn't surprised by it. Svetlana was the closest person to family that Ilya had and Shane knew how important she was to him, how much it would mean for Shane to get to know her.

And it was only fair, since Ilya had met Rose.

He was maybe a little nervous about the idea but also honored.

"I'd love that."

Ilya smiled, soft and boyish and sweet. He looked pleased and happy and Shane always wanted him to look that way. He wanted to make Ilya happy, always.

They were really doing this and that was pretty incredible.

“Thank you,” Ilya said, kissing Shane softly, and Shane rested a hand on his face.

“You don’t have to thank me for this. I know how important she is to you. I’d be honored to really get to know her.”

Ilya nodded and Shane kissed him again.

“I will talk to her. Maybe next time away game when we are there?”

“Yeah. Just let me know the details. We’ll make it work.”

“I was thinking too...” Ilya started, his cheeks turning pink. It was so rare to see him blush, the action making him uncomfortable, and Shane brushed a thumb over his cheekbone.

So sweet.

“Thinking about what?” he prompted softly.

“Maybe we wait, to tell everyone else. Maybe at the end of the season? I don’t want to distract them.”

Shane smiled and chuckled. “Yeah. Okay. It is kind of nice that this is just ours, for a bit.”

Ilya nodded. “Yes. I want to tell people but also... I want you all to myself.”

Shane laughed, his own cheeks warming, the words making him all fluttery inside. “Yeah. Me, too.”

They curled up a little tighter and Shane’s brushed their noses.

“You will love Sveta,” he murmured. “She already loves you. Big fan.”

“Really?” Shane asked, surprised. “I feel like she would hate me.”

“Hate you? Why?”

“Because I hurt you.”

Ilya paused, thinking, and slowly shook his head. “No. She did not hate you. She was sad for me but...” He smiled wryly. “She told me too that I was getting in my own way.”

“How?”

“Being closed off. Trying to protect myself. She knew I still loved you but I didn’t want to be hurt again. She told me I was getting in the way of my own happiness.”

Shane’s brows furrowed. “Did you feel like that was true?”

“Yes.” Ilya nodded. “I was hurt, that is true, but you were trying so hard and being so determined.”

Shane huffed a laugh and Ilya smiled, kissing the tip of his nose. “So cute. I could not refuse you for long.”

Shane shook his head a little. “So... she doesn’t hate me.”

“No. She thinks you are very talented. A beautiful skater. And very cute.”

Shane felt himself blushing and he laughed. “Stop.”

“Is the truth.”

“Oh my god.” His face burned.

Ilya snickered, kissing his cheeks. “I am being serious.”

“I know you are.”

Ilya hummed and Shane squished their faces.

“I’m glad we’re doing this,” he murmured.

“Me, too.” Ilya smoothed his hand up and down Shane’s back and Shane’s eyes dipped closed once more.

He tucked himself against Shane again and sighed, legs all tangled up with Ilya’s, hand on his chest.

They’d be going back to Ottawa, back to real life.

He wasn’t looking forward to this little bubble of privacy they’d made for themselves being popped but he liked that they were going to take their time.

He wanted Ilya just to himself a little while longer. He knew that their relationship would be theirs, that they would keep things private in the ways that they wanted, but once the genie was out of the bottle, you couldn’t put it back in.

Social media was unpredictable, often toxic. He was sure that people would have a lot of thoughts about them and their relationship.

Shane knew they would have to face it eventually but for now, it was nice to just be wrapped up in this together. They had this protective little bubble around them, safe in their own little world.

It was indulgent but they deserved it after everything they’d been through.

They would take things one step at a time and he believed in them. They had people supporting them and a plan for when they came out to the world.

But one thing at a time. They were a good team and they were in this together.

They would be just fine.

Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Shane meets Svetlana

March - Boston

Sveta: I can't wait to meet your BOYFRIEND!!!

Ilya smiled at his phone, going to respond back when he heard something fall in the bathroom, and Shane's accompanying, "shit."

Ilya pressed his lips together. Shane had been horribly nervous since they'd arrived in Boston. It was incredibly endearing and also a little exasperating, mostly because there really wasn't much reason for him to be so stressed.

"Are you okay in there?" Ilya called.

"Yeah," Shane replied, sounding defeated. "I'm fine."

Ilya stood from where he'd parked himself in one of the armchairs in the room, placing his phone in his pocket, and walked to the bathroom, peeking inside.

Shane was standing by the sink, looking like he was having a crisis of conscience, leaning over, his hands gripping the counter.

"What happened?" Ilya asked, leaning against the doorframe.

Shane's shoulders slumped and he looked at Ilya in the mirror, waving his hand vaguely. "I dropped the stupid... *thing* in the sink."

Ilya had no idea what the *thing* was that Shane was referring to but he was looking every bit of the nervous sad sack and it was adorably pathetic.

Ilya couldn't help but smile, his heart giving a little wobble. He loved this ridiculous, silly man so, so much.

"What?" Shane asked, pouting, but Ilya could see him fighting a smile.

"Come here," Ilya chuckled, pushing off the doorframe, and holding his arms open for Shane. He turned and stepped into Ilya's arms, his head flopping onto Ilya's shoulder.

Ilya wrapped his arms around Shane, resting his cheek on top of his head.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” Shane sighed. “I’m nervous, I guess.”

“About lunch?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

Shane huffed. They had had this conversation in some way, shape, or form many times over the last few weeks after confirming their plans to meet with Sveta when they came to Boston.

Ilya was pretty sure Shane just had to have the experience and see that things were absolutely fine and there was nothing to worry about in order to not be anxious about it any more.

He and Sveta had already met but he supposed the circumstances were very different now.

But Ilya was happy to reassure and comfort him as many times as he needed, even if he teased Shane about it a bit.

Shane was quiet for a long time though and Ilya didn’t interrupt, waiting until he finally spoke up, his voice quiet.

“How can I ever measure up to everything she is to you?”

The words sounded so... defeated.

Ilya paused. He wasn’t exactly shocked to hear Shane say this. Ilya felt like he was fairly aware of how Shane felt, particularly because it was similar to how he felt about Rose, but hearing it aloud stabbed him right in the heart.

“Shane,” Ilya said, leaning away to look Shane in the eye, though Shane was trying to avoid his gaze. “Sweetheart.”

Shane lifted his gaze to meet Ilya’s at that, looking so sad, and like the living personification of the pleading eyes emoji.

“Not everything is a competition,” Ilya continued, touching Shane’s cheek with his thumb. “What Sveta is to me and what you are to me are two different things.”

Shane shook his head a little, looking away. “I know, I just—” He shrugged helplessly. “You’ve been friends for so long, you were married...”

“Shane...” Ilya murmured, watching him. “We have history, too. You *know* me.”

“So does she.”

Ilya closed his eyes for a moment. “Not the way you know me.” Ilya sighed and took Shane’s hands, holding them in his.

“Sveta and I have known each other a long time. We have shared many things. She will always be in my life. But she is not the one I am choosing to spend my life *with*. It was never like that for us... not like it is when we are together.”

Shane looked at Ilya then and Ilya cupped his face in his hands.

“I love you more than I have ever loved anyone in my life. When my mother died, I thought it was impossible for me to love again. I drifted between lovers and continents and never felt at home anywhere. And then I met you and everything changed...”

Ilya could feel his own eyes tearing up as he spoke, not having intended to fully bare his soul, but if he couldn't tell Shane this, then who could he tell? It was the truth. Even from the moment they'd met in Saskatchewan, Ilya's heart had known. It had taken his brain a long time to catch up but his heart had absolutely known.

He had been in love with Shane from that first meeting and he still was, all these years later. The feelings had never gone anywhere and even after all their time apart, everything had come flooding back.

They'd grown and changed in all the ways they had needed to in the intervening years. And maybe Ilya needed to make himself more clear about how truly and deeply he loved Shane.

He watched the way Shane's eyes glistened as he listened, his hands wrapping around Ilya's wrists.

“Ilya,” Shane breathed.

“I love you,” Ilya said firmly. “You are *home* to me.”

They looked at one another for a moment before Shane wrapped his arms around Ilya, holding him tightly.

“I love you,” he sniffled, hands gripping Ilya close. “You're my home, too.”

Ilya closed his eyes, Shane's hand resting against the back of his head.

“I'm sorry. Thank you for telling me that,” Shane murmured when they pulled apart. He wiped at his face, grabbing some tissues from the bathroom counter.

“Is okay,” Ilya replied. “You needed to hear it, I think. I can tell you more often.”

“I mean, yeah, but, I know it, too. I'm just feeling insecure.”

“Is okay. You are allowed.”

“It just feels silly. I know I shouldn't feel this way.”

Ilya chuckled, pulling Shane in again, kissing his forehead. Shane sighed and looked up at him, his nose all red, eyes all puffy.

“Is fine. Relax. You are very special to me,” Ilya reiterated and Shane let out a slightly wet laugh.

“You’re special to me, too.”

“I know, beloved,” Ilya murmured back.

“Do you though?” Shane asked, touching Ilya’s face. “I know you spend an awful lot of time taking care of me. But I do want you to know how much I love you, too. Truly.”

Ilya nodded, taking Shane’s hand, and kissed his knuckles. “I don’t think you would have tried to be with me after fifteen years if you didn’t.”

“That’s true,” Shane chuckled. “C’mere.”

Shane pulled Ilya in, holding his face, and kissing him deeply. Shane broke the kiss, rubbing their noses, before turning back to the sink to finish getting ready.

Ilya stayed with him, sitting on the toilet seat cover, waiting.

They finally left the hotel with plenty of time to spare. The restaurant was within walking distance of the hotel, on the wharf, which made it easy for them. Ilya itched to hold Shane’s hand but it was a game day in Boston and Ilya had been recognized a few times already.

“You think you could take me around Boston sometime?” Shane asked softly as they crossed the street.

Ilya looked at him, smiling. “Of course. Whenever you want.”

“Maybe before the season starts... after we go to the cottage.”

Ilya chuckled. “Sure. Okay.”

“Where would you take me?”

“Mm, all over. The whole city. The Cape.”

“All your old haunts?”

“Of course.”

Shane bumped against him and Ilya gently bumped him back, they shared a private smile, and Ilya’s heart felt so full.

Shane wanted to see Boston. They were going to spend most of their summer away at Shane’s private, incredible cottage, just the two of them. He was going to get to know Sveta.

It had been a long, long time since Ilya had been excited for a summer.

He wasn’t the biggest outdoorsy guy but he did like the idea of being in quiet luxury in the middle of lake country with the man he loved. All by themselves. No interruptions.

They'd never leave Shane's bed.

It sounded like the perfect way to spend their time off.

They arrived at the restaurant and Ilya spotted Sveta right away. The dining room was fairly quiet and she saw them, raising a hand and waving, smiling wide. Ilya lifted a hand and waved back.

Ilya let the host know that they were here to see a friend and she let them go through, his hand automatically going to the small of Shane's back. Shane glanced at him and gave him a grateful little smile.

Sveta had stood up from the table, wearing dark wash jeans, a black, long-sleeved peplum blouse, and black pumps.

"Hi!" she greeted, wrapping Ilya in a tight hug. "It's so good to see you!"

"Good to see you, too," Ilya replied, hugging her back. It was strange for them to speak in English together but it made sense with Shane present.

"You look good," she murmured in Russian as she studied his face. "Everything okay?"

Ilya nodded. "Everything's fine. Great. You look beautiful."

Sveta smiled and laughed softly. "I'm glad." She patted his cheek. "He's so sweet and nervous..."

Ilya turned, smiling at Shane who was indeed looking very sweet and nervous.

"Sveta, you remember Shane," he said, in English.

"Of course I do! It's so lovely to see you again!" Sveta said. "Do you hug?"

"It's so nice to see you, too," Shane replied. "Um, yes."

Sveta giggled and hugged Shane, who still looked awkward as hell, but hugged her back.

"I am a huge fan," Sveta said.

"Thank you. I appreciate that. Ilya's told me so much about you. I'm really glad we're getting the chance to actually sit and talk."

Sveta smiled at Shane and Ilya watched them. It was so weird to see his worlds colliding like this, mostly because he thought it would never happen. And now it was and it made him weirdly buzzy.

"The feeling is mutual," she replied, offering Shane a wink. "Let's sit."

They all sat at the table, menus already waiting for them.

