

summer slipped us underneath her tongue

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summer slipped us underneath her tongue

by [justhockey](#)

Summary

Ilya was glowing, and wild, and so bright he was almost blinding. *Beautiful*, Shane had known, even back then, when he was still too young to know much of anything at all.

Ilya Rozanov belongs to the summer, and the summer belongs to them.

(Or, two childhood best friends spend a summer by the lake, before the rest of their lives begin.)

Notes

Title from *The Louvre* by Lorde.

Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

For almost eighteen years, Shane has spent his whole life just waiting for the summer.

Chapter Notes

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

It's a two hour drive from Shane's house in Ottawa, to the cottage by the lake. He's traveled the route so many times that he knows the bends, and twists, and turns of it, even with his eyes closed.

His body holds the memory like it's something to treasure.

As a kid he'd fall asleep somewhere along the way, when his Nintendo died or his parents' chatter got boring, but - like his body could sense it - he'd always wake up on that final turn down the narrow, winding pathway to the cottage. His blood would hum, and his heart would sing, and he'd get that fuzzy feeling in the tips of his fingers, like he was anxious, but for something good this time.

Something worthwhile.

Shane isn't a kid anymore. He's eighteen, now, and off to college in the fall. He's six feet tall, and 180lbs of solid muscle that's been shaped and honed by - *and for* - hockey. He's even taller than his dad, now.

He's no longer the little boy who'd fall asleep in the car, and wake to the familiar crunch of gravel beneath the tires. No longer the little boy who'd start bouncing in his seat, un-clipping his seatbelt before the car had even rolled to a stop, much to his parents' chagrin.

But, still - as his mom's SUV makes that last turn, as he hears the gravel, as the cottage appears out from behind the trees like an oasis in the middle of the desert - it feels like every nerve ending in his body comes alive.

For almost eighteen years, Shane has spent his whole life just waiting for the summer.

Hockey is his everything, of course. He lives and breathes it. But in the depths of winter, during too-long bus rides and too-early mornings, Shane thinks of *this*.

He thinks of his bedroom in the cottage, with his awful plaid bedsheets and the peeling hockey posters on the wall. He thinks of the sunlight glistening off the lake like a disco ball, and the feel of grass between his toes, and the way his body knows it's allowed to relax fully, for the first time since last year.

But most of all, Shane thinks of Ilya.

Ilya is...sunshine. Blonde curls, and *bluegreenbrown* eyes, and a laugh so loud that he uses his whole body to make it.

He's funny and confident, and carefree in a way that Shane has never quite learned how to be, but he's never once made Shane feel bad for that. Not even when Alexei, Ilya's brother, and the other older boys would try and tease Shane. Ilya would just flip them off, wrap his fingers around Shane's wrist, and drag him away from whatever might hurt him.

Alexei doesn't come to the cottage anymore. Hasn't in years.

Irina - Ilya's mama, and Shane's mom's best friend - finally left their asshole dad a few years back. While Grigori and Alexei went back to Moscow, Irina and Ilya stayed in Boston. Stayed close enough to Shane that it didn't feel like his whole heart was being ripped from his chest.

Shane remembers that summer with a clarity most of the others lack. There's no haze to it; it doesn't bleed into the summer that came before or after it, like most of them do.

Shane will never forget it - the way Irina and Ilya had shown up alone, fingerprint bruises around Irina's wrist, and a cut and bruise on Ilya's cheek. "*From his ring,*" a twelve-year-old Ilya had said with a shrug, like it was nothing. Like it wasn't the worst heartbreak Shane had ever felt.

It took a while, but Ilya got happier after that.

And it's crazy, really, the things you do and don't pick up on as a kid. Because, for all the summers they had spent together - every single one since they were five years old, when the Rozanov's moved to Boston - Shane had never realised how much Ilya was holding back. He'd always seemed larger than life, even when they were small. Even when Ilya was sad and scared.

But that first summer without his brother and his father...Ilya came alive in a way that Shane had never seen before.

He laughed louder, ran faster, played harder, like finally there was nothing holding him back.

Ilya was glowing, and wild, and so bright he was almost blinding. *Beautiful*, Shane had known, even back then, when he was still too young to know much of anything at all.

Ilya Rozanov belongs to the summer, and the summer belongs to them.

Shane and his mom are the first to arrive. His dad is always busy with his government job during the summer, so he comes whenever he can steal the time, but it's always sporadic - a weekend here, and a few days there. Shane doesn't mind all that much. He loves his dad, but Shane's time and attention is reserved for Ilya between the months of June and August, so it's not like he misses his dad all that much.

Ilya had text him a while back to say they landed safely and were picking up the rental car, but the reception gets spotty on the drive to the cottage and Shane hasn't heard from him since.

It won't be long, he figures, before Ilya arrives and summer begins again.

"Come on," Yuna says, once the car has slowed to a stop, "let's get everything unloaded."

"Has Irina messaged you?" Shane asks, checking his phone for the dozenth time.

Yuna looks at him, shaking her head but smiling fondly. "Not since the last time you asked me...five minutes ago."

"Okay, okay. *Attitude*," Shane teases, rolling his eyes playfully until his mom shoves at his arm to get a move on.

He's excited, okay, it's not his fault. He hasn't seen Ilya in person since last August, when they'd hugged each other too tightly and for too long, before getting in their cars and driving in opposite directions.

Shane has *missed him*.

He hops out of the SUV and meets his mom at the trunk so they can start unloading everything they've brought: cooler bags filled with groceries - and alcohol that Shane and Ilya aren't allowed to touch - duffel bags full of their clothes, mom's laptop and all the relevant paperwork for her clients who'll be needing her expertise during the offseason.

He's placing everything in a pile on the ground, when he hears it - that all too familiar sound of a car approaching slowly along a well-worn path.

For a moment Shane just freezes, so overwhelmed with anticipation that he doesn't know what to do with himself. He's paralysed for a second, then two, until he sees the car appear - sees Ilya in the passenger seat beside Irina, already taking his seatbelt off, already reaching for the door handle - and then Shane moves.

"Shane, wait-" his mom laughs, trying to slow him down to no avail, because he's already running.

Ilya scrambles out of the car just in time for Shane to lunge at him, all long limbs and grabbing hands, and a heart that's trying to jump out of his chest and crawl beneath Ilya's ribs.

They both groan as they collide, knocking the breath out of each other.

For a brief moment Shane is lifted off his feet - *god*, how strong did Ilya get in the year they've spent apart? - but then his feet touch the ground again, and they're laughing as they rock from side to side, arms locked tight like they don't ever want to let go. Like there's no force on earth that could pry them apart.

"Holy shit," Shane murmurs against Ilya's neck.

“I missed you so fucking much.”

“When’d you get so huge?” Shane teases, and Ilya laughs brightly. “It’s been too long.”

“Same amount of time as always,” Ilya tells him.

“Exactly,” Shane says. “Too long.”

Ilya laughs like Shane is being ridiculous, but he holds him tighter anyway.

Ilya is so different to Shane in so many ways. He has a loud, full life back in Boston, even outside of hockey - he doesn’t need Shane in the same way Shane needs Ilya. But somehow, these two months at the cottage are Ilya’s favourite time of year, too. He misses Shane as much as Shane misses him, and the months apart are as long and painful and boring for Ilya as they’ve always been for Shane.

He can pretend all he wants, but Shane has a hundred saved *I miss you* messages from Ilya in his phone.

“Alright, alright. Let me at him,” Irina’s voice chimes in, soft and sparkly like the ripple of water over rocks.

Shane pulls back from Ilya only to be enveloped in Irina’s arms, and the smell of lilacs washes over him - as comforting a scent as his own mom’s perfume. He holds her close as her hand cradles the back of Shane’s head, and he sinks into her embrace like they’ve never been apart.

Over her shoulder, Shane sees his mom hugging Ilya in a similar fashion. Sees the way Ilya makes himself smaller and Yuna rolls up onto her tiptoes, so she can hug him the way she used to when he was a boy. Shane notices his mom’s mouth moving as she whispers to Ilya, but he can’t hear what she’s saying.

“You’ve grown, my darling,” Irina says softly, as she pulls back to take Shane in.

“Taller than my dad, now,” Shane announces proudly.

Irina’s hand drifts up to his face, brushing his hair out of his eyes as she looks at him.

He’s missed her, too. Not in the way he’s missed Ilya - he never misses anyone else with that kind of intensity - but there’s a piece of him that settles into place now that both Irina and Ilya are back where they belong.

“When did our babies become young men?” Yuna asks, assessing Ilya in the same way Irina had just done to Shane.

“I don’t know, but I hate it,” Irina says, as she loops her arm through Shane’s and leans her head on his shoulder.

“You were this high not long ago,” Shane’s mom laments, holding her hand out just above her hip.

Shane searches for Ilya's attention, and finds it already locked on him. They both roll their eyes at their moms' dramatics, but they're grinning, too. They've both missed this more than words can explain.

Nowhere in the world feels more like home than here, together at the cottage.

"Yuna," Irina says.

And suddenly Shane and Ilya are being abandoned as their moms rush forward, hugging each other like it's been ten years instead of ten months. They giggle like school girls, and Shane gets a brief flash of how they must have been together in college - wild and carefree, just *Yuna and Irina*, instead of moms and wives and adults with real responsibilities.

Shane glances at Ilya again, sees the soft expression on his face as he watches their moms - just two women who were once girls together - and Shane feels his chest flood with so much warmth.

Ilya catches Shane's eyes, his mouth pulling up into a smirk that Shane knows all too well. It's the smirk that got them stranded in the middle of the lake on a boat with a broken motor when they were fourteen, and the smirk that got them stuck on the other side of the lake with no ride home two years ago.

It's the smirk that leads to the best kind of trouble.

"Race you to the water!" Ilya calls out, and before Shane even has a chance to process the words, Ilya takes off running.

Shane doesn't hesitate.

He sprints after Ilya, the sound of their moms' laughter trailing behind him as he tries to catch up to his best friend. He rounds the corner of the cottage to where it backs out onto the lake, and finds Ilya waiting for him there, grinning like he's been holding it in for the last ten months.

"Too slow," Shane calls out as he runs past Ilya, who immediately begins to chase him.

"Cheat!"

"You started it!"

Ilya catches up to him as they reach the dock, and then there's no holding back. They jostle and elbow each other as they run, trying to slow the other down without tripping them up. Their shoes get kicked off, and t-shirts are discarded, and they skid to a stop right at the very end of the dock, where they race to pull off their shorts and socks.

They glance at each other, panting breathlessly, and then - in only their underwear - they jump into the lake.

It's a shock to the system as Shane plunges beneath the still surface of the water. It isn't freezing, but it's a damn far cry from anything close to warm. It feels like a thousand tiny

pinpricks against his sun-warmed skin, and he gasps as comes back up for air.

For a moment, Shane is alone. Then Ilya's head appears beside him, grinning maniacally as he shakes his head like a dog, spraying Shane in the face.

Ilya howls so loud it echoes, and Shane can't help but laugh.

He pushes his best friend's shoulder as he says, "Shut up, you idiot! You sound like a loon."

Ilya gasps in horror. "A *loon*? Shane, if you hate me you could just say that."

Shane snorts. "Fuck off. You're so dramatic."

Ilya's brows furrow and his gaze narrows as he says, "I'll show you dramatic."

He propels himself out of the water and launches himself at Shane, the weight of him pushing both of them back below the surface.

As Shane surfaces again, he wraps his arms around Ilya's waist and body slams him back into the water. Only Ilya grabs onto him too quickly, pulling Shane back under with him. They wrestle - legs tangled and arms battling - like they're kids again, instead of eighteen year old men getting ready to head off to college.

It feels different this time, though. Not like all the previous years they have done this same exact thing.

The wrestling stops, but Ilya's hands linger on Shane's skin for a moment too long, and Shane has to stop himself from clinging on - from wrapping his legs around Ilya's waist and refusing to let him go.

This summer, Shane knows that he is gay.

Realistically, he has probably had a crush on Ilya since long before he knew what it was.

Ilya has always seemed so much cooler than Shane, with the easy way he makes friends, and jokes around, and manages to be the life of the party without ever seeming arrogant or obnoxious. Well, *mostly*.

Looking back, the way Shane has always felt about his best friend - the way his life feels like it's on pause until he's back with Ilya at the cottage - hasn't been *just friendly* in a very long time.

Shane hadn't known it before, but he knows it now. Even if he hasn't been brave enough to tell anyone else yet.

And as Shane looks at Ilya floating on his back in the lake, water rippling over his toned abs as he smiles up at the sky, he thinks Ilya is even more beautiful than last summer.

Taller, stronger, more toned. His hair curlier, and his eyes brighter, with joy pouring out of him like sunbeams.