They decided on drinks and negotiated appetizers, their server coming around to take their order.

Ilya watched Sveta place her menu down, her hands folded neatly on the table.

“So... it’s official?”

She already knew that the answer was yes because Ilya had told her already and he chuckled, reaching under the table to rest his hand on Shane’s leg. Shane’s hand immediately rested on top, tangling their fingers.

“Yes,” Ilya replied, glancing at Shane.

Sveta grinned, looking delighted.

“That’s great! Things have been good so far?”

“Very good,” Ilya replied and Shane smiled, his cheeks going pink in the way that Ilya loved. “We are keeping things between us, for now.”

“Any plans on when you want to start telling people?” Sveta asked.

Shane and Ilya exchanged a look and Ilya nodded at Shane encouragingly.

“Ah, my parents know. And one of my closest friends, Rose. Landry. The actress but um... that’s all.”

Ilya couldn’t help but smile, squeezing Shane’s hand encouragingly.

“Before the season ends we will tell the staff, the whole team, and everyone else after the season ends. We want to just enjoy things. Just us.”

“That’s totally reasonable. It’s been a long journey for you two.”

Ilya looked at Shane and Shane looked back, smiling softly, nodding.

“Yeah. It has,” Shane said.

Ilya turned back to Sveta, who was watching them with warmth in her eyes. “I’m so happy for you two. I’m glad you found your way back to each other.”

“Us, too,” Ilya agreed and Shane squeezed his hand.

Their server brought their drinks and they cheered to new beginnings.

Sveta talked about what she was up to. She was the Vice President of Marketing for the Bears, which was very exciting for her. Things were going well with her partner, Hank, and with her parents, Sergei and Michelle.

Apparently she’d finally convinced her parents to stay in the States full time as they were getting older. She was also an only child and it was easier to care for them here than for her to

travel back and forth between Russia and the US.

Their appetizers arrived and Ilya watched, bemused, as Shane and Sveta started talking about the struggles of caring for aging parents.

Ilya knew they would get along well, especially once Shane was able to get over his first-meeting jitters.

They had a lot in common, being only children and huge hockey fans. Sveta knew more about hockey than Ilya and had she had any interest in playing, she would have been a great player. It was obvious that she would make an incredible General Manager. She had so much institutional knowledge and an insane understanding of the game, like a chess grandmaster.

Ilya had an inkling that that was the next job she was gunning for. It would be incredible for her to be the first woman GM in all of the NHL.

It was really only a matter of time.

“If the Cens keep going on this path,” Sveta said, leaning back in her seat, wine glass in hand. “I can see them getting the Cup in about three to five years, which is exceptionally quick. But the team has the caliber and the drive, with a few more choice draft picks and bringing people up from the ECHL after development...”

“You’re not just saying that to flatter us?” Ilya teased.

Sveta shook her head. “You know I would never flatter you.”

Ilya laughed. “That is true.”

“I think we could do it in two,” Shane piped in.

Ilya turned to look at him, raising a brow. Shane glanced at him, shrugging, and smiling a little.

“What? I think we can.”

“From your lips to God’s ears,” Ilya murmured in Russian. He was a little skeptical but it would be pretty amazing to get there that fast after a rebuild like this. Knowing Shane, he would be determined to get them there.

Sveta chuckled. “Well, if Shane Hollander says it, I’m sure that God will listen.”

Shane’s ears went red and Ilya wanted to bite them as he laughed.

Appetizers were cleared away and they ordered their entrées, talking about the upcoming game tonight, and Sveta’s split loyalties.

“I love you but I have to cheer for the Bears, you know that.”

At one point Shane excused himself to use the restroom and Sveta watched him go, leaning over the table when he was out of earshot.

“Ilyusha,” she murmured.

Ilya bit back a smile. “Mm?”

“He’s adorable,” she said, in Russian.

“Yes.”

“So cute. And so funny! And smart!”

“I know, yes.”

Sveta looked at him, her expression so soft and fond and Ilya could feel cheeks warm, though he was smiling like an absolute idiot.

“You love him so much!”

“I do.” His cheeks burned but he couldn't help it.

Sveta rested her hands over her heart, pouting. “It’s so sweet. The way he looks at you...” She sighed wistfully, reaching out a hand to rest it on Ilya’s arm. “He loves you so much, too.”

Ilya nodded.

“You deserve that.”

“I know.”

“I’m glad you figured it out.”

“Me, too.”

“And things are going okay? Even with keeping things under wraps for now?”

“Yeah, it’s good. We both agreed that we wanted time to just have our relationship for ourselves before telling everyone and then telling the world...”

“Understandable.” She sipped from her wine glass. “How do you think the team and everyone will take it?”

Ilya considered her question. “Well, I think, overall. The team will probably be fine. Staff, too. I think a few of them might have an inkling of something going on. Management is harder to tell. Shane told me he would leave the job if they made a big deal about it. He said he’d rather be with me than stay.”

“Oh Ilyusha! So romantic!”

Ilya laughed. "He's very sweet."

"Ugh. He's adorable. I love him."

Ilya smiled, his heart full. "I do, too. He's great."

"I'm so happy for you, truly. You know I'm always in your corner. Keep me posted. Let me know if I can help."

"I know. I will, thank you. And... thanks for knocking some sense into me."

Sveta smiled brightly. "Anytime."

Shane returned to the table and Ilya grinned at him, which made Shane smile and laugh.

"What'd I miss?"

"Nothing," Ilya replied, and reached for his hand again.

"Shane, I have to ask," Sveta sighed. "Can you please tell me what it's like being friends with Rose Landry and is she always as stylish as she looks?"

Shane smiled and laughed and Ilya watched him as he talked about his best friend to Ilya's best friend and the wholeness of it all just made that buzzy feeling worse, in a good way.

It just felt like the impossible had become possible. This was his reality. And it was incredible.

The rest of lunch went quickly. Ilya and Shane covered the bill and said their goodbyes to Sveta.

She hugged them both outside the restaurant, wishing them good luck at the game.

"We'll have to do something again soon," she said. "I miss having you so close."

"I know, we will. Shane wants to see Boston so, we will let you know when we have plans."

"Yes, please! I would love that."

They all hugged goodbye and Ilya and Shane went back to the hotel.

"See? Not so bad, right?"

"Not at all," Shane chuckled. "She's really great. Easy to talk to. She knows so much about hockey."

"She is amazing."

"Yeah. She is."

Ilya smiled, tempted to kiss Shane's temple, to slide an arm around his shoulder, and keep him close.

"She loved you," Ilya said instead.

"Yeah?"

"Yes. She thought you were very smart and cute and funny."

Shane's bloomed pink and he rubbed the back of his neck. "Oh yeah?"

"Mm."

"That's nice of her."

Ilya chuckled. "You *are* all of those things."

"Shut up."

"No."

They looked at each other for a moment, waiting to cross the street.

"How much time do we have before we need to get going?" Shane asked.

"Almost three hours."

"That's enough time, right?"

Ilya smiled devilishly back at his boyfriend. "More than enough."

Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Some sweet April domesticity

April - Ottawa

Shane stood in Ilya's kitchen, coffee percolating while he tied his damp hair back into a messy bun.

It was nearing nine o'clock and he and Ilya had nowhere to be. It had been an early game for them yesterday and a day off today before they were traveling for a few away games as the season wound down.

Shane was looking forward to a relaxing day.

The team had been fighting hard to try and get a wildcard spot and it was so close but there was a high likelihood that they were going to miss that spot, by a point, if Dallas won their next game.

There had been a lot of planning and strategizing into the wee hours of the morning, so Shane had appreciated that they'd slept in a bit before their shared run and walking Anya.

Shane smiled, straightening out the mugs on the counter.

He and Ilya had been spending more time together than not. They were at one another's condos every day, alternating weeks on where they stayed, and trying to get as much time in together as they could.

He couldn't believe it had been two months already. It felt like all the time and then like no time at all.

Shane turned his head at the sound of bare feet on the floor and giggled as Ilya wrapped his arms around him from behind, burying his extremely scruffy face against Shane's neck.

"Mm, moy vozlyublenniy," he purred, making Shane's toes curl and his cheeks warm.

He smiled, turning his head to look at Ilya, laughing as Ilya pressed a big, long kiss to his cheek. Warm, elegant fingers slid against his throat and Shane let his head fall back on Ilya's shoulder at the touch, eyes closing as Ilya nipped his ear.

"What's all this?" Shane murmured, his voice all breathy.

“I cannot appreciate my boyfriend?” Ilya replied.

Shane smiled. “You can do whatever you like.”

Ilya chuckled, his hand leaving Shane’s neck, wrapping around him again and Shane bit his lip, opening his eyes, half hard in his sweats.

“Mine,” Ilya murmured, kissing Shane over his shoulder.

“Yours,” Shane breathed.

The coffee machine beeped and Shane jumped a bit, making Ilya chuckle, and hold him close.

“Later,” Ilya said and Shane whined. Ilya pulled away, giving Shane’s ass a little smack, as he made his way to the fridge for the milk.

“Cruel and unusual punishment.”

“Discipline,” Ilya replied from inside the fridge. "Patience." He emerged with the milk, closing the door, and looked at Shane. “With a very nice reward at the end if you are good for me.”

Shane bit his lip again against a smile. He loved playing like this with Ilya. They’d already had sex this morning in the shower after their run and he honestly loved the idea of waiting for more.

He didn’t know when, but it would happen. He just had to be good for Ilya. And he had no doubt he would be rewarded well for his patience.

Shane wouldn’t say that this sort of thing was new for them. They’d sort of always had this kind of dynamic. Shane a little bratty and impatient and Ilya more even keeled and in control.

They played off each other well and Shane was enjoying fleshing things out more between them.

They’d talked a bit about things that interested them or that they wanted to explore and they were fairly aligned there, which was nice.

It came easy, especially because Shane trusted Ilya so much.

“Thank you for making coffee,” Ilya said as he came back to stand next to Shane. He rested an arm around Shane’s waist and Shane leaned into him, enjoying his clean, familiar smell, and the warmth of him.

“No problem.”

“I’ll make breakfast?”

“If you want. I can help.”

Ilya kissed his cheek. “We can do it together.”

“Sure.” Shane smiled, pouring coffee into their mugs.

It had been a delightfully domestic few weeks. Waking up and going to bed together, making space in closets and dressers for one another.

After games, they would drive around the neighborhood, talking about the game and things that went well, things that didn’t, working it out of their system before heading home.

They’d decided that they could talk shop in the car but their condos were just for them to spend time together.

And that had been working out really well so far.

They were integrating their lives together. They were making plans for the summer, for Ilya to meet J.J., Rosaline, Hayden, Jackie, and the kids. And Ilya had asked if Shane if he would want to meet Troy Barrett and his husband Harris, and Cliff Marlow, his wife Diana, and their daughter, Cleo.

So they already had a packed summer of meeting each others friends planned for after they spent May, June, and July sequestered away at the cottage.

Shane didn’t want to rush the rest of the season. He and Ilya were both really proud of the team and how they had all come together and Shane was enjoying being a coach.

They would have to tell everyone soon, which was scary, but Ilya kept reminding him of how good they all were.

The other coaches, the rest of the staff, the whole team.

Immaculate vibes Ilya described it as. And he was right.

They were extremely lucky but it wasn’t lightning in a bottle exactly. This had come with hard work, really building team cohesion, understanding, and trust with coaches and staff.

The teamwork of it all was incredible and Shane was so grateful.

If this ended up being his one and only season as an assistant coach, he was proud that it had been with this group of men.

“What are you thinking about?” Ilya asked, interrupting Shane’s thoughts. He smiled, shaking his head.

“Just the team.”

Ilya nodded and hummed. “No work while we are here.”

“No, I know. It wasn’t work really. Just thinking about how, if this is my first and last AC job, I’m glad it was with this group.”

Ilya made a dismissive noise. "This will not be your last season, Hollander."

"You don't know that!"

Ilya gave him a fond, yet exasperated look. "I do. They will not fire you."

Shane made a face, suggesting he didn't disagree, but also he had no evidence to suggest that he was correct. "Fine."

Ilya huffed a laugh and reached for his hand, tugging him close.

"You are an amazing coach and I do not think they will let you go just because we are together."

"You really think they'll keep me?" Shane rested his hands on Ilya's chest, looking up at him.

"Of course. You are you. And we are very good together."

"We are," Shane agreed. "In more ways than one."

Ilya nodded in agreement and then leaned in to kiss Shane's forehead. Shane sighed and wrapped his arms around Ilya, holding him.

"I've really loved this time together with you," he said.

"You make it sound like it is ending," Ilya replied.

"No. I know it's not. I guess it just feels like it's going to change so much once we tell people..."

Ilya was quiet for a moment, one hand smoothing up and down Shane's back. Shane closed his eyes, enjoying the comfort.

"Maybe outside it will," Ilya finally said. "But here, inside, it will be the same. Just us."

Shane nodded, eyes stinging a little at the reassurance. He had no idea how Ilya knew exactly what to say, to know exactly what Shane needed. But he never missed.

"Okay," Shane breathed and Ilya squeezed him, making Shane let out an involuntary groaning noise.

They both laughed and Ilya started peppering kisses all over Shane's face, making him giggle and cling to Ilya.

"We should actually make breakfast," Shane chuckled and Ilya sighed.

"Yes, yes. Okay. Breakfast."

Shane smiled, reaching up to touch Ilya's face. His stubble was thick, not quite a beard, but getting there. Shane liked it. It was handsome on him and he also liked the way it felt against his skin.

“Should I keep it?” Ilya asked.

“I like it,” Shane replied.

“I will keep it then.”

Shane chuckled and they finally moved apart to see what they could make for breakfast, which ended up being bagels with Nutella and banana and some Greek yogurt with honey and granola.

Breakfast was relaxing and uneventful.

Anya was hanging out under the table and Shane occasionally rubbed his foot over her soft, warm body.

Shane was learning that Ilya didn't like silence. If the TV wasn't turned to a sports thing or an action movie, he had a podcast on, or he was listening to music.

Shane was also learning that of all the things Ilya outsourced, he actually enjoyed doing laundry, and had put a load in once they'd finished eating and cleaned up breakfast.

Shane settled into one of the deep set armchairs by the window to read while Ilya was on a call with his wealth manager.

Once Ilya had finished his call, he flipped the laundry, and they took Anya out for a nice long walk. On the way back, they picked up a few things for dinner. It was a week day, so they weren't really bothered, and Shane even snuck holding Ilya's hand as they walked to the condo.

They got home, Ilya fed the dog, and Shane unpacked the groceries. Ilya went to grab the finished laundry, bringing the laundry basket into the living room to start folding.

They put a hockey game on and Shane helped, both of them idly chatting, offering commentary about the game.

Never in a million years would Shane have allowed himself to think about this, let alone have it.

It wasn't anything exciting or thrilling. It was just him and Ilya, in this comfortable condo together, doing things that normal couples did on the day-to-day.

Waking up together, having a routine, making meals and talking and doing little chores, and taking care of the dog.

It was painfully domestic and it filled Shane with absolute delight.

He loved this. He loved being settled and peaceful and relaxed. He loved that he and Ilya had been able to just settle together.

Shane folded a t-shirt and set it on the couch cushion, helping.

“Would you want to move in together?” Ilya asked.

Shane looked at him, smiling, his heart skipping at the question. Were they really that aligned? Practically reading one another’s minds?

“When?” Shane asked.

“I don’t know. We have a busy summer... the season will pick up quick but... maybe next summer?”

Shane considered it, picking up a pair of socks, and folded them together. “I think we could swing it. We’d buy a house?”

“I think so. Two of us and all of our trophies and a dog?”

They'd talked about this already but now it felt more... real.

Shane laughed. “Yeah. A house makes sense.”

“Maybe on the river?”

“That could be nice.”

Shane watched Ilya neatly fold a pair of jeans and place them down, while he picked up a shirt, very casual and unbothered.

“Do you want to get married sooner rather than later or...?” Shane asked.

“Mm. Maybe we wait a little.”

Shane’s brows furrowed. He was surprised how the comment stung. Ilya had already been married once before and Shane kind of wished he had been Ilya's first... but that was something that couldn't be helped.

Ilya leaned close for a moment to kiss between Shane's knitted brows before he went back to folding. “Buy the house, then get married. I want to be with you no matter what.”

Shane’s cheeks warmed and he nodded, folding the shirt, then picking up a pair of briefs. “Okay. Makes sense.”

Shane glanced at Ilya and Ilya was smiling, looking peaceful and relaxed, and it was all that Shane wanted for him. He wanted Ilya to be happy and for him to feel loved.

And Shane felt like he was succeeding.

They finished folding laundry and Ilya placed the piles into the laundry basket, bringing them down the hall to the bedroom, dropping them off.

Shane went to crouch by Anya’s bed and pet her gently.

“You like the idea of moving into a house, huh? You, me, and your dad?” Anya just looked at Shane with her big brown eyes and he smiled. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

Ilya came back to the living room just as it had started to rain. Shane checked his watch.

“I have to call my parents soon,” he said as Ilya walked further into the room, coming to stand by Shane.

“No problem,” Ilya replied and Shane rested his head against Ilya’s thigh, Ilya’s fingers stroking his hair. “You’ve been so patient.”

Shane sighed, eyes sliding closed. “I like being good for you.”

“I know. I like rewarding you.”

Shane hummed and Ilya tugged on his hair just a little, before going back to playing with the longer strands. Shane rubbed his cheek against Ilya’s thigh and felt his thumb caress his cheek.

God.

Shane hadn’t felt his horny in *years*.

He wanted to have sex with Ilya all the time. He honestly would have thought his libido would have kind of calmed down by now. He thought it had in all honesty. But apparently it had more to do with who he was with than anything else.

They stayed like that for a few long moments before Shane finally got to his feet, cupped Ilya’s face in his hands, and kissed him just because he could.

He could do that now. Kiss him and touch him just because. It was freeing and exhilarating and wonderful.

Ilya was smiling, his eyes all crinkled up, smile bright, and Shane loved him with every fiber of his being.

“I love you, baby,” he murmured.

“I love you, too,” Ilya murmured back. They kissed again and then Shane went to grab his phone so he could call his parents.

He always talked to them on a regular basis. A phone call every other day and texting every day. Since his dad’s health issues earlier in the year, he’d started checking in more regularly.

Shane loved his parents and worried about them and it made him feel better to check in.

He was glad he moved back to Ottawa for a whole host of reasons and it made him less anxious to know he was so close just in case.

His parents weren’t getting any younger and he wanted to do whatever he could for them.

The call with his parents was easy and fun, as always. They didn't keep him, knowing he was with Ilya, but they asked about him, which was sweet, and invited them for dinner.

When Shane was finished with his call, Ilya was at the door, leaning against the doorframe.

"That was good timing."

"Was it?"

Shane nodded, holding his arms out for Ilya, and Ilya came, joining Shane on the bed, and lay on top of him.

Shane hummed happily, wrapping his arms around his boyfriend.

"I love a good squish."

"I noticed," Ilya chuckled.

Shane closed his eyes, his brain quieting down as he was flattened into the mattress under Ilya's warm, comforting weight.

Eventually, Ilya rolled off of him and Shane stretched out, feeling relaxed, before turning onto his side to face Ilya.

"Are you hungry?"

"Getting there."

"One more walk for Anya and then we can start cooking. Is okay?"

"That's perfect."

"Would you like to join?"

"I think I'll stay here and get dinner prep stuff started if that works."

"No problem." Ilya took his hand and kissed the back of it, his eyes closed as his lips lingered. Shane watched him, all fluttery inside.

How was it possible to love someone so much? Even when things were quiet and boring and still.

There was just so much love and joy in the small moments and after so much time apart, Shane wanted to treasure it all.

He felt so lucky.

"We won't be long," Ilya said as he got out of bed.

"Take your time," Shane chuckled, turning as Ilya leaned over onto the bed to kiss him.

“Have a good walk.”

“We will.”

Shane watched Ilya leave and smiled, flopping back onto the bed, listening as Ilya got Anya ready.

Shane bit his lip and rolled out of bed.

He opened up one of the nightstand drawers. Inside were a few sex toys, two dildos, a few prostate massagers, condoms, and lube.

Shane moved one of the devices aside and pulled out a cobalt blue butt plug. He looked at the toy for a moment, almost giddy with excitement and his own cleverness.

Ilya would probably enjoy the surprise and Shane was particularly keen about getting fucked tonight.

He took the plug and the lube to the bathroom, since he didn't want to risk Ilya walking in on him.

Shane had used the plug only once so far. Ilya had enjoyed learning that Shane had a dildo and had started buying him toys. They'd tried a few things and Shane liked most of the stuff, though Ilya was much pickier.

Shane did a quick search to make sure that wearing a plug for a long period of time wouldn't have disastrous consequences and finding that he would be okay, went about prepping himself, before sliding the plug in.

He had to make a few adjustments, particularly after sitting down, but he'd managed.

The sensation was kind of wild and he was a little on edge, but if he distracted himself enough with prepping for dinner, he'd be okay. It was a good thing they weren't making anything too complicated.

They were making a creamy chive pasta with lemon and grilled chicken. Shane started cutting up the chives for later and making sure the rest of the ingredients were readily available and measured out.

Ilya came back with Anya, both of them a little wet, and Shane laughed as he watched Ilya chase Anya around before catching her and wrapping her up in a towel to dry her off.

He made sure that Anya was fed before washing his hands and joining Shane at the island.

“Okay. How can I help?”

They worked together to season the chicken and pop it in the oven, setting a timer, before working on the pasta and sauce.

Shane enjoyed cooking with Ilya. He liked having this time, listening to music, talking, working together to make something delicious. He loved that they were such a good team and something about it was just... sexy.

Maybe because making something well felt like winning. And Shane loved to win.

Ilya took the chicken out of the oven as Shane finished with the pasta. Ilya cut the chicken and added the slices to the pasta, Shane mixing everything up.

They finished things off with a very easy side salad with a red wine vinaigrette and sat down to eat.

Shane didn't want to rush through dinner but he was full of anticipation.

Ilya wasn't oblivious, occasionally asking if Shane was okay, because the guy was perceptive as hell, but he didn't push.

They finished eating and cleaned up, loading the dishwasher.

Shane felt two seconds away from just shamelessly rubbing himself all over Ilya but Ilya started the dishwasher and turned to Shane, taking his hands.

"What is going on with you?" he asked, amused, pulling Shane close. "Are you so horny for me?"

"Are you going to make fun of me if I say yes?"

"Of course."

Shane pouted at Ilya and Ilya chuckled, smoothing the back of his hand over Shane's cheek.

"Only a little bit."

Shane pouted harder, which only seemed to entertain Ilya more.

"You have been so good," he hummed, reaching down to squeeze Shane's ass in his hands, and Shane bit his lip, making a soft noise of pleasure as Ilya pulled him flush.

"What do you want, beloved?" he asked, lips against Shane's ear, making Shane shiver.

Shane's hands rested on Ilya's chest, practically kneading his pecs. He turned his head to kiss Ilya, making a soft, needy noise against his mouth.

"Want you to fuck me," Shane breathed, when the kiss broke, sliding one hand up to rest against the back of Ilya's neck. He looked at Ilya through his lashes. "I put a plug in before we started making dinner."

Ilya looked taken aback for a second, before he growled in response, starting to pull at Shane's clothes, right there in the middle of the kitchen.

“Fuck, Shane. Help me.”

Shane laughed as Ilya pulled off the shirt Shane had stolen from him, smiling as he pressed his face against Ilya’s neck, stepping out of his sweats and underwear. He was so fucking turned on and he loved that he’d gotten Ilya all riled up.

Ilya hitched his hands under Shane’s thighs, pulling him into his arms, and Shane wrapped around him, kissing him as Ilya carried him into the living room. Shane gasped as Ilya found the base of the plug, pressing on it.

“Oh fuck,” Shane panted and Ilya made a soft, satisfied noise.

“Can you wear a plug for that long?” Ilya asked.

Shane nodded. “Yeah. I looked it up.”

Ilya chuckled, tugging at the toy, and making Shane whimper. “That is very slutty.”

He kissed and nipped at Shane’s neck, and Shane sighed at the slight burn, unwinding himself from Ilya, back on his feet by the couch.

Ilya kept playing with the plug, tapping the base, pulling it out and then pushing it back in. The sensation was kind of wild. Sort of like using a dildo but not quite. It felt good but it wasn’t nearly enough.