The *want* hits Shane like a wrecking ball, right between his ribs.

It was easier when there were hundreds of miles between them - when he only saw Ilya through pixels on a screen, or heard his voice through the speaker on his phone - but *this*? Being close enough to reach out and touch, while knowing he's not allowed? It feels impossible. Unbearable, almost.

Shane has spent the better part of a year waiting to be near Ilya again, and now that he is, he's terrified.

"Boys!" Yuna calls from somewhere up near the cottage.

Ilya flails in the water for a moment, splashing Shane as he tries to get himself upright. It makes Shane snort, impossibly endeared by his best friend.

"These bags won't unpack themselves!" Irina adds.

Ilya tips his head back all dramatically, and groans like it's the world's biggest inconvenience. Shane can't resist splashing him, which earns Shane the finger as Ilya rushes past him to reach the ladder first.

Shane watches, his mouth as dry as the Sahara, as Ilya climbs out of the water and onto the dock.

Water drips from his hair and cascades down his back in rivulets, highlighting the moles and freckles that decorate his skin like stars across the night sky. The muscles in his back and thighs shift as he bends down to collect the pile of clothes and shoes they'd abandoned, and for a moment Shane is helpless to do anything but stare.

Ilya is jaw dropping.

He looks like a statue in a museum, somewhere in Paris or Florence or Athens.

Shane's heart beats too fast in his chest, and his skin feels flushed despite the chill of the water, and he has to push the longing down, down, down inside of him, before Ilya can catch it written all over Shane's face.

Ilya looks over his shoulder, down to where Shane is still treading water, and raises his eyebrows.

"Are you coming?" Ilya asks him. "I'm not unpacking your bags as well."

Shane shakes his head free of impure thoughts, then scoffs as he begins to climb the ladder.

"You'd just do it wrong anyway."

"Alright, weirdo. Sorry not everyone colour-codes their clothes," Ilya teases, but it's loving and playful, and not at all judgemental.

Ilya waits for Shane as he collects his own clothes and shoes, then they start the short journey back up towards the cottage. As they walk Ilya bumps their shoulders together, and when Shane looks at him he smiles so wide that Shane can see every one of his teeth.

He wants to put his finger inside Ilya's mouth and feel the sharp edges of each of them.

"This is gonna be the best summer yet," Ilya proclaims.

Shane thinks it's going to be the *longest* summer yet.

Chapter End Notes

yes, this is loosely inspired by the summer i turned pretty :)

i was going to upload chapter by chapter but i got too nervous that i would start it and decide not to finish it, so i wrote the whole thing first and then posted in one go.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

This is Ilya's little slice of heaven. He might not get it for long, but it's his favourite part of every single year.

The first morning at the cottage, Ilya wakes with the birds.

He's not usually an early riser - not by choice, anyway - but there's something about this place that just makes him feel at peace. Sleep comes easier, and mornings arrive in less of a hurry, and there's a laziness to the whole summer that allows Ilya to relax, truly, for the first time in a long time. The first time since he last left this place, if he's being honest.

There's no one to perform for, here. No expectations to meet, or people to impress. All Ilya has to do here is exist, and the relief of that feels like a knot unravelling beneath his ribs.

His bedroom here faces east, so as the sun begins to rise it slips in through the window, like fingers pulling back the curtains on a beautiful day.

Ilya spent a long time hating this room.

He's always loved summers, always loved the cottage, and he's been grateful to the Hollander's since before he knew what gratitude was. But for seven years - between the ages of five and twelve - Ilya had to share this room with Alexei. His brother. Then, it had felt more like a prison - like Alexei was a mouse inside a trap, and Ilya was the cheese.

He's had it to himself for years now, of course. Ever since mama was brave enough to walk away from his father, and Alexei made his allegiance more than clear.

The sage green wallpaper, teakwood furniture, and the rug that feels like walking on a cloud, is Ilya's home away from home now. Yuna had resigned it like this just for him, after everything happened.

All the posters on the wall are Ilya's, and so are the old sneakers in the closet, still caked in mud from three summers past. There's a photograph of Ilya and Shane taped to the wall by his bed from when they were maybe seven or eight years old, their mouths covered in melted ice cream while they grinned and held sticks of cotton candy.

He's even got a collection of bottle caps in the bottom drawer of his bedside table, from when he and Shane used to sneak one of David's beers to share when Ilya could convince Shane to be reckless.

And in a box under the bed, hidden beneath old sheets and pyjamas that haven't fit anyone in years, there's a blanket. It's threadbare now, but the Ottawa Centaurs logo on it is still clear as day. It used to be Shane's favourite blanket, the one he brought from home, to the cottage, and then back again, every single summer.

The summer Ilya turned twelve, when he and Irina showed up bruised and alone, Shane had left it in Ilya's bedroom *"by accident."*

He's never asked for it back, and Ilya has never offered. There are some things that do not need to be spoken.

Ilya lies in bed and listens. There's an early morning silence to the cottage, like even the foundation is still sleeping - none of the creaks or groans that old houses sometimes let out, no shuffling footsteps, no quiet chatter. Ilya is the first one awake.

Perfect.

He's almost silent as he pulls on a t-shirt and pair of basketball shorts. He tiptoes to the bathroom across the hall from him so he can splash his face with water and brush his teeth with Shane's toothpaste, because Ilya always forgets to pack his own.

He looks in the mirror and catches his reflection - sees the same face he always does, but it looks different here. *He* looks different here. Like a weight has been lifted off his shoulders.

Ilya blinks the sentimentality away.

Once he's ran damp fingers through the unruly curls that his mama keeps trying to get him to cut, he's ready for action.

And by action, he means terrorising Shane.

The only door between his and Shane's leads to a linen closet, so Ilya hurries past it to get to Shane's. He holds his breath as he turns the handle of Shane's bedroom door, convinced it will make him quieter somehow, convinced it will make the house obey his pleas for silence.

When it clicks with only the faintest sound, Ilya breathes out a sigh of relief. He opens it a crack, just enough to slip inside, and then holds his breath once again when he shuts it behind him.

Ilya leans back against the door, and he takes a second to look around. Like Ilya's, the room faces east. Shane did a more thorough job of pulling the curtains tight over the window, so only a sliver of light bleeds into the room. The early morning sun stretches across the room in a straight line, from one side to the other.

The walls are still the same shade of slate blue, and the floorboard in front of the dresser still creaks when you step on it; Ilya feels a wave of nostalgia wash over him at the familiarity of it all. But it somehow feels smaller now, than it used to - now that the boy who inhabits it is bigger.

Once upon a time, Ilya used to spend more time in here than he did in his own room, back when boys could get away with things like that.

Almost every night that he shared that room with Alexei, Ilya would wait until the cottage fell silent and then sneak out of his room and into Shane's. He'd tiptoe down the hallway in his pyjamas - the hardwood floor cold against his toes, because wearing shoes would be too loud - and he'd slip through Shane's door noiselessly.

Ilya would grab a blanket from the basket Shane used to keep in the corner, snatch the Centaurs throw pillow that Shane used to move to the foot of his bed every night before he slept, and assemble a makeshift bed on the floor. It wasn't comfortable, exactly, but the rug was thick and plush, and it was better than sleeping in a room with Alexei.

Every night without fail, however, Shane would wake up to the sound of Ilya's body settling on the floor. The covers would swish as his body moved beneath him, he'd grumble something unintelligible, and then he'd pat the bed. An invitation.

"Come cuddle," Shane had said that very first time, when they were only five.

It had transitioned to, *"You'll freeze to death down there,"* somewhere along the way, but the sentiment always remained the same. Shane never let Ilya spend a night on the floor; he would shuffle over so his back was pressed to the wall, lift the edge of his covers, and wait for Ilya to climb in beside him.

It wasn't something they talked about back then, not even as curious young children who hadn't yet learned that there were some things boys weren't allowed to do with each other. They still haven't talked about it *now*.

Ilya would always rise with the sun and sneak back into his own bed, gone before Shane even opened his eyes.

It all feels like a lifetime ago now, and yet, somehow, still close enough that if Ilya were to reach his hand out, his fingertips might just brush along the edges of the memory. He doesn't let himself try, though.

Shane is still fast asleep.

He always sleeps heavy on the first few nights at the cottage. This place has magic built into the bones of it, Ilya could swear, because it manages to strip them of all pretence and allows them to just *be*. Allows them to laugh louder, and live wilder, and rest for longer, if it's what their bodies need. And, as hockey players, that's *always* what their bodies need.

Ilya watches Shane rest for a moment, more peaceful like this than any of the times Ilya has seen him fall asleep over facetime in the past year.

It's a shame Ilya has to ruin it.

He takes a running jump, and then leaps onto the bed. All Ilya's weight comes crashing down on Shane, making his body jolt as he lets out some kind of half-gasp, half-shriek. His eyes fly

open in shock, and Ilya - always so gracious - gives Shane just enough time to register what's happening, before hitting him with the *real* wake up call.

He digs his fingers into Shane's sides, and he *tickles*.

Shane gasps, and his whole body seizes for a moment, and then suddenly he's writhing beneath Ilya, grasping at his shoulders and arms and anywhere else he can reach, bucking up his hips to try and throw Ilya off him.

Ilya remains steadfast, though. He clenches his knees around Shane's hips so he can't wriggle from beneath Ilya, and he goes to town.

"Ilya!" Shane yells. "Oh my *god*, get off me! Jesus - what have you been *eating*? I swear to fucking god..."

"Good morning sunshine," Ilya sings, a decibel above Shane's protestations.

"I'm actually going to kill you, you--"

"The sun is up--"

"Ilya, holy fuck--"

"The birds are chirping!"

"You're gonna be chirping if you don't--"

"It's a beautiful day!"

"Get *off* me, you fucking *oaf*!"

Ilya laughs, loud and brazen, and he watches as - for a moment - Shane's face softens. He looks like he's about to laugh, too; the corner of his mouth is twitching like he's trying his hardest not to smile, and Ilya is determined to wring it out him anyway.

He shifts his weight, leaning forward over Shane's chest, but that's the moment Shane's body goes tense beneath him.

"Get off, Ilya."

"Come on," Ilya taunts. "Don't be such a--"

There are hands on his chest, shoving him hard enough that Ilya falls backwards, off the bed and onto the floor, with a startled yelp.

He looks up at Shane, who's now leaning over the side of his bed and looking down at Ilya sprawled out on the floor. He looks half pissed off, half guilty, and Ilya - always desperate to fix things for Shane - wants to reach up his hand and smooth the divot between his furrowed brows.

“Dude.”

A pale pink flush creeps up Shane’s neck and rushes to his cheeks as he says, “I told you to get off me.”

Ilya holds his hands up in surrender. “Okay, Jesus. Lesson learned,” he concedes. Then, “Fuck, you’re strong. That hurt,” he huffs, rubbing at his chest where Shane had shoved him.

“Yeah, well. It’s your own fault.”

Ilya rolls his eyes as he starts to smile. “You know, most people just say sorry.”

“But why would I lie?” Shane says, completely deadpan, but with a mischievous glint in his pretty brown eyes.

For half a second they just stare at each other, but in an instant they both burst out laughing.

Whatever tension crackled between them a moment ago, it’s gone now - floating away like dust motes in the sunlight. Shane is Shane again, his nose all scrunched up as he laughs, and Ilya is Ilya again: completely at his best friend’s mercy.

Shane dresses quickly, pulling a t-shirt and shorts on over the boxers he’d slept in last night, just as Ilya had done. He strolls off to the bathroom with Ilya on his heels, waiting outside the half open door for Shane to pee, and brush his teeth - “Did you use my toothpaste, Ilya?” - and wake himself up with a splash of cold water to his face.

“Come on, let’s go,” Shane says, as he steps out of the bathroom and heads for the stairs. “You’ll have woken our mom’s up by now.”

Ilya gasps. “*Me?* I’m not the one who screamed the house down.”

“Oh, and whose fault was that?”

“Don’t try and shift the blame, Hollander.”

Shane snorts. “Bite me, Rozanov.”

“Well, if you say so...”

Shane is two steps below him on the staircase, so Ilya rests his hands on top of Shane’s shoulders and leans down, bringing his mouth close enough to Shane’s neck that he can feel Ilya’s breath on his skin. He isn’t going to do it, *probably*, but-

Shane’s flinches, swatting Ilya away with a slap to his forehead, like he’s a fly who’s gotten in through the patio doors.

“Will you stop being such a menace?” Shane pleads, but Ilya knows him too well - he can hear the smile in his voice without having to see his face.

“You *looove* it,” Ilya teases, his hands still on Shane’s shoulders as they reach the bottom of the stairs.