Shane shuddered and whined and panted, biting Ilya’s shoulder through his shirt.

“You want my dick, little slut?” Ilya cooed, a hand in Shane’s hair, pulling his head back slowly.

“Yes. Fuck. Want you so bad.”

“Turn around.”

Shane did as he was told, turning toward the couch, forearms on the armrest. He heard Ilya taking off his clothes, then watched him retrieve some lube and a condom from the mantel.

“Um,” Shane said and Ilya paused.

Shane’s stomach tumbled with nerves and he swallowed as Ilya looked at him.

“You don’t need a condom,” he said.

Ilya looked at him for a long moment. “You are sure?”

They’d talked about it so it wasn’t a complete surprise but Ilya had left the ball in Shane’s court. Neither of them had been with anyone else, they’d both been tested. Shane trusted Ilya.

“Yeah. I’m sure.”

Ilya nodded. He placed the lube and the condom back and moved away from the mantel. Shane stood up, confused, and nervous now.

Did Ilya not want this?

But Ilya surprised him by hefting Shane over his shoulder carrying him out of the living room.

“What are you doing?” Shane laughed.

“We are doing this proper.”

“Oh, so carrying me off like a conquest is how you’re going to fuck me raw?”

“A little.”

Shane laughed, his cheeks warm, pleasure and happiness making him feel all fizzy inside. Ilya smacked his ass, because of course, and Shane didn’t even protest.

Ilya got them to their bedroom, plopping Shane down onto the bed. He bounced and laughed, watching as Ilya leaned back, hands on his hips, stretching his lower back. He was still wearing his briefs.

“You okay?” Shane asked.

“Fine enough to fuck you,” Ilya replied and Shane smiled, holding his arms out for him.

Ilya took off his briefs and joined Shane in bed, pressing him down into the mattress, kissing him in that commanding, yet tender way of his, managing to be perfectly filthy, and still leaving Shane feeling precious and adored.

His heart fluttered, hands in Ilya’s hair, running over his scruffy cheeks.

“Turn over.”

Shane turned over onto his hands and knees, settling his chest down on the bed, ass up in offering.

Ilya had grabbed the lube they had in here, slicking himself, before setting the bottle aside. But he didn’t pull the plug out, he just kept playing with it some more.

He pressed on it, turning it slowly, fucking Shane with it. Shane moaned and wiggled his hips, gasping when the toy bumped up against his prostate, his cock hard as granite, leaking all over the sheets.

“Ilya. *Please.*” Shane was not above begging.

“So polite,” Ilya murmured. “Such a good boy.”

Shane made a frustrated noise as Ilya twisted the toy some more, before finally pulling it out in one steady pull. Shane gasped and arched at the sensation and heard the toy get tossed, landing on the floor.

Shane rolled over onto his back, wanting to look at Ilya. He wanted to touch him and kiss him and watch him and Ilya seemed happy at this arrangement.

“Is this what you want?” Ilya asked, lining himself up, and Shane nodded his head vigorously.

“Yes. Come on.”

Ilya pressed in and Shane let his head drop deeper in the pillow under his head, eyes closed, the feeling absolutely euphoric.

His body was loose and open and Ilya sliding into him without any barriers between them was more delicious than he could have ever anticipated. He loved the way Ilya filled him up, leaving no empty spaces. He belonged here and it was perfect.

“God,” Shane breathed. “So fucking good.”

He spread his legs wider, drawing his knees to his chest, practically begging Ilya to go deeper. Ilya gripped his thighs, pushing his legs back as far as they could go (thank you, yoga), sliding in as deep as possible.

“Good?” Ilya asked.

“Incredible,” Shane replied, because it was. Shane opened his eyes and looked at Ilya, who was looking right back. His face was so open, as if he was amazed that he was allowed to have this. That they could share this.

“I love you so fucking much,” Shane said and Ilya nodded.

“I love you, too. So much, Shane.”

Ilya started a few slow, easy thrusts, and Shane sighed, falling into the feeling, letting go, eyes half-lidded, mouth slack.

“C’mon, baby. Give it to me.”

Ilya smiled. “As you wish.”

Ilya fucked Shane in earnest, resting Shane’s legs over his shoulders, finding just the right angle, just the right cadence.

Shane was a whining, panting, moaning mess, fingers gripping to Ilya’s forearms.

He had never had sex this good with anyone before. It was just hit after hit after hit, like they couldn’t lose when they were together.

He could remember when they had first been together, he'd been so nervous and unsure, but filled with so much confusing desire and want. And Ilya had been so good to him. Treating him so well, being so patient.

It was wild to think that they had met each other when they'd been so young and that that had been it for them.

They'd met their person as kids and it had taken them until they were adults to figure it out and to know it.

But Shane was just glad they'd gotten here at all.

He wanted it forever.

"You are perfect, Shane. So beautiful. I love you. I love this."

"Me, too. Fuck, Ilya. Me, too. I love you. Love you inside me. Want you to come in me. Fill me up."

Ilya grunted and fucked Shane harder, the headboard banging against the wall in time with Ilya's thrusts.

Shane reached between them, stroking himself, watching Ilya's face. He was so gorgeous, looking blissed out, as if he'd never experienced something so good in his entire life.

Shane's back arched off the bed as he came, surprising himself, all over his hand, splashing up to his chest, his ass spasming around Ilya's dick.

Ilya wasn't usually very noisy when they fucked but he groaned, long and loud as he came inside Shane, their eyes locked.

When they could both finally move and speak, Ilya let Shane's legs slide from his shoulders, before gathering him into his arms, and holding him close.

Shane melted into him, an arm across Ilya's damp shoulders, one hand resting against the back of his neck.

"That was so fucking good," Shane breathed, eyes stinging a bit, just from how intense that had all been, how amazing it had felt.

"Yes."

Ilya kissed Shane's neck and shoulder and Shane pressed their foreheads together.

"I love you," he murmured with every fiber of his being, holding Ilya's cheek in one hand. "You are my favorite person."

Ilya smiled at him, his cheeks all flushed, eyes crinkled. "I love you, too," he replied quietly. "And you are mine."

Shane smiled and sniffed, kissing Ilya as gently and tenderly as he could. He didn't want to move. He wanted to stay connected like this for as long as possible.

Ilya petted Shane's hair gently and Shane squished their faces, making Ilya chuckle.

Eventually, Ilya's softened cock slid out of Shane and he went to the bathroom to clean up, bringing back a washcloth for Shane.

Ilya slid back into his briefs and went to retrieve Shane's clothes from the kitchen so he could change, while Ilya changed the sheets.

"You're too good to me," Shane said when they were snuggled in bed together.

"Impossible," Ilya replied.

Shane chuckled, playing with the chain around Ilya's neck.

"I hope you'll let me take care of you sometimes."

"I do."

Shane looked at Ilya.

"What? I do!"

Shane shook his head, smiling. "I love you. Let me take care of you, too."

Ilya blinked slowly at Shane, his expression easing, and he nodded. "Okay."

"Thank you."

"I love you." Ilya smiled and Shane kissed him.

There was still so much that needed to be done and so much still yet to happen, but Shane was happy.

And he knew that they would face whatever challenge presented itself together.

Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Ilya and Shane tell their fellow coaches, the team, and management that they're together

Monday

Ilya walked into the kitchen, dressed in a pair of jeans and a nice black t-shirt.

Shane was standing at the kitchen island, organizing a charcuterie board and crackers, fiddling with the arrangement of paper plates and napkins and utensils.

His hair was down and he was wearing jeans and a nice navy blue t-shirt.

Ilya watched him. It was clear to see that he was nervous. He had been slowly growing more and more nervous as the day had progressed.

Their fellow coaches were going to arrive soon and they were going to break the news about their relationship, so Ilya understood where the nerves were coming from, even if they weren't warranted.

They had talked about how they would tell everyone within the Centaurs organization, ultimately deciding to tell the coaches first, then the team, then management.

They had already talked with their agents about this arrangement. The coaches and team deserved to hear things from them directly, as opposed to hearing things from management if things went south.

Ilya had invited Bood, Max, and Hazy to his place, so they could talk to them in private.

But Shane was still worried because that was just who he was.

Ilya walked around the island, though Shane seemed oblivious to his presence. He came to stand behind Shane, very gently resting his hands on Shane's, stilling them.

Ilya felt him freeze, then relax, leaning back into Ilya a little.

"You are worrying," Ilya murmured, resting his cheek against Shane's, squeezing his hands.

"Yeah," he sighed.

Ilya hummed, wrapping his arms around Shane, and held him, rocking them both back and forth.

“What are you nervous about?”

“I don’t know, all of it? Everything?”

“Tell me one thing.”

Shane took a deep breath, breathing into Ilya, and exhaled, before he replied.

“I’m afraid that we’ll tell them about us and they’ll be upset.”

Ilya nodded, closing his eyes. “Why would they be upset?”

“I don’t know,” Shane replied helplessly. “Because that’s what always happens?”

“Shane…”

Shane made a frustrated noise and turned in Ilya’s arms. Ilya looked at him, reaching up to gently smooth some of his hair behind his ear.

“We have the queerest team in the whole NHL.” He paused, searching Shane’s face. “You, me, and Max. Luca and Carson. I don’t think anyone will have problems.”

Shane nodded, letting his forehead rest against Ilya’s mouth. Ilya chuckled and pressed kisses to Shane’s skin, wrapping his arms around him again.

“Is going to be okay,” Ilya assured. “And if it isn’t, we can quit.”

“You’re right.”

“We technically do not need to be working either,” Ilya continued out of the corner of his mouth. “We are very wealthy…”

Shane laughed. “That’s true.”

He looked up at Ilya and Ilya pinched his cheek playfully.

“Hey,” Shane grumbled, swatting at him. Ilya laughed and kissed the offended cheek.

“I love you. Will be fine. And we are together.”

“Yeah. That’s true. I love you, too. Thank you.”

“Of course.”

They kissed and parted and Shane going back to making a few more adjustments.

About thirty minutes later Ilya got a text from Bood that said that he had arrived with Hazy and Max.

Ilya buzzed them up to the condo and Shane brushed his hair nervously behind his ears, sliding his hands in and out of his pockets.

“Relax,” Ilya assured, kissing Shane’s temple. “Is okay.”

“I know, I know.”

Ilya smoothed his hand up and down Shane’s back and kissed him once more, lingering, Shane’s hand coming to rest on his stomach for a moment.

There was a knock at the door and Anya was up and out of bed, waiting patiently, tail wagging, ready to greet their guests.

“Be good,” Ilya told her and opened the door.

The rest of the Centaurs’ coaching staff stepped into Ilya’s condo, greeting Ilya, Anya, and then Shane.

Bood had brought brownies that Cassie had made, Max had a bottle of wine, and Hazy had brought more cheese.

Everything was set on the counter, beers were grabbed and wine was poured and they all stood in the kitchen, talking about work for a bit.

They’d seen one another only a few hours before and everyone was a little down given that the boys had indeed missed the wildcard spot by one point.

“So what’s goin’ on Roz?” Hazy asked, eating a piece of cheddar cheese on a cracker.

“Yeah. Is everything okay?” Max added.

“Everything is fine,” Ilya said casually, swirling the wine in his glass. He looked over at Shane, who looked extremely pale and a bit unwell.

Ilya held out a hand and Shane took it. The room went very silent and Ilya smiled at Shane, before turning back to his staff.

“We are together.”

Bood, Hazy, and Max stared at them for a long moment before Max blurted out, “I fucking knew it!”

Ilya couldn’t help but laugh at that, everyone else joining in, the temporary tension broken at the hilarity of the outburst.

“Holy fucking shit. I knew something was going on!” Max laughed.

Hazy nodded his head. “Me, too!”

“Was I the only one who missed the memo?” Bood asked, arms crossed over his chest, looking miffed that he hadn’t caught on that there had been something happening between Ilya and Shane.

“I thought you guys were joking!” this was directed at Max and Hazy, who were both shaking their heads.

“I meant it seriously!” Max exclaimed.

Shane had moved closer to Ilya’s side, still holding his hand, but not looking nearly as much like he was about to puke his guts out.

“Okay, okay,” Hazy said, waving his hands. “So... how did all of this happen?”

Shane and Ilya looked at each other.

“It’s a long story,” Shane said, turning back to face everyone.

Max held up the two unopened bottles of wine on the counter. “I think we have plenty of time.”

“From the beginning?” Ilya asked.

Shane nodded, though he looked grave. “Yeah. I think so.”

He finished the wine in his glass in one go and held it out. Max refilled it.

“Thanks. Okay. So... me and Ilya...”

Max and Hazy sat on two of the stools at the kitchen island and Bood moved closer, standing behind Hazy.

“All of you know our rivalry and everything,” Shane said. “But what you don’t know is that Ilya and I were, uh, secretly hooking up, for like, the first six or seven years of our career...”

“Oh shit,” Max murmured, covering his mouth. “But you said...”

Shane nodded. “Yeah. We know.”

“That’s not an accusation!” Max clarified. “I just... I’m putting two and two together. You guys weren’t ready.”

“We were not even together at that point,” Ilya added. “At the dinner.”

Max nodded.

Shane took another sip of wine. “We stopped seeing each other in 2016. Things were getting serious, or as serious as they could be for two closeted guys. I hadn’t even really come to terms with my sexuality. It was a hot mess. So, yeah, we stopped talking for fifteen years.”

Shane looked at Ilya.

“We met again, here, in Ottawa. There were things we needed to discuss and we did. And... now we are here,” Ilya finished.

“Damn, fellas,” Bood murmured, shaking his head.

“So this is like... your second chance?” Hazy asked.

“Basically, yes,” Ilya replied.

“Are you... in love?” Bood asked.

“Yes,” Ilya answered, as Shane said, “very much so.”

They looked at each other and smiled.

“Wow. This is... this is absolutely blowing my mind,” Max said.

“Me, too,” Hazy agreed.

“Me three,” Bood sighed.

“We are happy to answer any questions as best we can. We know this is a lot,” Ilya explained and Shane nodded his agreement.

“How long have you two been together now?” Bood asked.

“Since February.”

All three men nodded.

“I know this is going to sound kind of gauche, but, is it serious?” asked Hazy.

“Extremely,” Ilya replied and Shane squeezed his hand. “We would like to get married at some point.”

“Aww guys,” Max gushed.

“Are you going to tell the boys? Management?” this from Bood.

“Yeah. We wanted to talk to you all before we spoke to the boys. We wanted to be sure that you heard this all from us, not from management if they don’t approve. We’ll talk to management last,” Shane answered.

“They surely can’t fire you,” Hazy said.

“We don’t think so, no, but,” Ilya shrugged. “Who knows what could happen.”

The room went quiet again.

“But you’re happy? Things are good?” Max again.

Shane nodded. “Yeah. Everything’s great.”

“Then that’s good enough for me,” he said, hopping out of his chair. “C’mere, you guys.” Max hugged them both. “I love love. And I’m so happy you two found your way back to each other.”

“Thank you, Max,” Ilya said.

“Seriously. Thank you,” Shane added.

“Aww, bring it on in. Group hug!” Bood announced and he and Hazy joined them.

“We support you guys one thousand percent,” Hazy said.

“We’re here for you. Whatever you need. We’ll back you up,” said Bood.

“Thank you. All of you,” Ilya sighed. “That means a lot.”

“Truly,” Shane sniffled.

“Aww Holly!” Bood, Max, and Hazy chorused and everyone got Shane into the middle of the group hug so he could be squeezed.

They all laughed and Shane wiped helplessly at his eyes.

“It’s been a really long road,” Shane sighed. “Shit was really hard for a while and it’s still wild to me that we can talk about this openly...”

“Totally,” Hazy replied.

“Nothing is perfect, but we are making strides,” Ilya murmured.

Hockey still had a long way to go, particularly with trans inclusion, but Max being here said a lot about the Cens and their ability to see how good someone was at their job, regardless of identity.

And Ilya had to admit, never in his wildest dreams did he think he could come out to a group of hockey men like this and be immediately accepted. It was healing in ways he couldn’t even fathom and his eyes stung with grateful tears.

“We got you,” Max assured.

Once the group hug was over, Bood opened up the tray of brownies and Ilya opened another bottle of wine.

They let the guys ask whatever questions they had, which were mostly about their time hooking up, and how difficult that must have been.

No one asked for details about their “falling out,” which was appreciated, but they did all seem very happy that Shane and Ilya had found their way back to one another.

It was nice to feel supported by the other coaches, knowing that no one seemed particularly bothered by the idea of Shane and Ilya dating.

They knew that they needed to refine some systems. They already drove around to talk about work before coming home. But they'd have to figure out navigating disagreements in their personal life (or at work) and how to not let those get in the way of their ability to do their jobs.

Ilya didn't necessarily want to think about truly disagreeing with Shane but it would be inevitable. So having something in place would be helpful.

But for now, things had gone smoothly with the other coaches, and that was certainly promising.

"How do you guys think the team will take it?" Shane asked as they all sat in the living room.

Shane was sitting on the floor by Ilya's feet, while he and Max occupied the couch. Hazy and Bood were in the armchairs, Anya cradled in Bood's arms.

"I think they'll take it well," Hazy said. "They might need some time to process but I think they'll be okay."

"I agree. They're such a mushy bunch," Bood chuckled. "We got lucky with them."

"We really did," Max added. "We can be there, too, as back-up, but I think they'll be fine."

Ilya rested a hand on Shane's shoulder and Shane reached up to curl his fingers around Ilya's, squeezing.

The true battle was going to be talking to management and it was incredibly reassuring to have their friends support them like this, saying that they would happily fight admin in order to keep them, should things not go well.

They ended up finishing all the wine and Shane and Ilya made sure that everyone was poured into a car to get home safe.

Alone, Shane leaned into Ilya's arms, head on his shoulder.

"See?" Ilya chuckled, wrapping his arms around his boyfriend. "We survived."

"Yeah," Shane sighed. "I'm so tired..."

Ilya smiled, kissing into Shane's scalp. "Let's go to bed then."

He literally dragged Shane out of the kitchen, down the hall to the bedroom, Anya trotting along beside them, confused.

Ilya left Shane in the bedroom to take Anya out, then started getting ready for bed himself, finding Shane in the bathroom, washing his face.

They collapsed into bed and Shane turned toward Ilya.

“Do you think we can really pull this off?” he asked softly into the dark.

“Of course,” Ilya replied, genuinely confident in their ability to be the first romantically involved coaches in the NHL. Hopefully, the first married ones in the not so distant future. “Things are going well so far.”

“That’s true...”

“One thing at a time,” Ilya soothed, wrapping his arms around Shane, smiling as Shane snuggled his face against Ilya’s chest.

“You’re right.”

“Of course I am.”

Shane pinched Ilya in reply.

“Ow!” Ilya laughed.

“We have to sleep,” Shane grumbled but Ilya could hear the smile in his voice.

“Yes, yes,” Ilya hummed, kissing Shane some more, smoothing his hand over Shane’s back.

Ilya wasn’t worried about the team. He knew they would be fine and whatever happened with management would happen.

They would handle whatever came their way.

Friday

The season was coming to an end for the Centaurs.

After missing the wildcard spot they had had a few more games before officially finishing out for the year.

It would be nice for everyone to have a longer summer, to come back hungrier next year.

Ilya was so proud of the team and everything that they had accomplished. It hadn’t been easy but they had done much better than expected.

And Ilya made sure to tell them that he was proud of them, that he was impressed by their cohesion and dedication.

Back in the locker room after one of the last handful of practices they had left, Ilya let them know that he and Shane had an announcement.

The guys all sat in their stalls in various states of undress, still sweaty from practice. Shane stood close by and Ilya could feel his anxiety. It radiated off of him in waves and Ilya would be lying if he said he wasn't nervous, too. He was just better at hiding it.

The likelihood of the team not taking their relationship announcement well was very low but he still couldn't help imagining it going over like a lead balloon.

"I want to say something quickly," Ilya said. "Because it is important you hear it from us, than on social media."

Ilya watched some of the players straighten up, brows furrowing, nervous.

"Don't tell us you're leaving, Roz," Dunks said, to which several of the other men nodded and murmured in agreement.

Ilya laughed, shaking his head. "No, nothing like that. I wanted to tell you that, Coach, *Shane*, and I are, together."

Ilya glanced back at Shane, who took a step forward and slid his hand into Ilya's, squeezing.

"Wait, like, as a couple?" someone asked.

"Yeah," Shane answered. "As a couple."

The room was weirdly quiet for a long time before Luca said, "that makes sense."

Ilya turned to look at him, a smile teasing his lips.

Luca shrugged. "You two were acting very strange earlier this year, and then things were fine, and then they weren't, and then they were really good so... now it all makes sense."

"Yeah," Andy added. "It's kind of not that surprising actually."

Shane sputtered a laugh and Ilya chuckled. He supposed they hadn't been all that subtle.

"Really? Not so surprising?" Ilya asked.

The other guys started shaking their heads, saying that it made complete sense, and that explained so much of things being kind of weird before they got exponentially better.

Overall, the team was extremely supportive and nonchalant about the whole thing, which was a pleasant surprise, and a relief.

"Have you talked to management?" Luca asked.

"Not yet," Ilya replied. "We have a meeting in a few days, so, we will see. Either we will be back next year or not."

"They can't fire you," Carson argued. "Can they?"

Ilya shrugged. "We hope not..."

“Worst case,” Shane said, speaking up for the first time. “Ilya will be back next season but I won’t.”

The whole room burst into objection about this, which Shane did his best to quell. Ilya smiled at him. He wasn’t surprised that the boys would all be up in arms about the idea of Shane not being here next season.

Shane had endeared himself to the team because of course he had. He was perhaps the most strict of all the coaches but he had an easy way with all the guys, especially one-on-one. They loved him and the idea of him not being back next season was unfathomable.

Shane did his best to calm them down, though he was very appreciative of the guys who said they would happily go to war for Shane and Ilya. Eventually they were able to assure everyone that they would be doing their best to stay together as partners and as coaches for the team.

This seemed to satisfy everyone.

“We’re all invited to the wedding right?” asked Forty and the room went quiet again.

Shane laughed and smiled, looking at Ilya, his cheeks all pink, his face crinkled in happiness, and Ilya’s heart leapt. He nodded and Shane turned back to the guys. “Of course you are.”

The entire dressing room erupted in applause and cheers and the guys finally went back to getting ready to leave, everyone in much better spirits after that assurance.

Shane was much more visibly relaxed, perhaps feeling a bit more confident given that they’d received a lot of support already.

Ilya squeezed the back of Shane’s neck as they left the locker room, following behind the other coaches who had been on standby, just in case.

Shane looked at him, smiling, relieved, and Ilya smiled back, slinging his arm across Shane’s shoulder, and giving him a squeeze.

They both laughed softly and Shane leaned into him.

“We’re really doing this,” he murmured.

Ilya kissed his forehead. “We are.”

It was scary, being so open, talking about these things, but they were two for three, which bolstered Ilya. He felt hopeful.

That night they sat together on the couch and read through the emails a bunch of the guys had sent after practice.

They were all supportive and emotional, thanking Shane and Ilya for their honesty, for being great coaches, for creating an environment that allowed people to be themselves, while also pushing them all to be better.

Haasy's email in particular had them both in tears.

From a young queer player who never thought I'd see representation on the ice or behind the bench, it means so much to me what the two of you have done for the sport and for players like me. Thank you.

It was all either of them could ask for and it was healing in ways that neither of them had really anticipated.

This was for the younger versions of themselves as much as it was for the team and the League at large.

"I think we are going to be okay," Ilya assured as he held Shane in his arms.

"Yeah," Shane breathed, his hand on Ilya's chest. "I think so, too."

Monday

Ilya and Shane were both dressed in nice suits, making sure there wasn't a hair out of place for either of them.

They were meeting with management today and they were both, understandably, nervous.

"It's going to be fine," Shane said by way of pep talk, holding Ilya's hands in his as they stood in Ilya's kitchen.

"Yes. It will."

"Even if they're not okay with things, it'll be fine because we can still be together."

"Yes exactly."

"I can always go into consulting."

"Yes... or be a househusband."

Shane's face screwed up in displeasure and Ilya couldn't help but laugh. Shane rolled his eyes a little but he was smiling now, too, and Ilya pulled him into his arms.

"We will be fine. No matter what happens."

Shane hugged him back tight. "You're right. It'll be okay."

"I love you."

"I love you, too. I'm so proud of you."