Before Shane can say anything in response, they round the corner to the kitchen and find Irina and Yuna already there. Irina is leaning back against the sink, Yuna is sitting at the kitchen island, and they’re both sipping at mugs of coffee while watching Shane and Ilya with what can only be described as fond exasperation.

Shane grinds to a halt, forcing Ilya to stumble into his back. He earns an elbow to the ribs for that, even though it was *absolutely* Shane’s fault, so Ilya removes his hands from Shane’s shoulders and moves to his side instead.

“Morning boys,” mama greets them.

“Morning mama, morning Yuna.”

“Hey mom. Irina,” Shane adds.

“That sounded like a nice wake up call,” Yuna says, smirking.

Shane rolls his eyes. “He’s not invited anymore.”

Ilya lets out a loud bark of laughter. “You say that every year.”

It’s true, he does. But Shane never means it, and Ilya never doubts that. They’d live here year round, if they could. As a kid, Ilya used to wish on shooting stars for summer to last forever.

He doesn’t believe in that kind of thing anymore, but he keeps that wish tucked beside his heart, all the same.

Ilya reaches Yuna first, curling an arm around her shoulders to hug her. When she lets him go he heads to mama, leaning down to press a kiss the tangle of curls on her head - the ones she passed down to Ilya. She lists sideways, her shoulder pressing into Ilya’s chest as she lets herself be hugged by her not-so-little boy.

“Sleep well?” She asks, when Ilya pulls away.

“Like a baby.”

“How about you, Shane?” Yuna asks.

“Well I was, until *someone* decided to dive bomb me.” He glares at Ilya, who gives him a toothy grin back in response.

Ilya leans back beside his mama, and just watches the moment unfold in front of him. Shane and Yuna and Irina, all together, talking and laughing like they’ve never even spent a moment apart. Ilya has all his favourite people in the same place; no wonder the cottage has always felt like magic.

This is Ilya's little slice of heaven. He might not get it for long, but it's his favourite part of every single year.

Ilya loves Boston. His mama is a dance teacher, which is how he met Svetlana, his dearest friend beside Shane. He's got Marley, too, and Connors, and Carmy. He really is happy there, despite the stress of scouts and college prep, but nothing has ever come close to *this*. He's never more himself than he is here.

"Go on, boys," Yuna says. "Get some coffee then go sit at the table. We'll bring breakfast through."

"Thank you, Yuna," Ilya rushes to say, then sticks his tongue out at Shane when he manages to beat him to it.

"Kiss-ass," Shane mutters beneath his breath.

They stand side by side, their shoulders and elbows bumping together as they make their coffee. Ilya takes the bright orange mug with a cartoon moose on it for himself, and passes Shane his trusty Canadian maple leaf one. Ilya adds milk and two sugars to his, then drops a splash of milk into Shane's sugar-free mug, before they leave their moms to it.

The dining room has sliding patio doors that are already cracked open, leading out onto the back porch, and beyond that the lake lies in the distance. The sun rises behind the cottage and sets on the far side of the water, so far now there's only a glimmer of sunlight reflecting off the surface of it.

Soon it will be bathed in the heat of the day, and it will be echoing with the sound of the people who own or rent all the other cottages around the lake. But for now there's a quiet stillness to it, like the rest of the world is still sleeping.

They like eating breakfast on the back porch sometimes, and occasionally they'll even take a thermos of coffee and breakfast burritos down to the dock before the morning peace is broken. But today, they sit in comfortable quiet - listen to their moms in the kitchen - and watch as the world starts to wake up.

It's not long before their moms appear with plates of pancakes, and crispy bacon, and eggs two different ways.

Ilya and Shane both offer to help, but they're quickly shooed away; moms like doting on their babies.

"So," mama begins, "how was graduation, Shane? I'm so sorry we couldn't be there."

They'd wanted to - both of them had hoped they'd be able to fly in to watch each other graduate.

But in an a twist of impossibly bad luck, both their graduations had fallen on the same day. Thankfully they'd happened a couple of hours apart, though, so their moms had facetimed each of them so they could at least watch their best friend cross the stage.

“Yeah, it was, y’know,” Shane says, waving his hand dismissively.

“Ah, yes. Of course,” Irina says completely seriously.

“Shane was absolutely wonderful, weren’t you, honey?” Yuna elaborates. Then, “He also left right after the ceremony.”

Ilya almost chokes on his pancakes when he laughs.

“Not true!” Shane argues, pointing his fork at his mom. “I let you take pictures first!”

“Right, right. He let us take pictures, *then* he left,” Yuna corrects herself.

It’s not like it comes as much of a shock to the people who know Shane.

For as much as he thrives beneath the bright lights and raucous applause of a hockey rink, any other large scale event is completely beyond his comfort zone. He can barely stand it when Yuna and David have friends over for dinner - Ilya always finds himself on the end of a phone call with Shane, while he hides in his bedroom or back garden to avoid the guests.

He can just picture it now - Yuna and David manoeuvring and adjusting Shane for pictures as he grimaces between every shot they take. It makes Ilya feel impossibly fond.

“How about you, Ilya?”

He shrugs as he swallows a mouthful of food. “It was fine. The hockey team will miss their captain, but...I’m glad to be leaving.”

It’s not like he hated high school, or anything. He was the best hockey player the school had seen in, well, *ever*, so Ilya was popular and well-liked by basically the entire student body. He’s just...over it, now. Bored of the whole thing.

Ilya knows he can go pro if he wants to - just like Shane probably will when he enters the draft next year - and he’s just ready for the rest of his life to start.

“So humble,” Shane teases, and Ilya kicks him beneath the table.

“I just can’t believe it,” mama sighs wistfully. “You were just two tiny boys, and then...”

“And then we blinked,” Yuna adds.

“Well if you could blink a little faster that would be great, because we still can’t buy alcohol so-“

“Ilyusha!” His mama tuts, but she and Yuna are both smiling, and Shane is too.

They chat for a while as they eat, catching up on all the things they’ve missed out on during the months they’ve been apart. Mama and Yuna act like they’re not in contact with each other every day, and like Ilya and Shane aren’t glued to their phones, texting almost constantly.

Still, there are things you leave out or forget to mention. And sometimes there are things worth going over again, just to see the expressions on each other's faces this time, just to hear each other laughing about something ridiculous one of them did.

By the time they've finished eating, and Ilya and Shane have cleared away the dishes, they're eager to get down to the water.

They have the whole summer stretching out ahead of them to do other, more exciting things, but the first few days are for the dock, and the lake, and each other. No trips into town, no bumping into other summer vacationers - just hanging out by themselves, like they've spent the last ten months waiting for.

They spread their beach towels out at the end of the dock. Ilya's is a gaudy Boston Bears towel in black and gold, while Shane's has blue, red, and white stripes, and reminds Ilya of a tube of toothpaste.

There's a half-sand, half-pebbled beach they could set up at instead, if they wanted to, but Shane hates when sand gets on his towel and between his toes. So, it's been the dock since they were old enough to be trusted not to fall off it and drown. Or push each other.

Playfully, of course.

Ilya plops himself down on his towel, legs stretched out in front of him, and arms stretched behind to prop himself up.

He tilts his head up to the sky, feels the sunshine on his face, and he lets out a long, soft sigh. The rest of the tension that was still lingering in his body melts away in the bliss of the heat.

"This is what I've been waiting for."

"You're gonna burn if you don't put sunscreen on."

"I'm Russian," Ilya says. "We do not get sunburned."

Shane snorts. "You've lived in Boston since you were five, you loser. You're as Russian as I am Japanese."

Ilya squints one eye open to look at his best friend. "Shane, you *are* Japanese."

"Whatever. You know what I mean."

Ilya knows Shane doesn't really have a connection to his Japanese heritage - Yuna's parents both died when Shane was only a baby, and Yuna was born and raised in Canada.

He knows Shane will be one of the only Asian players in the league when he gets drafted, but Shane doesn't want to be defined by that, like some kind of token diversity hire. He just wants to *play*.

He says feels the *most* Japanese when he walks into a locker room and people look at him like he doesn't belong there. Which is fucking heartbreaking. And *enraging*. Shane has been

the best player on every team he's ever played for, bar none.

Ilya had genuinely considered hopping on a plane to Ottawa and fighting Shane's teammates, the first time he'd told Ilya that. Shane wouldn't let him.

"I actually don't, but okay."

Shane sighs. "I mean, you need to put sunscreen on, Ilya."

"I mean, you need to put sunscreen on, Ilya," Ilya mimics.

But unfortunately, Shane is right. Ilya *will* burn if he doesn't put sunscreen on. It's just so much fun winding him up like this, watching him get all red faced and flustered the more Ilya pushes back against his polite requests (ie: demands).

So Ilya hums quietly, then lies down flat on his back and wriggles around a little, making a show of getting comfortable, as if he isn't planning on moving for a while.

"Think I'll take a nap," Ilya tries to bait Shane.

He's met with silence and is convinced it didn't work. But just as he's about to open his mouth and push Shane a little further, the sun is suddenly blocked out and Ilya feels something cold hit his chest.

He curses under his breath, his eyes shooting open to find...*fuck*.

Shane is on his knees, hovering above Ilya as he squeezes sunscreen onto his stomach and chest. All Ilya can do is stare, mouth still open on a silent gasp, as Shane tosses the bottle onto his own towel and then - then starts rubbing the cream into Ilya's skin.

His hands are warm and strong, and Ilya feels like putty beneath them.

"Shane--"

"I'm not letting you get burned, so if you don't won't do it yourself, then--" he leaves the sentence unfinished, his actions speaking for him.

Ilya should probably bat Shane's hands away and insist he can do it himself, but instead he just lies there as Shane's steady hands massage the sunscreen into Ilya's stomach, and chest, and shoulders, and arms. He does Ilya's legs, next, and then - with the leftover sunscreen on his hands - he spreads it across Ilya's face.

Once he's done, he places his hands on his thighs and finally looks at Ilya.

Before he can stop himself, before his better judgment has time to kick in, Ilya reaches up a hand and swipes his thumb across the freckles on Shane's cheek. Just because he wants to.

"You missed a bit," Ilya lies.

"Thanks."

Holy fucking shit.

Shane lies down on his own towel and moves around until he's comfortable, his elbow and knee knocking against Ilya's a couple of times before he settles.

Shane has no idea about the whirlwind inside of Ilya - about the way his hands are clammy, and his heart is beating too fast, and he can still feel the ghost of Shane's hands on his body.

He can't *ever* know.

Shane is Ilya's best friend, his favourite person in the entire world, but all that would change if he knew.

It's not a thing Ilya has been living with for a years - he'd only realised it last summer, in fact - but the way he feels about Shane is decidedly *not* friendly anymore. Or, not *just* friendly, at least.

Ilya's always liked girls, he's never questioned that. But last summer, everything changed. And Ilya had hoped beyond belief that the feelings that had sparked in his chest for Shane would have disappeared by now - that Sasha had helped Ilya get it out of his system - but all hopes of that died the moment Shane put his hands on Ilya.

Fuck. All hope of that died the moment Shane fucking *smiled* at him.

Ilya's stupid, ridiculous, *embarrassing* fucking *crush* on his best friend is alive and well. And it is absolutely terrifying.

"I've missed this," Shane says quietly, like he doesn't want to disturb the illusion of peace. "Missed you."

"Yeah," Ilya agrees, swallowing thickly. "Yeah, me too."

Shane turns his head to look at Ilya, and he smiles so wide and so beautiful that it makes something deep inside Ilya ache.

He gets caught up in staring at Shane - at the constellation of freckles on the bridge of his nose, and sprinkled like flecks of glitter across the tops of his shoulders. Ilya takes in the way Shane's mop of dark chocolate hair looks softer in the sunlight, as it keeps falling into his eyes. It's longer this summer, and Ilya wants to run his hands through it, as if that's something he would ever be allowed.

"What are you staring at?" Shane questions, startling Ilya.

"Something ugly," Ilya throws back, earning himself a harsh shove to the shoulder.

"Fuck off," Shane laughs.

He closes his eyes again, turning his face back towards the sky, and giving Ilya a few more precious seconds to just look at him. At the way his skin is already starting to turn pink from the sun, and the way his laughter is still tucked in the corner of his mouth.

Ilya knows Shane isn't an option - of *course* he does. He isn't stupid. But that doesn't stop him from wanting anyway.

The morning turns to afternoon, and afternoon turns to evening, quicker than anyone is ready for.

Ilya and Shane had sun-warmed skin, and fingers wrinkled like prunes from the lake, by the time they returned to the cottage. They both showered quickly, and made it down just in time for dinner.

Mama had cooked - zharkoye and golubtsi, with sharlotka for dessert.

They ate, and they talked - easy like it always is with the four of them - and then after dinner, once the food had settled in their stomachs and the table had been cleared, Ilya and Shane had wandered back outside.