Ilya hummed, leaning away to look at Shane. "I'm proud of you, too."

Shane smiled and nodded and Ilya kissed his forehead.

“We do not want to be late.”

They made sure they had phones, wallets, and keys, saying goodbye to Anya, before heading out to the offices.

The car ride was mostly quiet. They had already rehearsed what they wanted to say, deciding that they wouldn't discuss their past and Shane wasn't going to volunteer to leave. They would just lay out the facts of meeting again and falling in love and starting to see one another seriously in February.

So Shane just held Ilya's hand as Ilya drove them downtown. His hand was clammy but Ilya didn't mind. He didn't think his was any better.

He knew that they would be okay, regardless of the outcome. Their relationship wouldn't suffer. But he didn't want Shane to lose his job. He wanted him to leave on his terms if he so chose.

But he couldn't predict what would happen so they would just have to wait.

Ilya parked in the garage when they arrived and they took the elevator up to the main floor and checked in before heading upstairs to the offices.

Anne-Laure greeted them when they arrived, cheerful and elegantly dressed. She took them to the main conference room, asking them if they needed anything, but both Shane and Ilya politely declined.

The meeting they had asked to have was with the three joint owners of the franchise, Anne-Laure and her two brothers Martin and René, the general manager, Travis Dupree, and the club president, Guy Poulin.

Depending on how things went, their agents would maybe get involved, but they'd promised to keep them in the loop.

For now, they were just going to handle this themselves.

They greeted everyone in the conference room, shaking hands, before taking a seat.

It was nice to hear about how much management was appreciating their efforts and how impressed they were with how far the team had come in such a short amount of time.

“Thank you,” Ilya said. “We are happy to hear that you are pleased with our work.”

“Oh incredibly pleased,” Anne-Laure said. “Now, I know you two wanted to speak with us so, what's on your mind?”

Ilya swallowed, his hands laced together, resting on the conference table.

“Shane and I wanted to be completely transparent with everyone, the staff, the team, and all of you, so, we wanted to let you know that we have started seeing each other. Romantically.”

Everyone at the table went silent and Ilya’s heart was pounding in his chest. He could feel Shane next to him, body taut as a bowstring.

“You’re... in a relationship?” Travis asked tentatively.

Ilya swallowed and nodded. “That is correct.”

“Well that is highly unusual,” said Martin.

“We know that this is... odd. But it was not something we planned. It just happened and we wanted to make sure everyone knew.”

“How long has this been going on?” Anne-Laure asked.

“Since February.”

She nodded her head. Guy had leaned back in his seat, arms crossed over his chest, as if considering the situation.

“So this relationship is relatively new.”

Ilya glanced at Shane and Shane sat forward a bit.

“Yes. We, um, we obviously have known one another from our playing careers but this, currently, is fairly new.”

Everyone at the table nodded.

“We don’t have any rules or stipulations about this,” Guy said. “It is unusual but perhaps we, as the board, should discuss how we should proceed.”

“Yes, of course,” Ilya replied. He felt his anxiety like a stone in his stomach.

Anne-Laure rested an elegant hand on the conference table, tapping it gently. “Why don’t you two wait outside while we talk.”

Ilya and Shane both nodded, getting up from their seats and left the conference room, closing the door.

“Oh god,” Shane murmured, hands going behind his head. He looked pale. He looked at Ilya. “I think I’m gonna throw up.”

Ilya huffed a soft laugh. “Sit.”

Shane sat in one of the chairs across from the conference room, head between his legs. Ilya rested a hand on the back of his neck, rubbing gently.

“Deep breaths. Do you want water?”

“I don’t know...”

Ilya hummed, smoothing a hand up and down Shane’s back before going to the water cooler a few feet away and grabbing a cup. He filled it and brought it back to Shane.

It felt better to focus on him than on his own anxiety.

Shane looked at him as he sipped his water.

“How are you so calm?” he asked.

Ilya shook his head, glancing at the conference room, then back at Shane. Shane reached for his hand and Ilya held it, squeezing.

He hated this but he also understood why it was happening.

A part of him wished that maybe they shouldn’t have said anything at all, though that would probably have more disastrous consequences in the long run.

Neither of them wanted to keep their relationship a secret for that long.

And in the end, if management ultimately decided that one of them could stay and the other had to go, they had a plan.

Ilya didn’t love it but he knew that at least he and Shane would still be together, which was really all that mattered anyway.

Ilya wasn’t sure how long they waited for but Shane had gotten up and started pacing, so Ilya sat, running his hands through his curls, mussing them up.

Shane was trying to fix them a little when the door to the conference room opened and they both turned, standing ramrod straight.

Anne-Laure smiled at them. “Come in.”

They followed her back into the conference room and sat back down.

“We’re all aware that this is very unprecedented,” Anne-Laure said, de facto speaker for everyone in the room. “But we wanted to express that we support the two of you completely. You’re wonderful coaches. We know that the team and the staff think very highly of you and we’ve seen your work. The same rules apply for you both as it would to anyone else and we haven’t seen any indication that either of you can’t maintain a sense of professionalism. I suppose the only real concern is external. Will you be releasing a statement to the public?”

Ilya felt relief wash through him at Anne-Laure’s words and he felt Shane deflate next to him. They were okay. Things were going to be fine.

“Yes, we will. We talked with our agents about how to launch our relationship and we were intending to do so over the summer.”

“Very good. Please have your agents get in touch with Abby to coordinate communication. We’ll be sure to have a statement of support.”

“Thank you so much,” Shane said and Ilya nodded in agreement.

“Truly. Thank you.”

Anne-Laure smiled and looked at the other members of management, who were nodding along.

“No objection from any of us,” Travis said and Guy nodded his agreement.

“We’re very lucky to have you both and we would prefer to keep it that way,” Guy added.

Ilya smiled. “We are both very grateful for the opportunity and for your understanding and support.”

They talked a little more about arranging things between their teams and the Centaurs’ communication team before they shook hands with everyone and were thanked for the wonderful season and all their hard work.

“Looking forward to more good things next season, boys,” Travis said.

“We can’t wait,” Shane replied.

They left the offices, stepping into the elevator. They turned to each other and hugged one another tight, laughing softly.

“Holy fucking shit,” Shane said, leaning away. He cupped Ilya’s face in his hands and kissed him, both of them smiling into it.

“Holy shit,” he repeated and Ilya laughed, mouth pressed to Shane’s forehead. They held one another down to the lobby, stepping out of the elevator hand in hand.

“I can’t believe it,” Shane sighed, looking at Ilya, a little more pep in his step. “We did it!”

Ilya laughed. “We did.”

Shane beamed and Ilya wanted to gather him up and kiss him some more. He felt so happy and relieved, his body so light that if he wasn’t careful he’d float off into space.

They walked part way to the elevator that would go down to the parking garage when Shane stopped.

“Do you want to get lunch?” he asked. “There’s that Italian place you love. We could walk. Get some chicken parm...”

Ilya smiled hugely at Shane and nodded, lifting his hand to his mouth, and kissed the back of it.

“A date?”

Shane was smiling back, face all crinkled and happy, dark eyes sparkling. “Yeah.”

“Okay. Yes. Let’s go.”

They turned back around and left the offices, going out onto the street, hand in hand, laughing and grinning like two idiots and not even caring.

Ilya felt like he could walk in air, like he could fight a bear. He felt invincible.

He was in love and he got to keep doing this great job with Shane beside him.

The future stretched out before him full of hope and promise and for the first time in a long time, Ilya fully realized that everything was *going to be okay*.

He looked at Shane and Shane looked back.

“I love you,” Shane said and Ilya’s cheeks hurt from smiling so much but he couldn’t stop.

“I love you, too.”

Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya at The Cottage

May - The Cottage

Shane was staring up at the bedroom ceiling, following the grain in the wood with his eyes. He was familiar with the pattern and it was soothing just to look at. He had an arm behind his head, the other wrapped around Ilya, who was snuggled against Shane's side, head on his chest, snoring softly. He was a warm, familiar weight, comforting.

Shane had his hand in Ilya's curls, scrunching the strands gently in his fingers, rubbing against Ilya's scalp.

The morning was quiet. Shane could hear birds outside, a light breeze rustling the leaves. Light spilled into the room from the gaps in the curtains and Shane couldn't quite believe that this was happening.

Ilya was here, with him, at the cottage. His favorite person with him at his favorite place in the whole world.

They'd arrived yesterday afternoon, driving up from Ottawa with a car full of luggage, and groceries, and Anya.

Shane was mostly excited, but a little worried, too.

He was afraid that Ilya was going to get bored, that he would get tired of Shane.

Ilya was a sociable, extroverted person. He loved being around people and Shane knew that he wasn't really into nature exactly.

They would be here until mid-August. That was a long time to be alone with someone. And even though they spent so much of their time together already, enjoying one another's company, Shane was afraid Ilya might go stir-crazy.

Of course there was no obligation for Ilya to spend ALL his time with Shane. Shane liked his alone time. He wouldn't mind reading while Ilya played video games or going off to do one thing while Ilya did something else.

There was no obligation to spend every waking moment together.

But it was hard to shake that concern.

Shane had a lot of things he wanted to show Ilya, things he hoped would keep him interested and entertained.

His favorite hiking trails, the local farmer's market, and one of the nice restaurants in town.

Shane's birthday was in a little less than two weeks and he had invited his parents, the Pikes, J.J, and Rosaline to the cottage for a few days to celebrate. He hoped that maybe the socializing might help a bit.

Shane had kayaks and jet skis, which he had no doubt Ilya would love, and there was just swimming around in the lake by the property as an option, too.

Ilya had been talking about fucking Shane in every room of the entire cottage and Shane had told him about a fantasy he had about going out to one of the little islands in the middle of the lake and being fucked out in the open.

Ilya seemed very keen on making those things happen, so that was a lot to look forward to.

Shane took a deep breath and let it out slow, continuing gently playing with Ilya's thick curls, plucking at them lightly. He turned his head to breathe Ilya in, reminding himself not to get too ahead of himself.

He just wanted to enjoy each new day as it came, to just allow himself to be in Ilya's company. He loved being with Ilya. He loved making meals with him, laughing and teasing each other. He wanted to lounge by the fire and talk about all the difficult, vulnerable things, just as much as the things that made them happy and brought them joy.

And there was the promise of lots of sex, too.

If Shane hadn't been sure before now, he knew definitively that he was going to marry Ilya.

He knew that this was the person he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. He'd known for years, really, but now he could actually *do* something about it.

Shane was drawn from his thoughts as he felt Ilya stir, making a soft noise, shifting against Shane as he woke up.

Shane turned his head to look at Ilya, smiling as he blinked his eyes open.

"Good morning," Shane murmured.

"Good morning," Ilya murmured back.

Impulsively, Shane leaned in to kiss Ilya's mouth, fingers dragging through Ilya's hair, carding it back from his face.

Ilya hummed, a little smile on his lips when Shane leaned away.

"That was nice," he sighed.

Shane chuckled. "It was."

"More please."

Shane laughed and smiled wide, obliging, pressing tiny kisses to Ilya's smiling mouth, and then to his cheek and forehead, smoothing his curls.

Ilya hummed, rolling himself on top of Shane, and lay on him, face tucked against Shane's neck, and Shane wrapped around him, smoothing his fingers up and down his back.

This was all Shane could have asked for.

A quiet, lazy morning with his boyfriend, being squished into the mattress just like this, and Ilya's warm breath against his skin.

They were both hard but in no rush to do anything about it. Shane was happy for them to just kiss and caress and cuddle, existing together in the quiet.

"I should take Anya out," Ilya murmured against Shane's neck.

Shane smiled, turning his head to kiss Ilya's temple, fingers following the notches of his spine. "I can make coffee. We can go on a nice walk with her."

"Mm. Yes." Ilya leaned up, looking down at Shane and smiled at him tenderly. "I would like that."

"Me, too," Shane hummed, reaching up to touch Ilya's cheek, and playfully tug at a curl.

Ilya kissed him and Shane made a happy noise, wrapping his arms around his neck to hold him until the kiss broke and Ilya rolled out of bed.

Shane sighed, turning onto his side to just look at Ilya while he walked to the bathroom, admiring his perfect ass and that ever present swagger before he disappeared.

Shane suppressed a giggle and stretched out, feeling all warm and fizzy with happiness.