It only took five minutes for Shane to get the fire pit going, and now they're sitting beside each other, watching as the sun sets slowly across the lake.

It's a perfect evening.

The sunset has cast everything in a soft, orange haze, and the fire is keeping them cozy even as the warmth of the day gives way to a cool, summer breeze.

The stars will be out soon enough, and Ilya will ask Shane, for the millionth time, to tell him about the constellations. He remembers, of course; he remembers everything that Shane tells him. But Ilya just likes listening to Shane talk about the things that interest him - he likes the way his voice gets that excited lilt to it, and he keeps glancing at Ilya to check he's still listening.

The sound of laughter trickles outside, and Shane and Ilya both glance over their shoulders back towards the cottage. They can't see their moms, but they can hear them - that loud, carefree kind of laughter, that makes your lungs burn and your stomach ache.

Ilya loves that sound. It took his mama years to get her sparkle back after she left his father, so every glimpse of it is something Ilya treasures.

"You think we should have cut them off after that second bottle of wine?" Shane jokes.

"They're having fun," Ilya says needlessly.

"I think my mom is more herself here, than anywhere else," Shane muses. "Like, at home she's a mom, and a wife, and she's an agent, and so many people need her. But, I don't know, I think when she's here - when she's with Irina - she gets to just be Yuna. Does that make sense?"

Ilya nods immediately.

“Yes,” he agrees. “Absolutely. It’s the same for mama. She’s been better for a long time, obviously, now that - well, y’know. But it’s like she really comes to life here.”

Magic, Ilya thinks again.

They fall silent for a while, their heads tilted back to watch as the stars begin to appear. When another loud bellow of laughter is carried to them by the breeze, Shane and Ilya both chuckle.

“You think we’ll be like them?” Shane asks.

“What, wine drunk and loud?”

Shane rolls his eyes, nudging their shoulders together. “Friends forever.”

The way he says it, so easy and unashamed, makes Ilya want to wrap his arms around Shane and squeeze him.

“Yes, Shane. I think so.”

Ilya will make sure of it.

Even if he has to spend the rest of his life hiding how he really feels, Ilya will give Shane the forever he is hoping for.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

They're standing too close, their bodies touching in places they have no right to be. Shane can even see the faint, white scar on Ilya's cheek.

After another lazy day by the lake, Shane wakes up bright and early on the third morning at the cottage. His muscles already feel rejuvenated, even after two straight days in the water with Ilya; there's just something about the cottage air, and the summer sun, that feels a little bit like healing.

Shane can already hear that no one else is awake - his mom and Irina never know how to be quiet when they're together, and if Ilya was awake he would already be bothering Shane by now.

He loves mornings like this, when everyone is still sleeping and the day feels like it's in no rush to begin. Shane has always been an early riser, ever since he was small. With years of routines and hockey practice, and two career driven parents rubbing off on him, he just can't help it.

He also likes it when he gets to start his day alone.

He dresses slowly, in no hurry to get out the door. When he pulls the curtains back the sun has only just started to rise, and Shane knows he's got a while before the serenity gets disturbed by two moms remembering how it felt to be teenagers, and a best friend who attracts trouble like a moth to a flame.

He walks quietly down the stairs, only putting his shoes on when he makes it to the bottom, and then he roots around in the kitchen cabinets for a reusable water bottle he can take on a run with him.

Once the bottle is filled, and Shane is stretched, he sets off from the back porch.

He knows how to pace himself after years of workouts, and he's not in any rush today. He's got at least a month before he really needs to start preparing for college hockey by packing back on the weight he lost during the last season, and he simply refuses to think about that too much right now.

He's got a habit of borrowing trouble, his dad always tells him. He worries about things before there's any need to.

Shane is excited, obviously.

His dad went to McGill, and it's where his mom went for her masters degree - it's where they met, in fact - so of course he's looking forward to it. It's all Shane has ever wanted - to follow in his parents' footsteps before the draft, and the NHL, and this big, terrifying life he's been planning for since he was just a kid, comes knocking.

But...but Shane can't help worrying that once college begins, everything is going to change.

If he enters the draft next year like he plans to, and if Ilya does the same, that means this could be the last summer they ever get to spend like this.

They'll have new cities to call home, new teammates and friends, and maybe even - maybe even *partners*, for Ilya, at least. And Shane can survive watching Ilya fall in love with someone else, but what he can't survive is losing him.

Shane is afraid that, before they know it, they'll have drifted apart too far to ever fully close the distance again. It's his biggest fear. Beyond failure, beyond not getting drafted or never winning the cup, Shane is absolutely terrified to lose his best friend.

There's no one in the world who gets Shane like Ilya does.

He knows how he is - knows he's neurotic, and rigid, and just plain weird, but Ilya has never once made him feel bad for being himself. In fact, Shane feels the most normal he's ever felt when he's with Ilya. He doesn't have to perform, or pretend, or hide behind some sanitised version of himself. There's a freedom in Ilya's friendship that Shane doesn't think he could find anywhere else.

Ilya doesn't ask Shane to be more and he doesn't ask him to be less, he just meets Shane wherever he is; they balance each other out.

He can't bear the thought of losing him.

And it's not that Shane doesn't trust Ilya, not that he thinks Ilya would ever *want* them to drift apart, but Shane worries that it's just a part of life. A part of growing up. They can promise each other they won't, and they can mean it with their whole heart in the moment, but that doesn't mean the universe has to agree.

Sometimes things just don't work out, and Shane has never been very good at handling change.

He stumbles over a rock he hadn't noticed, and it jolts him out of his spiral. Shane shakes his head, trying to remove the negative thoughts like some kind of etch-a-sketch. He's in his favourite place in the world, with the best person he has ever known, and he refuses to let himself dwell on things that might never happen.

So Shane pays attention to his surroundings instead.

He listens to the water as it ripples across the shoreline, and the rustle of the leaves on the trees. He watches the light grow brighter and warmer as the sun rises above the tree line, and

he breathes in the fresh, clean air. He lets the tranquility of this place wash over him, cleansing his mind of the doubt that's creeping in.

The ice is Shane's church, but this place is a close second. He's happy here. He won't let his own thoughts ruin that.

Shane is panting by the time he makes it back to the cottage. He toes his running sneakers off by the door, drains the last of his water, and then slips in through the patio door that he'd left unlocked.

He must have lost track of how long he was out running, because when he walks into the kitchen everyone is already awake. His mom and Irina are sitting beside each other at the island, drinking coffee and eating bowls of cereal, and Ilya is - well.

Ilya is shirtless, with an old pair of joggers slung far too low on his hips to be decent. He looks too fucking good. He looks *dangerous*, standing there, leaning against the cabinets and holding that stupid orange moose mug up to his lips. His eyes widen when he spots Shane, and he raises his free hand in a wave.

"Morning."

"Morning," Shane replies, still breathless.

"Hey, honey. Good run?" His mom asks.

"Yeah," Shane says. "It was good. Didn't realise how long I was out there."

Ilya rolls his eyes and groans obnoxiously. "Oh my *god*, Hollander. It's summer break! Do you know what that word means? *Break*? It's when--"

"Oh, fuck off," Shane laughs.

He throws his empty water bottle at Ilya, and it's impossibly frustrating when he catches it with one hand without even flinching. His mom grumbles in complaint, but Ilya just tosses the bottle into the sink behind him, then flips Shane off.

"You know, maybe if *you* worked out a little more you wouldn't be so...puny."

Shane is lying. Of course he's fucking lying. Shane's hockey and his workout routine means he looks good, he knows that, but no eighteen year old has any business looking as good as Ilya does. Their bodies are for use, rather than vanity, but my god, is Ilya gorgeous.

He's tall and broad and strong, with thick thighs and those obscenely pronounced lines that point straight down to his...well.

Shane'd had his hands on that body the other day.

It was reckless, he knows it. He's still kicking himself for it. But Ilya needed sunscreen and was acting like a child about it, and Shane simply couldn't help himself.

And it's not like he's never done that before - he's put sunscreen on Ilya a dozen times, or more - but it was different this time. Shane knows. Still feels a little guilty about it, really, like he was taking something that Ilya wasn't offering.

Shane quickly averts his eyes before he gets caught out.

A slow, smug grin expands across Ilya's face as he raises his arm and flexes his bicep. Shane almost swallows his tongue.

"I think I'm good," Ilya teases.

"And he's modest, too," Irina jokes.

Shane clears his throat. "Well. I'm going for a shower," he announces, and then bolts upstairs, suddenly sweating more than he was while he was running.

"Hurry! We have plans!" Ilya calls out after him.

Shane holds his breath until he's behind the locked bathroom door.

He tries his best, he really, honestly, truly does, but he just can't help it. He's so hard it hurts as he steps into the shower, and if he has any of hope of spending the entire day with Ilya without doing something absolutely life-ruining, well, Shane has to get it out of his system somehow.

He touches himself, steady and certain, the familiar rhythm setting his nerve endings alight with pleasure.

Shane doesn't mean to, but visions of Ilya flicker through his mind. This morning with his flexing bicep, and yesterday when he had stripped his t-shirt off and then tackled Shane into the water, and their first day here, when Ilya had climbed out of the lake and the sunlight had hit the water droplets sliding down his back.

Shane flickers through a million memories of his best friend - a rolodex of all Ilya's greatest, most irresistible hits - and Shane comes with a bitten off cry, Ilya's name unspoken, but still heavy on his tongue.

Fuck.

He's so fucking screwed.

Shane rushes back downstairs once he's dry and dressed, not giving himself any time to dwell on what just occurred in the shower.

Ilya is already waiting impatiently for him, and he basically hand-feeds Shane two slices of toast in an attempt to hurry him along. Then he is being dragged out the door, Ilya's hand around his wrist, before Shane has time to get any potential protestations out in the open.

Their speed only slows to something manageable when they're halfway up the road.

“What the hell are these plans?” Shane asks. “Because I don’t remember making any.”

“You didn’t. *I* did,” Ilya says, flashing Shane a grin.

Ilya has sunglasses on so Shane can’t see his eyes, but he’s almost certain that Ilya has a self-satisfied look about him - the one he always wears when he gets his own way with Shane. Which, honestly, is far more often than Shane would like; he has a hard time saying no to Ilya.

“We’re getting ice cream,” Ilya announces.

“Ice cream? That’s the big plan you dragged me out the door for?”

“It’s a very important plan, Shane.”

“It’s not even 10am, *Ilya*.”

Ilya skips a couple steps ahead, then turns so he’s facing Shane and walking backwards. Instinctively, Shane looks to the ground to make sure there’s nothing Ilya could trip over.

“It’s *summer*, Hollander. Live a little. Please. For me?” Ilya begs.

He even pushes his sunglasses up onto his head so Shane gets the full force of Ilya’s infamous puppy-dog eyes. Shane groans dramatically, and Ilya fist-pumps the air, already knowing that he’s won.

“Fine,” Shane acquiesces, “but only because you said please.”

Ilya grins, slow and devious, as he says, “Oh, so you like hearing me beg?”

For a heart-stopping moment, Shane’s brain goes blank with terror. He stumbles, and Ilya chuckles as he reaches out a hand to steady Shane. It lands on his hip, Ilya’s finger slipping just beneath Shane’s t-shirt and brushing against his skin.

Shane slaps his hand away.

“Fuck off,” he replies, forcing out a laugh that sounds just close enough to real that it fools Ilya.

Ilya starts walking beside him again, and he gently elbows Shane’s ribs, before saying, “Come on. I want to beat the rush.”

“What *rush*?” Shane asks. “No one is buying ice cream this early.”

As usual, Shane ends up being right.

It takes them twenty minutes to walk into town. It would have taken Shane less time on his own, honestly, but Ilya is very easily distracted, and sometimes when he’s talking about something that excites him, he slows almost to a standstill.

It's too endearing for Shane to even try and hurry him along.

When they finally get into town, they find *Sal's* - the best and only ice cream shop in the area - completely empty. Shocker.

Shane raises an eyebrow, and gestures broadly at the completely deserted shop as Ilya pretends to ignore him. "Well would you look at that."

"Shut up."

"Who'd have thought this place would be empty, eh?" Shane teases, but they both know he's just kidding around.

Shane would follow Ilya to the ends of the earth if he asked him to.

Ilya throws his arm around Shane's neck, grabbing him in a headlock and tickling his stomach as Shane desperately tries to get free. Only when Shane is shrieking and threatening to pee on Ilya, does Ilya finally let him go.

They shove each other playfully as they walk through *Sal's* door, and Shane finds himself grinning so wide that his jaw is starting to ache.

"Sit," Ilya orders. "I'm picking for you."

"Ilya, no--"

"*Sit.*"

And like a good fucking dog, Shane does exactly as he's told.

He grumbles all the way, just to prove he isn't thrilled about it, but all that does is make Ilya look over his shoulder and smile at Shane.

It's not the taunting, playful one that Ilya so often offers up. It's something softer, sweeter. An honest smile, that Shane knows is a rarity. Only he, and his mom, and Irina get those kind of smiles from Ilya. It's something you have to earn, something you have to be worthy of, and Shane feels grateful every day that Ilya chooses to give it to him.

It would have been the easiest thing in the world for a kid like Ilya to confine Shane to the summers.

Especially as Ilya got older and cooler, while Shane always felt like he was three steps behind. People find him attractive now, sure, and he's too good at hockey for people to completely overlook him, but more often than not, people tend to find Shane a little off-putting. Weird. Someone to put up with, rather than welcome in.

He could have become the kid Ilya spends summers with - his mom's best friend's son, and nothing more - but Ilya pulled Shane into his orbit from day one, and he's never let him go since.

Shane watches Ilya at the counter, the way he laughs easily with the guy behind the register - probably some college kid home for the summer - as he points to the boards and orders for the both of them. The guy is instantly smitten, Shane can tell by the way he nods his head too quickly and laughs every time Ilya opens his mouth.

Go figure.

Ilya has a habit of doing that - of making everyone feel like they're the most important person in the room. It's heady and dangerous in equal measure; it can make people want things they have no business even dreaming of. Shane should know.

He hates that it's working on someone else. Hates that the guy is watching Ilya like he wants to taste him. It makes Shane seethe.

When Ilya returns, he's got a giant leaning-tower-of-ice-cream cone in one hand, and a smaller tub in the other. He's smiling like a, well - like an Ilya in an ice cream shop.

"You think you've got enough there?" Shane jokes as Ilya's takes a seat across from him in the booth.

"Oh no, this one is yours," Ilya says, trying to pass the ice cream cone over.

Shane snorts. "Fuck off. What did you get me?"

Ilya slides the tub across the table and Shane catches it before it slips off the end and spills all over him. He cautiously examines the contents, because Ilya is known to get a little crazy with his ice cream flavours, but-

"Is this-"

"Obviously."

"Lemon sorbet." Shane is feeling ridiculously emotional over something so small.

Ilya shrugs. "It's your favourite."

It's Irina's favourite, too. Shane used to be a raspberry ripple kind of guy, until the summer he tried Irina's lemon sorbet, and since then he's never gone back. He'd expected Ilya to order him something different, something wacky, not his favourite.

"Thank you," Shane says, entirely too sincere for the situation. "What did you get?"

Ilya's face lights up and he wiggles his eyebrows.

He starts at the bottom scoop and works his way to the top as he tells Shane: "Triple chocolate brownie, salted caramel, and honey cheesecake."

"Oh, that sounds good, actually."

"The honey cheesecake?" Shane nods. "Here, try some."

Ilya leans across the table, holding out his ice cream cone expectantly. Given no other choice, really, Shane leans forward too. And he doesn't mean to do it - he swears - but his eyes catch Ilya's eyes right as he takes a lick of the ice cream. The *bluegreenbrown* of them flicker down to Shane's mouth for the briefest of moments, then they're both pulling back quickly.

Shane feels breathless, which is just embarrassing. Like, what the fuck?

"Good?" Ilya asks, looking anywhere but at Shane.

"Mhm," Shane confirms. "Kind of reminds me of--"

"Medovik?"

"*Yes!*"

The Russian honey cake is one of Shane's absolute favourite things in the world. Irina even gave him her recipe so he could make it at home, but Shane and his mom can never quite get it to taste exactly the same as when Ilya and his mama make it.

Irina always says the secret ingredient is love, which is cheesy and embarrassing, and maybe also true.

"You'll have to get it next time," Ilya suggests, even though they both know Shane won't.

He's a creature of habit. He's used the same stick manufacturer, same brand of hockey pads and stick tape, same fucking *shampoo*, for as long as he can remember. Except for the summer, most of his days look exactly the same, and Shane likes it like that. There's comfort in the familiarity of it - comfort in the routine.

And somehow Ilya, despite the chaos that he always brings, gives Shane the same kind of comfort.

Maybe it's the guarantee that Ilya is always going to do something insane, or maybe it's the way Shane always feels completely safe with him, but Ilya's personal brand of crazy is as familiar to Shane as each of his well-worn routines.

Shane raises his phone to snap a picture of Ilya and his enormous ice cream cone, and Ilya poses with his tongue out like he's about to lick it.

"I'm sending that to Irina," Shane says.

Their ankles and knees bump together beneath the table occasionally, as they eat their ice cream. And every single time, they catch each other's eyes and smile, making no immediate effort to pull away. They're comfortable like that, after so many years of sharing spaces together. The back seat of their moms' cars, the ferris wheel carriage at the town's summer fair. Shane's bed, too, when they were younger.

When things were simple.

They people watch through the window, picking out different pedestrians and creating stories about them.

“His wife just left him,” Ilya says, gesturing to a stout, balding man wearing too-short shorts. “He’s pretending like it’s the best thing that’s ever happened to him, but he’s one more bad day away from begging her to take him back.”

Shane snorts, and has to cover his mouth to stop himself from spraying lemon sorbet all over Ilya and the table.

“She’s a secretary who just married her boss,” Shane says, about a beautiful woman with sun-bleached hair and flawless makeup. “They’re on their first family vacation with his kids, and it’s going terribly.”

“Nice,” Ilya acknowledges, then points to a miserable looking guy who’s traipsing behind his parents. “He doesn’t know how to tell his mom and dad he got kicked out of college.”

“But it was only a bit of pot, so like, everyone is just overreacting,” Shane continues, and he feels his chest glow warm when Ilya tips his head back and laughs.

This. *This* is what Shane has been missing.

It never feels like this with anyone else - never feels easy, or carefree. Shane is so used to creating a script in his head for every interaction, used to going over it a thousand times to make sure he’s saying it exactly right. There’s none of that with Ilya. Without the pressure of seeming “*normal*” Shane just gets to be himself.

And thankfully, *himself* is someone that Ilya loves to be around.

They don’t rush - at the start of summer, it always feels like they’ve got so much time - but once they’re finished, Ilya thanks the server behind the counter and then they head back outside.

It’s warmer now, the sun high in the sky, and Shane squints against the brightness of it. Without hesitating, without even asking, Ilya unhooks his sunglasses from the collar of his t-shirt and hands them over to Shane.

“Oh, no, I’m fine-“

“Put them on, Hollander. We don’t want the sun to damage your pretty eyes.”

“Well technically, lighter eyes are more sensitive to sunlight than darker eyes. So really-“

“Shane.”

“Yeah?”

“Put the sunglasses on.”

Shane puts the sunglasses on. Not because Ilya tells him to, though, but because the sun really is bright as it reflects off all the shop windows, and Shane doesn't want to get a headache.

The town is mostly built for tourists.

There are a handful of locals scattered around the place who live here year-round, but it mostly relies on summer vacationers and the people who are just passing through on their way to somewhere else.

Because of that, there are too many gift shops to count - places that sell useless little trinkets that people buy as a souvenir for someone, only for it to get tossed in the trash a year later.

There's *Sal's*, of course, a bakery-slash-cafe, a secondhand book store ran by a sweet old man, and a restaurant on either end of Main Street. There's a single-screen movie theatre that only plays movies made before 1995, for some strange, unknown reason, and there's a mini golf place a ten minute drive away.

That's it. That's the whole town.

They have the fair at the end of August, when a nearby field fills up with rides, and games, and stands selling hotdogs and cotton candy and funnel cake, but it only lasts for two days and then it's gone again.

It would be an easy place to get bored, maybe, spending every single summer here. Or, it would be if you didn't have someone like Ilya to make every day interesting, even when you're doing nothing at all.

They're almost at the end of Main Street, ready to take a right turn and start the walk back to the cottage, when a vaguely familiar voice calls out their names. Ilya stops, so Shane does too, and they both turn in the direction where it was coming from. Shane instantly recognises the guys walking towards them.

He certainly wouldn't call them friends, but he and Ilya know them well enough. They're two brothers and their cousin - Leo, Corey, and Blake - and their parents own the cottage a few down from Shane's.

"Hey! We didn't know you were in town," Leo says, greeting both of them with the bro-y handshake, back clap combo that Shane has never quite mastered.

"We've only been here a few days," Ilya answers.

"It's good to see you, both," Corey adds.

"Are you coming tonight?" Blake asks.

Shane immediately wants to groan, grab Ilya, and drag him away, because he knows what that means before anyone has to clarify: a party.

More often than not, the three of them are at their place alone while their parents stay home in Mississauga for work. That tends to mean parties, parties, and, oh look, more parties. They're always too loud and too busy, with far too many drunk assholes for Shane to ever enjoy himself. But, being the social butterfly that he is, Ilya always has a good time.

"Your place?" Ilya asks, and Leo nods.

"Keeping it out of the house though, after last time." Shane doesn't even want to know what that means. "Just a fire pit and music, and drinks down at the beach."

"You in?" Blake questions.

Ilya instinctively looks to Shane, and he must read the expression on his face as easily as the pages of an open book. "Oh, I'm not sure. I think--"

"Yeah," Shane interrupts. "We're in."

"Sweet! We'll see you there, boys," Corey says, before all three of them head off in the opposite direction.

Shane doesn't want to go. Of course he doesn't. But he knows Ilya does, and he also knows that Ilya wouldn't abandon Shane to go without him. So, compromises must be made.

"We don't have to go."

Shane shrugs. "I know."

"You hate parties," Ilya unnecessarily points out.

"Yeah, but you love them. I don't mind, seriously."

"Okay, fine. But we leave whenever you're ready."

It sounds like a pretty fair deal to Shane, so he nods his head in agreement and then continues walking, knowing Ilya will follow quickly behind him. Because, as much as Shane would follow Ilya anywhere, he knows that Ilya would follow him, too. Every step of the way.

They're halfway home when the storm cloud arrives without warning.

It blankets the bright haze of the day in sudden darkness, like curtains being drawn across a window. Shane and Ilya look to each other, and then up to the sky, just in time for the first cool, fat raindrops to splatter on their cheeks.

Shane flinches. "Shit."

Ilya just laughs, entirely unconcerned.

"Race you home!" He calls out, and immediately starts to run.

Shane chases after him, and he catches up quickly enough that he knows Ilya wasn't really trying to beat him. They run side by side, their elbows bumping into each other as the heavens open and deliver an absolutely torrential downpour.

They're both soaked within minutes, rendering their run futile, but they keep going just for the fun of it. Shane has to shove Ilya's sunglasses in the pocket of his shorts after they nearly fall off his face for the fifth time. Ilya laughs brightly, and soon Shane is joining in, and as the rain gets heavier their laughter only grows louder, more hysterical.

By the time the cottage is in sight, they're drenched.

They both hurry for cover, jumping onto the back porch in sync, and when they catch each other's eyes they start laughing all over again.

"Quick," Shane says, as he toes his shoes off, "mom will kill us if we get her floors wet."

Ilya follows suit and kicks his sneakers off, then he's reaching for the hem of his t-shirt as well. He doesn't hesitate - doesn't give Shane a second to prepare - he just tugs the translucent white shirt up from his waist, and pulls it off over his head.

When he catches Shane watching, he just grins and nods his head towards Shane's own water-logged clothes.

"You too," Ilya insists, so Shane strips his t-shirt off.

They're both standing there, dripping onto the wooden deck, when a crash of thunder rumbles through the air and Shane almost jumps out of his fucking skin.

The startled motion makes him bump against Ilya's bare chest, but when lightning splits the sky in two a moment later, it's Ilya's time to flinch.

They're standing too close, their bodies touching in places they have no right to be. Shane can even see the faint, white scar on Ilya's cheek.

Ilya laughs, shaking his head in disbelief, and as his curls spring with the force of the movement, they fling water everywhere. Shane watches as a drop of it slides down Ilya's neck, pooling in the hollow of his throat.

Shane wants to lick it.

He fists his dripping t-shirt in his hand and steps back.

"I'll get some towels," he says, his voice suddenly scratchy and hoarse. "You wait here."

Ilya does as he's told.

Like so much of summer, the rainstorm doesn't last very long.

It's long since stopped by the time they're ready to leave for the party, and the ground is almost completely dry, like it never even happened at all. The only reminder of it is the way Shane's heart rate still hasn't fully settled, and it's got nothing to do with the run home and everything to do with the moment on the porch. With Ilya.

"Be careful!" Irina calls after them as they're leaving out the door.

"We will!" Shane and Ilya both yell back in unison.

"And don't stay out too late!" Yuna adds.