Ilya came out of the bathroom and Shane went in after him, pausing to rest a hand on his chest and kiss him, just because.

They both changed into briefs and Shane stole Ilya's t-shirt to wear, though Ilya seemed unbothered about being shirtless. And Shane didn't mind the view, at all.

Anya had slept out in the living room and immediately hopped up once she realized that they were awake. Shane went to the kitchen, smiling as Ilya took Anya out into the backyard, watching them both as they went down the stairs and onto the lawn.

They hadn't even been at the cottage for a full twenty-four hours and it already felt like Ilya and Anya had been here forever.

It felt so satisfying to have their lives fit together so seamlessly.

Shane pulled travel mugs from the cabinet, setting them on the counter with their covers, and then went about making coffee when Ilya and Anya came back inside.

Anya drank from her water bowl, then came to greet Shane, who gave her some pets, the coffee machine going.

He watched as Ilya picked up the can of coffee on the counter, holding it away from himself, eyes squinted as he tried to read the can.

“Where are your glasses?” Shane chuckled.

“In my bag. Can I use yours?” Ilya replied.

“They’re prescription. And somewhere in my bag, too.”

Ilya sighed, setting the can down again, and went to get his glasses. Shane chuckled, unable to help himself from just looking at Ilya’s broad shoulders and strong back and that perfect, round butt. Shane wanted to sink his teeth into one of those ass cheeks.

He shook his head at himself and gave Anya some more pets.

Ilya came back out with his glasses and Shane wished he had his phone so he could snap a picture.

“What?” Ilya asked, smiling as if he knew exactly what Shane was thinking.

“You,” Shane replied.

“What about me?” Ilya came to stand by Shane, hands going to Shane’s hips, backing him up against the counter.

“You’re unfairly handsome in the mornings, you know that?” He let his hands skim up Ilya’s stomach, to his chest, squeezing his pecs.

Ilya smiled, pressing a few kisses to Shane’s mouth, and Shane took advantage of his closeness just to feel the catch of his chest hair under his palms, and the warmth of his skin.

They parted when the coffee machine beeped. Ilya kissed Shane’s cheek and neck, before turning away, slipping his glasses on to go back to looking at the label on the coffee.

Shane poured coffee into the travel mugs, making Ilya’s like he liked it, two sugars and a splash of milk. He popped the tops on so they would stay warm and turned back to his boyfriend.

“We can take our coffees with us,” he said.

“Okay,” Ilya replied, sliding his glasses on top of his head to hold back his curls.

They went back to the bedroom, pulling on workout gear. Ilya was wearing a pair of well-fitted shorts and a cut off muscle tee, then added a zip-up hoodie.

He slid on a snapback, backwards and looking at him, Shane felt like he was twenty-six again.

He wore a similar outfit, only he'd opted for an oversized t-shirt instead and a hoodie.

They put on socks and sneakers and Shane explained the route he was thinking.

They got Anya all geared up and were out the door with their coffee, walking on the road.

"What do you want for breakfast?" Shane asked.

Ilya pondered the question. "French toast."

Shane smiled. "I think we can manage that. I haven't had French toast in a long time. We have the strawberries, too."

"Sounds delicious."

"I think so. I figured we could eat and just hang for a bit. It's a little too cold to swim but we could go for a hike or into town if you want."

Ilya looked at him. "We can stay at the cottage. Is nice."

Shane smiled. "Okay. Whatever you want."

"Don't worry," Ilya chuckled, bumping Shane a little. "I won't be bored."

Shane felt his cheeks heat at being called out and gave Ilya a look. "I know."

"Do you?" Ilya asked. He stepped a little closer to Shane, their arms brushing.

"I just want you to like it here," Shane confessed. "I don't want you to get bored or sick of me. We're here for like, three months. And I want you to have a good time."

"Shane..."

Shane looked at Ilya, then glanced away. Ilya nudged him gently with his elbow and Shane looked at him.

"Will be fine. I want to be here with you. I want to enjoy our time together. I want you to show me everything and all the places you love. And if we get sick of each other, we do other things, and come back together later. Is fine."

Shane nodded. "Yeah... I know."

"I am very happy to be here."

Shane smiled shyly at him. "Yeah?"

"Yes."

“Okay. Good. I’m glad.”

Ilya smiled back, kissing his forehead, and Shane looped his arm around Ilya’s, since Ilya couldn’t hold his hand.

“I’m really happy you’re here, too. It means a lot to me.”

“Of course.”

Shane leaned his head on his shoulder as they walked, the morning a little on the cooler side, but the sun was out, and the sky was clear.

Today felt like it was going to be a good day.

The walk was long and leisurely, except when Anya decided she wanted to try and chase some chipmunks.

They got back to the house and Ilya fed the dog while Shane started in on French toast and they ate outside on the back deck, looking out at the lake, holding hands on the table.

They just talked and Ilya snapped a few candids, which had Shane laughing and blushing.

“I want all the pictures,” Ilya said as Shane scooted closer to him so they could take a few selfies.

Shane kissed his cheek and Ilya snapped a picture of that, too. “So do I.”

Ilya slid his arm across Shane’s shoulders, keeping him close, and Shane snuggled into his side, legs curled up on the bench seat.

“I am very happy to be yours,” Ilya murmured into Shane’s hair.

Shane closed his eyes, wrapping his arm around Ilya. “I’m very happy to be yours, too.”

They sat outside for a while, enjoying the spring sunshine for a bit, before cleaning up their breakfast, and then the kitchen, stealing kisses and touches and laughing as they slapped each other playfully with kitchen towels.

When they were together, Shane felt like he was in his twenties again. Ilya made him feel young and excited and delighted.

Maybe it was just being in love or maybe it was just what happened in the company of your favorite person, but Shane felt like he could do anything as long as Ilya was with him.

They giggled all the way to the bathroom, showering together, getting each other off, and taking their time after, happy to bask under the warm spray, tucked together tightly.

After showering they went back out down by the water with Anya and Shane told Ilya a little more about the property and the house and how he’d had it built and what he’d wanted.

They talked about Shane's birthday plans and the trip to Boston they were going to take before the season started so Shane could meet Ilya's other friends and see the city.

Once they got back to the house they made lunch together.

Shane always enjoyed working with Ilya on a meal. They made a good team and it was fun to peel shrimp together, tossing them into a bowl, making up weird voices and conversations and using the shrimp as props, laughing hysterically at their own ridiculousness.

They had made a marinade and Shane dumped it over the shrimp, using his hands to make sure that the seafood was well covered.

"Maybe we should make our post," Ilya said as Shane washed his hands.

"About our relationship?"

Ilya nodded. He was leaning against the island, arms crossed over his chest.

Shane's stomach flipped with a mix of anxiety and excitement. "Yeah. We can. You feel ready?"

"Very ready," Ilya replied. He looked at Shane for a moment, then took Shane's hand after Shane had finished drying them.

"I have never been so sure of anything before."

Shane squeezed Ilya's hand, his heart melting at the words. He knew that Ilya meant them but hearing them aloud made Shane want to combust.

"Neither have I."

They stood there for a moment, hands held tight, just smiling and looking at each other.

Victoria and Farah had sent them some bullet points and suggestions for the post, basically saying to be clear about their relationship and being excited to continue coaching next season.

They suggested three to four photos of them together as a couple would be a nice addition.

They would handle the media and anything else, possibly reaching out if they needed a statement.

Abby was already ready and waiting for post the team's response once the media got a hold of things, which they inevitably would.

Even if it was scary, Shane appreciated that they had so many people in their corner.

"We will put dinner in the oven and then do it?"

Shane nodded. "Yeah. Deal."

They finished prepping dinner and had everything in the oven, timers started, before going through their pictures and deciding which four they wanted to post.

Two from their California trip and two from today, at the cottage.

Ilya decided that he would post it on his Instagram, since he was more active on socials, and Shane would repost it.

“Here,” Ilya said, holding out his phone.

Shane looked at it. The first photo was of Shane on the dock, pointing out at something in the distance, across the lake, the second was from breakfast, one of their selfies, where Ilya had one eye closed against the sun as he smiled, snapping the picture, with Shane’s hand on his chest, kissing his cheek. The other two were their feet under a blanket on the couch at the Airbnb and a selfie they’d taken back in California.

The photos were really sweet but it was Ilya’s caption that had Shane tearing up.

Starting the summer off right with my love ❤️ See you in October hockey fans!

“Is okay?” Ilya asked.

Shane looked at him. He swallowed and nodded, wrapping his arms around his boyfriend.

“It’s perfect.”

Ilya hummed, holding Shane back, nice and tight, and buried his face in Shane’s hair.

“I love you,” Shane breathed. “So much.”

“I love you, too. Very much, Shane.”

Shane closed his eyes and just breathed, before finally looking at Ilya and holding out his phone.

Ilya took it.

“Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

Ilya smiled at him reassuringly, touching his thumb gently to Shane’s cheek. “We will be in it together.”

“We will.” Shane smiled back and Ilya held his phone between them, pressing post.

Shane took his phone out, seeing the notification that he had been tagged. He reposted it and set his phone down.

“I don’t think I can look at this for a while.”

Ilya laughed a little and nodded, setting his phone besides Shane.

“Same.”

The both sighed and hugged again.

“Will be okay.”

“I know.”

They’d just jumped off a terrifying precipice... but at least they weren’t alone.

It was hard to get back to cooking after that but Shane tried to just forget that his phone existed.

They finished making lunch and ate outside, leaving their phones on the kitchen counter.

They laughed off their nerves and cuddled together, looking at the lake, and watching some rabbits that were hopping around the lawn.

“My love, huh?” Shane murmured, playing with Ilya’s curls.

“Mm,” Ilya hummed. “You are.”

Shane smiled, cheeks going warm. He already knew that that was how Ilya felt. But he’d literally just told the whole world.

And while it was scary to be so exposed and knowing that people would judge them... Shane also liked the idea that people knew that he was Ilya’s love. That they were together. And loved each other.

“Baby,” Shane sighed, nuzzling his face into Ilya’s curls, making him laugh.

Shane pulled away, running the back of his hand in a gentle caress over Ilya’s cheek, fitting his index finger under Ilya’s chin so Ilya looked up at him. Shane held him in place, kissing him once, lingering.

He tilted his head, going in for another kiss and Ilya opened for him, tongue brushing against Shane’s, sliding into his mouth.

Ilya got his hands under Shane, forcing Shane to hold onto him as he stood, carrying Shane inside, leaving their dirty dishes.

Shane had his hands in Ilya’s hair, legs wrapped around him tight as they kissed, Ilya walking them to the bedroom, his hands supporting Shane.

They literally fell into bed, laughing, and Shane was so in love it felt impossible to contain.

He slid his arm across Ilya’s shoulders, cupping his face in his hand, and just looked at him.

Ilya looked back, pressing a soft kiss to his mouth.

“I want you inside me,” Shane breathed. “I want to be as close as possible...”

Ilya nodded, turning his head to kiss Shane’s palm. “Da. Yes.”

Shane held Ilya’s face in both hands, pulling him down to kiss him, wishing there was a way that they could just climb inside of each other.

Clothes were pulled off and tossed aside, the lube found under a pillow.

Ilya sat back against the pillows and Shane was in his lap.

Ilya took his time, opening Shane with patience and care. It was easy for Shane to open for him, placing himself in Ilya’s capable hands.

He fingered Shane with firm, deliberate strokes as they exchanged deep, hungry kisses, Shane’s hands fisted in Ilya’s curls, or digging into his muscular shoulders.

“I’m ready,” Shane murmured and Ilya didn’t dally. He just watched Shane with his golden eyes, dark with desire.

“Condom?” he asked.

Shane shook his head. “No. It’s okay.”

Ilya nodded, popping the lube cap again, slicking himself, and Shane shifted his weight back, sitting down on Ilya’s cock.

Shane settled, taking a moment. Ilya wrapped his arms around him, hands pressed to Shane’s back, and Shane slid his own around Ilya’s shoulders. It gave him enough leverage and they sort of just rocked together.

Shane didn’t really have a plan or an agenda other than to get off with Ilya. He wanted to be this close to him, feeling every inch of him, being able to hold him, and kiss him.

“Feels so good,” Shane hummed and Ilya nodded, mouth slack, cheeks flushed.

“Yes,” he breathed in reply. “Incredible.”

One of Ilya’s hands slid to Shane’s ass, squeezing one cheek, the other resting across his back, hand curled around his ribs.

Shane pressed their foreheads together, Ilya’s face turned up. They panted into each other’s mouths, gripping each other close.

“Fuck, Shane...”

“Can you come like this?” Shane asked.

“I don’t— maybe?”

Shane smiled and laughed softly, pressing kisses to Ilya's face, moving a little faster, bouncing as best he could on Ilya's dick. And fuck... it was almost enough.

Ilya made a frustrated noise and fucked up into him, which made Shane moan, eyes sliding closed.

They kept going like that, moving together.

Shane panted and whined, gripping to Ilya so tightly, chasing his pleasure, just out of reach.

"Don't stop," Ilya said and Shane groaned. He didn't have any intention of stopping.

"Oh fuck, Ilya. God. I'm so close."

"Come on, Shane. Give it to me."

Shane bit his lip, hands on Ilya's shoulders for leverage, truly riding Ilya's dick like his life depended on it.

"I love you. I love you. Ilya—!"

They both cried out as Shane's release hit Ilya's chest, his body spasming around Ilya's cock.

"I love you," Ilya breathed out as he came, holding Shane tight.

"Holy shit," Shane huffed, hand resting at the back of Ilya's head as they both caught their breaths. Ilya's arms wrapped tight around Shane and Shane buried his face into Ilya's hair.

"You're perfect," Shane said. "That was perfect."

"Yes. Perfect," Ilya agreed, pressing a kiss to the hollow of Shane's throat.

Shane smiled, forgetting about their post, focusing on just being with Ilya, right now, knowing that they were in love and he was here and they had the whole summer together. The whole of *forever*.

Shane eased off of Ilya once they'd both gotten uncomfortable, cleaning up in the bathroom together, and then returning to bed. They were both quiet and sleepy and deliriously happy.

Shane drifted off before he was even aware he was falling asleep and woke up an indeterminate amount of time later to Ilya stroking his hair.

"Mm," Shane hummed groggily. "Time's it?"

"Almost six."

"Oh jeez."

Ilya chuckled, kissing Shane's cheek.

“We should probably think about dinner. I have to take Anya out. And... maybe we check our phones?”

Shane rubbed at his eyes and stifled a yawn. “Yeah. Probably. Okay. Take Anya out and we can sort out dinner and then look? Does that work?”

“Yes. Is a good plan.”

Shane smiled and Ilya kissed him, rolling out of bed, and stretching. Shane watched him shamelessly and shifted closer to the edge of the bed to press a kiss to Ilya’s lower back.

Ilya looked over his shoulder and smiled at him, chuckling. Shane nipped at his ass and Ilya practically purred.

“Take out the dog,” Shane huffed.

“*You* are the one who is being so flirty.”

Shane just laughed, curling up under the comforter, watching Ilya from his vantage point all wrapped up.

“Cute,” Ilya cooed at him, redressing. He blew Shane a kiss, before leaving the bedroom, whistling for Anya.

Shane smiled to himself. He was nervous about looking at his phone but Ilya being Ilya belied his concern.

He gave himself a few more moments to just luxuriate in bed, before finally getting up, getting dressed. He remembered they’d left their lunch outside and swore softly, going out to clean that up while Ilya followed Anya around the yard.

Shane loaded everything into the dishwasher and started running it, before going to the fridge to see what they could have for dinner.

Shane eyed the phones on the counter but valiantly ignored them.

Ilya and Anya came back inside and Ilya gave Anya her dinner, before coming over to where Shane stood at the fridge.

“What are you thinking?”

“We could make the chicken thighs with boursin and couscous?”

“Sounds delicious.”

Shane pulled the ingredients out of the fridge and Ilya took the couscous from the pantry and a large pan from one of the cabinets.

They set all the ingredients out, measured everything.

“Phones now or after?”

“Might as well be now,” Shane sighed. “We’re going to need timers and I know you’ll put on music.”

“That is true.”

They both grabbed their glasses and phones.

Shane looked at the notifications clogging his screen. Thousands of likes, hundreds of comments. Texts from friends. A missed call from Farah, Abby, and his mom. Three voicemails.

“Oh no...”

“May not be bad,” Ilya assured.

He was scrolling, reading. “Most of the comments are good. Reposts from friends in support. Abby’s post is good, from the team. But the media has seen it.”

“Oh god...”

Shane looked at his texts. They were from all of his friends, saying how happy and excited they were for him and Ilya.

Shane went to his voicemails and played them.

Farah’s was just letting them know that she loved the post and she was fielding the media. She would keep them posted if she needed a statement.

Ilya had a similar voicemail from Victoria.

Abby had called them both with basically the same message; that she was happy and excited for them and that she had made the official team post of support. She would additionally be fielding questions from the media and assured them of continued support from the team and management.

The voicemail from mom was very supportive and excited but also letting them know that the media had gotten a hold of the post and that it was... kind of everywhere.

“Yes,” Ilya sighed. “Apparently people are posting pictures of us from our date...”

“Our date?! From the winter?!”

Ilya nodded, adjusting his glasses. “This is a tweet and it says, ‘we saw them at Clementine’s and didn’t even realize it was a date!’”

“Oh great...”

“Shane. Is fine,” Ilya soothed, setting his phone down, and pulling Shane into his arms. He was chuckling and Shane whined, leaning his full weight into Ilya.

“This is going to be a disaster...”

“Is not going to be a disaster,” Ilya laughed. “Is okay. Is mostly positive.”

Shane sighed. “I guess so.”

Ilya kissed into his hair. “I love you so much. We are okay. We have people who will help us if we need it. Lots of support.”

Shane nodded, wrapping his arms around his boyfriend. “That’s true. And I love you, too.”

“I know, sweetheart.”

They kept their arms around one another as they looked at some more of what was being posted, which was vastly positive, if maybe a bit parasocial.

Shane decided to call his mom back, who was actually very encouraging on the phone. Dad added his support from the background, which made Shane smile.

Mom told him to just have fun and enjoy his time with Ilya and let the professionals handle everything else. Which did reassure him.

After the call, he went back to making dinner with Ilya.

He’d already started cooking, standing at the stove, a dishtowel over his shoulder, music playing.

Shane just watched him for a few minutes, marveling at his presence, how at home he looked in the space. He was so relaxed and unbothered.

And Shane realized, in that moment, that everything really was going to be okay.

He had everything he could ever want and no one could take that from him.

He set his phone down and went to Ilya’s side, resting a hand on his back, and leaned into him.

“How can I help?”

Chapter 33: Epilogue

Chapter Summary

2034

Chapter Notes

And if you're interested in the playlist I made and listened to while writing this, you can find it [here](#)

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

August 2034 - Ibiza

Ilya was lounging out on the balcony of the extremely swanky hotel suite that he and Shane were staying at for their honeymoon.

It was a beautiful day, the sun shining, the ocean water sparkling, and he was on an exotic, queer getaway with his (nearly) brand new husband.

He was dressed in nothing but a very fluffy, comfortable white robe, loosely tied, his feet propped up on an ottoman, with his tablet in one hand, and espresso in the other.

He had been reading an article from *The Athletic*, discussing the Centaurs' recent Stanley Cup win and his and Shane's nuptials.

Ilya was honestly impressed that their wedding had made it into *The Athletic*, though there really wasn't much to be said.

He and Shane had kept things extremely private.

They had gotten engaged towards the middle of their second season working together. Shane had proposed in the living room of their brand new house, the entire space covered in electric candles.

It had been extremely romantic and wonderful and they'd decided to elope at City Hall two weeks later with Sveta and Rose as witnesses (which had been a miracle making that happen with such short notice) because they simply didn't wish to wait, and then decided that the ceremony and reception for their nearest and dearest would be in July the following year.

Being married to Shane, working with him, living with him, was truly a dream come true for Ilya.

They had their own lives, their own hobbies and interests. They both needed different things to recharge. They'd found a good balance and a good routine. They spent quality time together and were building a life that they could both comfortably live in together.

It was the most peaceful thing Ilya had ever experienced. Domestic and restorative, full of more love and care and tenderness than he could have ever fathomed.

Things weren't perfect.

They had their disagreements but they had learned how to disagree well. How to discuss problems. Always coming back together even after things were maybe a bit heated, working through concerns, and apologizing when necessary.

It was a beautiful life, one that Ilya had never imagined for himself, but that he had somehow found himself having.

Shane was everything he could have wanted in a partner and more; steadfast and kind and earnest and sweet.

Ilya felt more in love with him now than he had when they had first met. He felt like he was falling in love with Shane every day.

It had been an incredible few years for them and it only felt like it was going to get even better.

An arm slid around Ilya's shoulder, a warm hand resting on his chest, fingers splayed to cover as much skin as possible.

Ilya lifted his head and smiled at his husband.

"Hello, my beloved," Ilya cooed in Russian.

"Hey, baby," Shane replied in English, pressing a warm, firm kiss to Ilya's mouth. "Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all."

They kissed a few more times, just because, before Shane came around to join Ilya on the couch, overlooking the ocean.

Shane was also dressed in a robe, with a coffee cup in hand, making himself comfortable next to Ilya, legs curled up on the seat.

"What're you reading?" he asked.

"An article about us."

Shane's face fell. "Oh no..."

"No! Is good!" Ilya chuckled, reaching out to rest a hand on Shane's knee. Shane made a face and Ilya handed him the tablet.

Shane took it, reading, and Ilya watched, sipping his espresso.

"Okay... this isn't so bad."

"I told you."

Shane huffed a soft laugh and handed the tablet back to Ilya.

In truth, the media hadn't been all that bad. There had been some grumblings about them being a couple and coaching the same team but they were making franchise history, bringing the Centaurs back from the brink.

So that silenced the haters and homophobes pretty quickly. Their work spoke for itself.

Ilya turned off the tablet screen, folding the cover back over it, and set it aside, holding an arm out. Shane shifted closer, snuggling against Ilya's side.

"This is nice," he sighed and Ilya made a noise of agreement, kissing into his husband's hair.

"It is."

"I think I could just live in this robe forever."

Ilya chuckled. "Yes. They are very good."

"Should we just buy them?"

"Absolutely."

"Okay, cool."

Ilya smiled, looking at Shane, who looked back, face all crinkled up in the way that Ilya loved. That adorable, happy face.

He kissed him again, both of them still smiling, and Shane giggled, nuzzling his nose against Ilya's.

"You are happy," Ilya stated.

"Immensely," Shane sighed. "Are you?"

"Of course. I am here in this beautiful paradise, in this comfy robe, with the best coffee..."

Shane blinked at him, frowning when Ilya didn't mention him.

"And you are also here."

“Asshole,” Shane huffed, smacking his left hand against Ilya’s chest, his wedding band knocking into Ilya’s sternum. Ilya grunted, rubbing his abused skin, and caught Shane’s hand. He kissed over his wedding band, eyes lowered, before he looked at Shane through his lashes.

Shane paused and Ilya flicked his tongue between his knuckles. He watched Shane’s pupils dilate, lips parting slightly. Warmth pooled in his own belly at the sight.

“I am very happy to be here with you,” Ilya assured.

“You better be.” Shane leaned into him, practically on top of Ilya, but Ilya certainly wasn’t complaining. He reached down, resting a propriety hand on his husband’s ass, patting it soothingly.

“I was going to finish drinking my coffee and take a shower,” Shane said, his eyes lingering on Ilya’s lips, before shifting to his eyes.

“Oh? Information or invitation?” Ilya asked.

Shane fluttered his lashes and smiled coquettishly at Ilya. “Invitation.”

Ilya squeezed his ass and Shane laughed, turning to lay himself in Ilya’s lap, forcing Ilya to cradle him. Ilya didn’t mind in the least.

Shane nuzzled and kissed his neck, his jaw, and Ilya turned his head to kiss him.

“We don’t have any excursions or anything today, right?”

“No. Just dinner tonight. Why?”

“Maybe I just want to keep you in bed all day.”

Ilya grinned. “I would not mind that at all.”

FIN

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading this fic! This was such a wonderful fic to write and I had a great time with it! I think it came out awesome and I’m very proud of it 😊 Hope you enjoyed the journey!

End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!

You can follow me on [Tumblr](#), [Bluesky](#), or [Instagram](#) to get updates on what I'm working on!

Every kudo and comment is so greatly appreciated and treasured! Thank you for your support! 💖

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