"We won't!"

The walk to Leo, Corey, and Blake's place is maybe ten minutes, but it takes less than that before Shane can hear the thud of music. They hear it before they see it, in fact, and when the party finally comes into view, Shane has to hold back a sigh.

There are way too many people by the edge of the water, and even more further up towards the house, gathered around a fire that's burning in the pit. They've got a speaker somewhere, playing music that Shane hates - too electronic, with so much bass that he can feel it in his teeth - and the smell of spilled alcohol, mixed with lake water and smoke, makes Shane scrunch his nose.

He already wants to go home, but when he turns to look at his best friend, Ilya's eyes are alight with excitement.

"Go," Shane says, gesturing broadly in front of them, "be free."

Ilya rolls his eyes and turns to face Shane, taking hold of his shoulders as he says, "I'm not leaving you."

"I don't mind. You can--"

"I'm not leaving you," Ilya insists, shaking Shane a little. "Come on, let's find some drinks."

Ilya leads them through the crowd and it parts easily for him, space opening wherever he walks, like people can sense Ilya's presence approaching them, and they shift to accommodate him. He doesn't even have to ask. It's like he controls the very air around him.

Ilya locates a cooler full of beer in under two minutes, and plucks two out of the ice. With an ease that is, unfortunately, incredibly attractive, he slots the bottle caps together and pries them both off at the same time.

He hands one of the bottles to Shane with a lecherous smile, and wiggles his eyebrows until Shane laughs.

"You trying to get me drunk, Rozanov?"

"Maybe."

They clink the bottles together and take a sip without breaking eye contact.

Shane doesn't drink much, he's not likely to have a second after this one, but he'll indulge Ilya for now. It's the first - and hopefully last - party of summer, after all, and if Shane doesn't let loose at least a little, then Ilya won't let himself either.

He thinks he needs to look out for Shane, or something, which isn't true. Ilya has talked Shane through panic attacks before either of them knew what they were, Ilya has held his hand when Shane needed something to ground him, but he doesn't need *protecting*. Shane can absolutely take care of himself.

And yet, there's something about Ilya's protectiveness that feels good, even if it's unnecessary. Shane likes being someone that Ilya cares about.

They find a quiet-ish corner beneath an aging oak tree, and lean against it while surveying their surroundings.

"How's this compared to your usual parties?" Shane asks.

He feels Ilya shrug beside him. "It's better because you're here."

He's not even joking. That's the worst part. Ilya is being genuine and earnest and entirely serious. He's got so many friends in Boston, and he's popular and well-liked, but he'd still rather be standing under a tree, apart from the crowd, with Shane at his side.

"How about you?"

Shane scoffs. "You know I don't do parties."

"I know you drunk-texted me from a party after your last game of the season."

"That wasn't my fault!" Shane insists.

"Right, so the dozen incoherent messages were sent by someone else?" Ilya teases.

Shane leans into him, barging their shoulders together.

"Hayden dragged me along, and it's not like I could say no! It was our last big hoorah."

"Everything changes now, right?" Ilya sighs. "High school is over, we're starting college, and the people we've played with for years are about to be spread across the continent."

"You almost sound like you're gonna miss it."

Ilya laughs and takes another swig of beer. "No, not really."

Ilya has always seemed so sure of himself, of his path, of the life he wants to lead. Shane learned the summer they were twelve that that wasn't necessarily the case - that Ilya was just very good at pretending to know what he was doing, even when he was small.

But he's different now. Different in a good way.

Without Alexei and his father around to smother his light, Ilya has shone brighter with every year that passes.

"I'm gonna get us another drink," Ilya announces, then disappears before Shane can stop him.

It doesn't take him more than a few minutes, though, until he's coming back with drinks for them both. Another bottle of beer for himself, and - oh.

He hands a can of ginger ale to Shane without looking him in the eyes. It's not a big deal. It's nothing at all, really. Just a drink.

So why is Shane's heart racing?

People keep stopping to talk to them as they pass by. Acquaintances they've made while spending summers here, and even strangers - mostly girls - who stop by to flirt.

Ilya, as charismatic and effervescent as he is, charms them all with nothing more than a few words and a smile. And every time, the girls lap it up. It's like they're drawn to him, like they can't get enough. And Shane gets it - he knows what Ilya looks like, knows how easy he is to be around - so it's not like he can blame them.

It's just - he fucking *hates* it.

Shane *looks* good, sure, but he's got that awkward air about him that tends to deter people. Ilya is so charming that after five minutes in his presence, it feels like you've known him a lifetime. So it's nothing new for Shane, watching people fawn all over his best friend like this. Except for the fact that Shane *knows*, now.

All those years he spent thinking that warm, fluttery feeling in his chest was just friendship - really, *really* good friendship - have gone out the window. All the time he spent convincing himself that the way he felt about Ilya was normal, has proven to be a waste.

Shane *wants* Ilya.

He wants him in a way he's definitely not supposed to. And, looking back, he has done for a long time. Longer than he cares to think about, honestly. Maybe even since the beginning.

But it's harder, now that he knows, watching all the beautiful girls flirt with Ilya, and watching Ilya flirt back like it's as easy breathing. Shane knows Ilya could never be into *him* like that, but the reminder of it stings. It makes something hot and bitter take root in his chest, like fingernails hooking beneath his ribs and prying them apart.

The next girl to approach is absolutely stunning. She's got dark, velvety skin, and long black braids trailing all down her back. She even has glitter dusted on the top of her cheeks and along her collarbones, and it glistens when it catches the firelight.

Shane is gay, and even he thinks she's breathtaking.

She holds her hand out to Ilya in offering, and says, "Dance with me." It's not a question; she's the kind of girl who's used to getting exactly what she wants.

Ilya looks to Shane, as if searching for permission.

"Oh," the girl says, "are you two--"

"No!" Shane responds before she can even finish her sentence, his cheeks burning hot. "No. Go ahead. Have fun."

Ilya is frowning when he says, "Are you sure?"

But Shane nods his head insistently. He doesn't want to hold Ilya back. Shane even gives him a shove, just to encourage him, and eventually Ilya rolls his eyes at Shane, but takes the girl's hand.

Shane tells himself he won't watch, but he can't seem to stop.

The girl pulls Ilya along behind her until they reach the makeshift dance floor, where she turns around and throws her arms around his neck. Ilya's hands find her waist seamlessly, he pulls her a little closer, and then they're dancing. It's slow and sensual, all rolling hips and wandering hands, and impossible to miss how good they look together - her all dainty and soft, Ilya broad and strong.

Ilya loses himself in the music and the girl. Shane catches a glance of Ilya's face and notes that he's smiling with his eyes closed.

He looks beautiful, and impossible, and Shane feels sick with jealousy.

It only grows worse when the girl leans in and says something to Ilya, and he throws his head back in laughter. They start talking, no longer just bodies dancing, but now two people getting to know each other. And it's selfish of Shane, the way something heavy and acidic settles in his stomach at the sight of it.

He wants to pull Ilya away from the girl, wants to drag him back home to the cottage and hide him away in the place that never changes.

Maybe that way, they'll never change either.

But it's not fair of Shane to want that kind of thing, and it's not fair for him to stand here in the shadows, seething with jealousy over his best friend being happy with somebody else.

He crosses the patch of grass that has become a dance floor, being jumped and jostled by drunk partygoers. When Shane reaches Ilya and the girl, he places a hand on Ilya's shoulder and shakes him.

Ilya's eyes find Shane instantaneously.

"What's wrong? Are you okay?" Ilya worries, his hands quickly moving from the girl's waist to Shane's.

“I’m fine,” Shane lies, “but I’m gonna head out, okay?”

“What? No, I’ll come with you.”

Shane finds Ilya’s hands on his waist and wraps his fingers around his wrists. For a selfish moment, Shane just holds onto them, but then he’s pulling Ilya’s hands off him and stepping away.

“No, I’m serious! You stay and have fun, okay? This is just a little much for me.”

“Shane, are you sure? I can-“

“I’m sure. Promise. You have a good night, okay?”

And then he turns and walks away, leaving Ilya on the dance floor with a pretty girl and half of Shane’s heart in his hands.

As he wanders back, Shane can’t stop himself from feeling angry at Ilya. It’s childish and petty, and not even Ilya’s fault - Shane is the one who told him to dance with the girl, who told him to stay - but it’s not like he can control the way he feels.

He’d wanted Ilya to refuse to dance with the girl. He’d wanted Ilya to beg Shane to stay, or at least follow after him when he decided to leave.

Most of all, Shane is just angry at himself.

He’s the one who has changed this summer, not Ilya. He’s the one who suddenly wants more than he’s allowed to ask for. He can’t be mad at Ilya for being the same steady, wonderful person that he’s always been. Shane just wishes he could turn back the clock, go back in time to the moment before he realised how he feels and just...do it differently. Change it.

Shane wishes he could unlearn the terrible, awful truth, that he’s in love with his best friend.

And, right now, his best friend is dancing with a beautiful girl. Maybe Ilya is kissing her, maybe his hands are sliding under her shirt or she’s playing with his hair. Maybe they’re stealing away to some quiet, secluded corner so they can be alone together under the cover of night.

Shane stumbles to a halt, his stomach suddenly rolling angrily.

He slaps his hand on the trunk of a dead tree, then bends over and proceeds to vomit at the base of it.

Shane only had one beer, so it’s not even like he can blame it on the alcohol. He’s just lovesick, which is as embarrassing as it is laughable.

The cottage is quiet by the time he makes it back, and the only light is coming from the porch light that his mom must have left on for them. Shane considers turning it off, but he can’t bring himself to - he doesn’t want Ilya stumbling around blind if he decides to come home tonight.

Shane shuffles quietly through the house. He grabs a bottle of water from the kitchen, tiptoes upstairs, and brushes his teeth thoroughly in the bathroom, before slipping into his bedroom and closing the door behind him.

He doesn't bother turning the light on.

He strips his clothes and folds them neatly, then stacks them in a pile on his dresser so he can deal with them tomorrow. When he's plugged his phone into the charger, Shane finally crawls into bed. He doesn't even realise he's crying until the tears roll down the sides of his face and into his ears.

Shane can't have been in bed for longer than twenty minutes when he hears the front door click shut. Ilya. Shane had expected him to stay out longer than this, but he must have left the party not long after Shane did.

Something about that has his stomach doing somersaults.

He listens to Ilya's footsteps climbing up the stairs, and Shane holds his breath when they pause right in front of his bedroom.

For a moment there's nothing but silence, but a second later there's a quiet knock on Shane's bedroom door. *One, two, threefourfive*. Ilya's knock, the same pattern he always uses.

He doesn't usually knock on Shane's door, though. Normally he just comes barging in unannounced, like wherever Shane is, is where Ilya belongs.

Part of Shane wants to let him in, wants Ilya to crawl into bed beside Shane like he used to do when they were kids. But another part of Shane - the jealous, bitter side - doesn't want to talk to Ilya tonight. He doesn't want to hear about the girl, and what they did together, and if Ilya is going to see her again.

So Shane keeps quiet, and he pretends he's asleep until Ilya moves past his door.

Shane is an expert at pretending, after all. He's been doing it for most of his life. He's so good, in fact, that he even managed to fool himself.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Ilya wishes he could just...*not care*. But there's so much anger, and pain, and grief, and he doesn't know how to make it smaller. He doesn't know how to fold it into something he can carry easily, where no one else will notice it. It always manages to spill over somehow.

Ilya wades through the next few days, slow as molasses.

Ever since the party, since Shane left Ilya standing on the dancefloor, things have been...off. Not bad, necessarily, just different. There's an awkward air to everything they do, and they *do* do things together - they do *everything* together, just like always. But it feels like there's a distance between them that's never been there before.

Not even during the ten months of the year that they're apart.

Ilya doesn't know why. Obviously he knows it has something to do with the party they went to, because that's when everything shifted, but he doesn't know *what*.

Shane was the one who agreed to go to the party in the first place, even though Ilya knows that was just for his benefit. It was Shane who encouraged him to dance with Laila, the girl from the party, even though it wasn't *her* Ilya really wanted to dance with. And it was Shane who told Ilya to stay, even though he was leaving.

Even though Ilya would have left anywhere, anything, *anyone*, if Shane asked him to.

So while Ilya doesn't know *what* the problem is, exactly, he's pretty certain that it's his fault. A product of being raised by his father, no doubt.

And the dread of that hovers over him like a knife hanging on by a thread. Ilya is good at bracing for impact, between a childhood dodging hockey hits and his own father's fists, but he's not used to feeling like this around his best friend. He's not used to guessing how Shane feels.

They're like, soulmates, or whatever weird spiritual-crystal-horoscope stuff Ilya's mama always swears by.

Ilya knows Shane like the back of his hand; he usually knows what he's thinking with a single glance. He wants that back, desperately. Ilya feels lonely when Shane is here, but only halfway - only physically, while his mind is drifting somewhere else.

The cottage is lonely, too, when it's half empty.

David is making the two hour drive up from Ottawa for a couple of days, so Shane and Yuna have gone to the store to stock up on groceries.

David is a master of the grill, so they plan on putting him to work right away. The cottage has always been for the moms and the kids, so it's Yuna's running joke that David has to earn his keep when he comes along. He's a good sport about it, though.

It's just Ilya and his mama in the house for now. He'd hidden away upstairs in his room for a while, headphones in as he listened to Sveta rant about the latest asshole who's not even close to being good enough for her. But when she hangs up, and Ilya is left with only silence, he wanders downstairs in search of his mama.

He finds her in the dining room, looking out towards the lake with tear-stained cheeks and wringing hands. Ilya instantly feels his hackles go up, like a guard dog ready to attack.

"Mama?" Ilya says, voice soft so he doesn't startle her.

She jumps slightly anyway, and when she sees Ilya standing there, she instantly brushes her tears away. She's always done that - always tried to hide her feelings, thinking it will somehow protect Ilya. It's probably where he got it from, that instinct to hide his feelings, lest they inconvenience anyone.

"Ilyusha, my sweet boy," she says in Russian.

"Mama, are you okay?" He responds in kind.

"Of course. I'm fine. You don't have to worry about me, my love."

"You're crying," Ilya points out.

She chuckles and swipes at her cheeks again, like if she removes the evidence then Ilya will let it go. He won't. His mama doesn't cry very often anymore, and when she does - well. There are really only two things that do this to her. Two *people*.

"What happened?"

"It's not anything you need to worry about, Ilyusha," she insists.

"It is," he argues. "If it's - if it's *them*, and they're making you cry, then it *is* for me to worry about."

Ilya pulls out the chair beside his mama and lowers himself into it. He covers both of her wringing hands with one of his. She's so dainty, so delicate, and her bones feel so fragile beneath his hand.

He can't imagine the cowardice it must have taken for Ilya's father to raise his fists to her - to someone who had no hope of ever fighting back.

"Tell me. Please."

“My love-”

“I’m not a kid anymore, mama,” Ilya reminds her. Then, “I haven’t been in a long time.”

She did her best. Irina was too young when she married Grigori - ten years his junior, and still high off the four years she spent in college with Yuna, away from home for the first time, getting to be reckless and wild and free. She had no idea what she was getting into, what her life would become.

And while she tried her hardest to protect her children from Grigori’s wrath, she could only do so much.

She hid the worst of it from them, swallowed his violence so they wouldn’t have to, but it bled over sometimes. Mostly onto Ilya, because Alexei was always their father’s favourite, but even he couldn’t escape it every time.

So, Ilya hasn’t been a child since the first time he stepped between his mother, and his father’s anger.

“Your father called,” she admits.

Ilya’s free hand is already balling into a fist. “Why? What did he want?”

“Alexei - he’s in some trouble.”

“Trouble? What kind?”

Alexei is six years older than Ilya, so Ilya doesn’t really remember a version of his brother that hadn’t been completely warped and twisted by their father. Mama used to joke that *trouble* was Alexei’s middle name. She saw the good in him for longer than Alexei deserved, and certainly a lot longer than Ilya ever did.

The moment he was cruel to Shane, any hope of his brother ever redeeming himself to Ilya died.

He remembers that summer; barely eight years old, squaring up to a fourteen year old Alexei because he made fun of Shane’s new glasses. He can only *imagine* what trouble he’s getting up to now.

Mama sighs. She pulls one of her hands out from under Ilya’s, and rubs it across her face and into her hair. When she looks at Ilya, he recognises the same sadness in her that he sometimes feels inside himself.

“Grigori- your father. He said Alexei is under investigation for police misconduct, or something.”

“Jesus, what the fuck did he do?”

If the Moscow police think it’s bad, then it must be pretty fucking serious. Especially if their father can’t pull some strings and get the whole thing buried. He’s not part of the force

anymore, not since they moved to Boston when Ilya was five, but he's still got ties. Still got favours he is owed.

"I don't know, he wouldn't say and I didn't want to push."

"Why did he call you in the first place? Like, what are you supposed to do?"

Irina shrugs, and smiles sadly. "I'm not sure. But...I'm still his mama, too, Ilyusha."

Another tear seeps out of the corner of her eye, and before she can move, Ilya raises his hand and wipes it away for her. He hates seeing her cry, especially over his father and Alexei, who picked the man who abused his entire family over the woman who did nothing but try to protect him, and who loved him unconditionally.

"Sometimes...gosh, sometimes I think I didn't do enough." She twirls the cross on her necklace between her fingers.

"Mama-"

"I should have done more to protect you both. Should have shielded you from him better."

"You did everything you could."

She shakes her head. "I should have left sooner."

Ilya closes his eyes for a second, then chews on the inside of his cheek as he tries to think of the right thing to say.

Yes, it's true. She should have left sooner. But Ilya isn't foolish enough to believe it was ever that simple. His mama was terrified, and for good reason; they all knew what Grigori was capable of. The proof was in the bruises he left on both Irina and Ilya the day he came home and found them packing. Or - the day *Alexei* found them packing.

Mama had begged him to go with them, but he'd called their father instead.

They'd only got away because their neighbour came knocking over the noise, and Irina and Ilya slipped out the back while Grigori answered the door.

They'd showed up at the cottage the day after, and Yuna and Shane helped piece them back together.

What followed was a messy, contentious divorce, dragged out for eighteen months, just because Grigori wanted to punish mama for daring to leave him. They wouldn't have made it through without Yuna, David, and Shane. And at the end of it all Grigori moved back to Moscow, and Alexei - almost twenty at that point - followed in his father's footsteps.

"You left when you could, mama."

"I should have fought harder for your brother. I know that."

Ilya tugs on her hand until she turns sideways in her seat, facing him. He's got her eyes and her curls, and her same, big heart. At least, that's what she always says. Shane, too.

"You couldn't have fought any harder for him," Ilya insists. "You begged him to come with us that night. You were packing his bag, too, not just mine. He made his choice."

"He's still my son, Ilyusha. Your father hurt him, too."

"I know. And he still chose his side. What does that make him?"

Irina sighs. "A product of his environment."

"I had the same environment, and I'm nothing like him. Like either of them."

She smiles sadly, and brings her hand to Ilya's face. She brushes his curls out of his eyes, and then cups his cheek - the one with the white scar on it from his father's ring. Faded after all these years, but still there. A permanent reminder.

"No. No, you are my sweet boy. Always so kind, always so good."

"I learned it from you."

His mama's eyes fill with tears again, and suddenly Ilya is being pulled into her arms. He lets her hold him, lets her rock him from side to side like she used to do when he was a boy. He winds his arms around her waist and hugs her back tightly.

He used to believe his mama's hugs could fix every bad thing in the world. Part of him still believes that it's true.

A little while later, Ilya finds himself down at the end of the dock.

He's got his legs dangling over the edge, the water lapping over his feet gently. It's only early afternoon so the lake is busy - there are boats fishing way out in the middle, and a couple of kayakers passing by not too far away. It's a relaxed kind of busy, where there's no rush to anything or anyone. People have places to be and things to do, but no deadlines to do them in. It's nice, the syrupy slowness to it all.

The only thing that's missing is-

"Hey. Your mom said you were out here."

Shane kicks off his slides next to Ilya's, then sits beside him on the dock and submerges his feet in the water. He doesn't say anything else for a while; he's good at that, always knowing when a silence needs to be filled, and when it needs to be allowed to exist without interruption.

Their shoulders brush and their feet touch in the water, and the coil of tension in the pit of Ilya's stomach begins to unwind, just a little.

“My father called mama today,” Ilya says, when the weight on his chest feels light enough for him to breathe. “Alexei is under investigation.”

“That doesn’t sound surprising.”

“No. Not really.”

“But...?” Shane prompts, always hearing the things that Ilya can’t say.

“Why does he do that? Why does he call her, like this is her mess to solve? He is nothing to her now, and Alexei... Alexei *chose* our father. He chose to leave. He doesn’t call her, he doesn’t stay in touch. Why can’t they both just stay gone?”

Ilya wishes he had a brother worth missing, wishes he had a father worth loving. But he doesn’t, and that isn’t ever going to change, so why do they keep imposing themselves on his and his mama’s life, when things are good now?

“It was bad, y’know, before mama left him. Before they went back to Moscow.”

“I know,” Shane says. “I’ll never forget that summer you showed up with that bruise on your face. You’ve still got the scar, now.”

Shane lifts his hand and trails his finger along the scar beneath Ilya’s cheekbone. He’d done that when they were kids - touched the butterfly bandages with the tips of his fingers, so gentle that Ilya could barely feel it at all. It had made Ilya shiver, even back then. He’s got goosebumps on his arms, now.

Same place, same beautiful boy, same reaction, six years apart. At least Ilya is consistent.

“I got between him and mama,” Ilya details. “He was screaming so loud at her, and she was so scared, but she wasn’t backing down. *‘I’m leaving, Grigoryevich, and I’m taking my boys.’* He looked so furious that I thought he was going to kill her. So I stepped in front of him, shoved him back.”

“You were so brave, Ilya.”

“I didn’t feel it.”

“But you did it anyway. Sounds pretty brave to me.”

They’ve never really talked like this. Ilya has told Shane bits and pieces over the years, but mostly by accident - sad truths that slipped between his lips in the moments when Ilya forgot to pretend.

He’s never told Shane what happened that night. He’s never told *anyone* how frightened he was.

“Sometimes...sometimes I wish they were dead,” Ilya confesses. “Does that make me a bad person?”

“No,” Shane answers instantly. He doesn’t take a single second to even consider it. “No, Ilya, of course it doesn’t. You are *nothing* like them.”

Ilya turns to look at Shane. He’s terrified of what he might see written on his face, but Shane’s eyes have never been able to lie. Not to Ilya, at least. So he looks and he looks, and he sees nothing but complete and utter honesty.

Shane believes every word that he is saying.

“I just - it would be easier, I think, to grieve them if they were dead, rather than grieve the versions of them that I wish could have existed. Does that make sense?”

Shane nods. “Yeah. Yeah, it makes a lot of sense, Ilya. There’s nothing wrong with hating them for what they did to you and Irina.”

Ilya wishes he could just...*not care*. But there’s so much anger, and pain, and grief, and he doesn’t know how to make it smaller. He doesn’t know how to fold it into something he can carry easily, where no one else will notice it. It always manages to spill over somehow.

“I hate them for it too, y’know?” Shane says. “For what they did, and what they’re still managing to do to you, even from thousands of miles away.”

It feels good to hear that. Like a weight has been lifted off his shoulders.

His mama has always been so gracious, so understanding, even though neither Grigori nor Alexei have ever deserved it.

She will never hate Alexei because he’s her child, and she’ll never fully hate Grigori because he gave her her children. In comparison, Ilya’s hatred has always felt so ugly. His anger, like something he’s supposed to have learned how to put down.

It’s a relief to know that someone feels the same way as him. That Shane - who is always so unflinchingly *good* - understands it.

“I’ve got you, Ilya. Always. I’m not going anywhere.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

“Thank you.”

And for a moment, Ilya allows himself to be selfish. He takes Shane’s hand, and he holds it, and he refuses to feel guilty for it.

“We’re okay, right?” Ilya asks, his voice barely above a whisper. “These past few days, you’ve been-”

“I know. I know, and I’m sorry. I was just...in my head. But I’m here now, okay?”

Ilya looks at him - his best friend, the boy he wants more than he has ever wanted anything - and he sees his home. Sees the safest place in the entire world. He knows Shane better than he has ever known anyone, which is why he knows that something isn't quite right.

There's a secret growing smaller in Shane's eyes as he tucks it away and hides it out of sight.

But they're both too emotionally wrung out right now to deal with anything more, so Ilya lets it slide. He'll pull on that thread another day, but for now he just nods his head and holds Shane's hand for a little while longer.

They sit in silence, watching the kayakers on the lake and a couple of dogs splashing in the shallows about a hundred feet away. Shane doesn't ask for anything more than that from him.

They only move when a voice calls out to them from the cottage.

"Boys! David is here," Irina yells.

"We're coming!" Shane calls back, and then, to Ilya, "You ready?"

"I'm ready."

They stand and slip their wet feet back into their slides, and they squeak the whole way back down the dock. It's childish and ridiculous, but they can't help but laugh. Shane elbows Ilya, and Ilya elbows Shane, and they're basically wrestling while standing up by the time they make it to the back porch.

They get there just in time to see David swoop Yuna up in a huge hug, and she laughs as he kisses her cheek. When he steps back from his wife, David moves to hug Ilya's mama too. Then, over her shoulder, he spots Shane and Ilya.

"Dad, hey," Shane greets him.

"Heya, kiddo!"

Ilya observes the interaction closely, watching as Shane rushes over and lets his dad fold him into a giant bear hug.

He has known David for as long as he's known Shane and Yuna, but Ilya's feelings about him have always been so hard to place. Not through any fault of David's, but just because of Ilya's fucked up upbringing with his own father.

Even before the divorce, Grigori never came to the cottage; he would always spend his summers back in Moscow. But while David has a government job that often keeps him busy through the summer, he's always made it to the cottage whenever he can, even though it's never for more than a few days at a time.

Shane has only ever spoken highly of his dad; David is basically Shane's hero.

Yuna talks about him so lovingly, even when she's teasing him - even on the rare times Ilya has caught her complaining about him to Irina. And David has always been wonderful to

Ilya, always treated him like a second son. He would take Shane and Ilya camping when they were kids, and he taught them both how to fish, and he would turn a blind eye even when he noticed a bottle of his beer had gone missing.

Ilya doesn't always know what to do with that...with a loving dad.

He doesn't always know how to act.

"Ilya, son," David says gently. "It's so good to see you."

The hug he gives Ilya is a cautious one - learned behaviour from all the times Ilya used to flinch away. David has always been so aware of Ilya's boundaries

"It's good to see you too, David," Ilya greets him. "I hope you've got your apron ready."

David laughs, loud and raucous, and he pats Ilya on the shoulder carefully.

"Are you gonna help me out?"

"Oh, absolutely not. That's Shane's job."

"Neither of you boys are going anywhere *near* the food until you go inside and clean up!" Yuna insists.

"And make it quick," Irina tells them.

"We're going, we're going," Shane drones, as he grabs Ilya's wrist and drags him into the house.

Fifteen minutes later, everyone is exactly where they belong: David and Shane are manning the grill, while Ilya sits with his mama and Yuna and they watch the double act get to work.

Ilya was only five during his first summer here with the Hollander's, and he probably should have been too young to remember much from back then, but there were some things that were too prominent to forget.

He remembers hearing his mama laugh more that summer, than she had during Ilya's entire lifetime.

He remembers sitting down to eat dinner together, and being baffled by how quietly everyone spoke to each other - no anger, no yelling, not even when Shane spilled his orange juice on the table cloth.

He also remembers the first time David cooked for everyone, because Ilya had never seen anything like that before; his father didn't even know his way around their kitchen.

More than anything, Ilya remembers Shane's freckled face and his gap-toothed grin. He remembers thinking: *This one. This one is mine.* And when Shane looks over his shoulder, catches Ilya watching him, and grins...Ilya thinks the exact same thing all over again.

Mine.

“So, Ilya,” Yuna begins, watching him over the rim of her wine glass, “you haven’t mentioned anything about college yet. Boston College, right? That’s where you’re going?”

Ilya glances at his mama first, who raises her eyebrows knowingly, before he looks back to Yuna and says, “Come on, mama Hollander, it’s summer! We don’t need to talk about that yet.”

She tuts displeasingly, but thankfully she lets it slide. As she moves on to a different topic with Irina, Ilya lets out a sigh of relief. College isn’t something that he’s ready to talk about yet. Not because he’s nervous; not about starting, at least. What he *is* nervous about is telling Shane.

Because Ilya isn’t going to BC...he’s going to McGill.

McGill was where David played hockey, and where Yuna did her masters after getting her undergrad degree in Boston with Irina. It’s where they met and fell in love.

Since he was a little kid, it’s been Shane’s dream to go to McGill, so - somewhere along the way - it became Ilya’s too, for a while. They used to talk about it all the time, especially in the long months they were apart. They dreamed of going there together, playing on the same team, and even sharing a dorm.

As Ilya got older, the dream shifted.

BC became a more realistic goal for Ilya, though it was less about the school, and more about not wanting to leave his mama alone in Boston. But when Irina found that out last year when they were starting the whole college application process, she had insisted Ilya go for his *real* dream school.

“I’ll be just fine, my sweet boy. It’s time for you to put yourself first.”

He didn’t tell Shane that he applied, because he didn’t want to get his hopes up. But when Ilya got his acceptance letter through, he suddenly worried he was being too much - that their childhood fantasy should have stayed there, and Shane wouldn’t really want Ilya to go with him.

It’s crazy, maybe. Ilya knows how much he means to Shane. But it’s an insecurity he can’t shake.

And now...now he has no idea when the right time to tell Shane is.

Ilya is good at keeping secrets. He’s strong, and his shoulders are broad, like he is built for carrying the familiar weight of knowing something that no one else is supposed to know. Hiding something that no one else is supposed to find out about.

He wears secrets like an old, worn coat that has moulded to his body. This secret feels different, though, because he is keeping it from Shane. It feels more like a shirt stretched too tightly, about to burst open at the seams.

Shane and David bring the food over to the table, and Ilya's heart is beating a little too fast when Shane sits down beside him.

Their knees knock together beneath the table, intentional on Ilya's part. When Shane looks up at him they both smile, and in an instant Ilya feels the last of the distance between them evaporate into thin air.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" David asks. "Dig in!"

So they do. They eat, and drink, and talk, and laugh. The sun begins to set on the far side of the lake, and the light starts to go dim, but nobody makes any effort to move.

This feels like home, like family. Like something Ilya wants to keep for the rest of his life.

At two in the morning Ilya is still wide awake, staring at the unopened message on his phone. It's from a number he doesn't have saved, but knows by heart anyway. He should have blocked it - he's not sure why he hasn't - but he knows he isn't going to. At least not tonight.

Remind your mother she has two sons.

That's all the message says. It makes Ilya want to throw his phone out of the window.

He almost never hears from Grigori. There isn't anything for them to talk about. Ilya will get messages from him every so often, just reminding Ilya how much better off he would be if he had gone back to Moscow with them.

Or, like tonight, things about mama. But that's usually when Grigori feels like Irina needs a reminder of what he thinks of her. He probably thinks Ilya rushes to tell her - probably delights in all the ways it might cause her pain - but Ilya has never once passed on his father's messages.

He refuses to give him the satisfaction.

But it still guts Ilya, the way his father still has his claws in him, even now. Even after all this time.

Ilya tosses his phone on the nightstand and rolls onto his back. He looks up at the ceiling, at the last two remaining glow-in-the-dark stars that have managed to survive. There used to be a whole solar system up there. They don't glow anymore, but Ilya can still make out the faintly yellow shapes against the pristine white paint.

David had stuck them on Ilya and Shane's ceilings so long ago Ilya can't even remember how old they would have been. But he does remember the way David had sat Ilya on his shoulders and let him stick the moon and the rocket ship up there.

He also remembers the nights when he would sneak into Shane's room and they'd lie in bed together, looking up at the ones on Shane's ceiling. He'd made David place them in the patterns of different constellations.

Ilya throws his covers back and gets out of bed.

He's a pro at sneaking around this house in the dark, he's been doing it for thirteen years, so he doesn't make a sound as he creeps down the hallway.

He stops outside Shane's room. There's a sliver of light peeking out beneath the door and Ilya considers knocking, but last time he'd been ignored. So Ilya just pushes down on the handle and slips inside without permission.

"Ilya?" Shane whispers.

He's propped up in bed with his glasses on, reading his favourite non-hockey book, *Frankenstein*. He looks over his glasses at Ilya, his eyes scanning up and down like he's checking to see if he's hurt.

"Hey, are you okay?"

Ilya makes a quiet, uncertain sound in the back of his throat, and it makes Shane's brows furrow in concern. He only hesitates for a moment, but then he's putting his bookmark between the pages and placing *Frankenstein* down on his nightstand.

He shuffles over towards the wall - he has a double bed now, unlike when they were kids - and he lifts up the covers in invitation. It sends a rush of fondness through Ilya, and a rush of nostalgia too. They've done this so many times, but it's never made Ilya's stomach feel quite so squirmy before.

"Are you getting in?" Shane asks.

"Yes, please," Ilya whispers.

As he crawls into bed, he flicks off the lamp. Some things are easier to face under the cover of darkness.

Shane shimmies down and rolls onto his side, pulling the covers up to his chin. Ilya copies his position, both of them turned in towards each other like two parentheses.

Their heads are nestled at the very edges of their pillows, faces so close that Ilya can feel Shane's breath on his skin and see his freckles even in the darkness. So close that Ilya could lean in and kiss Shane, if he wanted to.

For a short while, they both just look at each other in silence.

Shane still hasn't taken his glasses off, and they're sitting slightly skewed from where the side of his face is pressed into the pillow. It makes him look so cute that Ilya can't help but reach a hand up between them and push them back up.

Shane scrunches his nose, and Ilya smiles.

He knows Shane is objectively gorgeous. He's tall, and muscular, and he's got those little ladybug freckles that make Ilya want to lean in and bite his cheeks. And this past year or two

Shane has started carrying himself differently, with a confidence he never used to have. A confidence that is painfully attractive to Ilya.

But Ilya doesn't really remember *when* Shane went from being lanky and nerdy, to...*this*. He doesn't remember because, to Ilya, Shane has always been perfect.

So, maybe in hindsight, Ilya should have realised some things a little sooner. That he's bi, of course, and that he wants Shane with, like, biblical levels of greed. Because clearly this is something that has been here all along, just hovering beneath the surface and waiting for Ilya to notice it.

"What's going on?" Shane whispers, his breath fanning across Ilya's lips.

"Grigori messaged me."

Shane exhales heavily out of his nose. "What did he say?"

"Usual. Trying to make mama sound bad. Trying to use me to hurt her."

"He's an asshole," Shane says.

"Yes," Ilya agrees.

"You're nothing like him, Ilya."

It's his biggest fear, that one day he'll end up like his father or his brother. That, no matter how hard he tries, he will always be cut from the same cloth as them.

He doesn't need to verbalise that fear for Shane to know it.

"You never will be, okay? You're too kind, and thoughtful, and *good*."

Ilya feels tears prickling in his eyes and he quickly blinks them away. Shane notices anyway, shifts marginally closer to Ilya so their knees and knuckles touch.

"Okay, Shane," Ilya whispers, because he wants so desperately to believe that it's true. He wants to be the version of himself that Shane sees when he looks at him.

They lie there for a little while longer, their blinks getting slower and heavier as sleep tries to claim them both. Ilya should move, probably. Should sneak out of here and back to his own room, his own bed. But he's warm, and cozy, and he doesn't want to leave.

So he reaches his hand up again, but this time instead of pushing Shane's glasses up, he pulls them off. He's careful as he folds the arms down, then he leans over to place them on top of Shane's book on the nightstand. When Ilya rolls back, Shane is smiling again.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

“Stay?” Shane asks, as if Ilya could ever drag himself away.

“Of course,” Ilya promises.

He might regret it in the morning, when he wakes to the sun shining on Shane’s face and Ilya’s heart does that little swoop, like his chest is caving in. But for now, there is nothing Ilya wants more than to stay cocooned in this perfect little bubble, where the rest of the world can’t touch them.

Where he gets to pretend, for a little while, that this is something he could get to keep.

“I missed seeing you in your glasses,” Ilya murmurs, sleep-softened and uninhibited.

The last thing he sees before he falls asleep is the flush on Shane’s cheeks.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Ilya's face falls, and tears well in his eyes, and Shane watches as he walks away. He still can't unstick his feet from the ground.

Chapter Notes

TW for homophobic slur used by a minor, original character.

The days of summer start to pass by in an endless, rolling montage. It feels like a highlight reel of best bits, except - for Shane - that's just every moment that he gets to spend with Ilya.

When they wake up to a dreary, unseasonably cool morning, with a light mist of rain covering the lake, Ilya makes the executive decision to go to the movie theatre in town. It's not usually one of Shane's favourite things to do over summer - it mostly just feels like a waste of precious time - but there isn't much else to do on a miserable day, except stay inside and rot. So, he agrees like he so often does when it comes to his best friend.

There's only the one screen so you don't get to pick what you want to see, you just go inside, buy your tickets, and hope for the best.

It ends up playing back-to-back screenings of *Rocky I, II, and III*.

Shane and Ilya stick around for the first one, but end up ditching halfway through the second. They end up running to *Sal's* for more ice cream (cinnamon bun and pecan pie for Ilya, lemon sorbet for Shane) despite the rain, and then once the sun starts to peak through the clouds again, they slowly make their way home.

It only takes Shane a couple of days - and the promise to go easy on him - to convince Ilya to start working out, ready for hockey to begin again in the fall. With Shane going to McGill and Ilya going to BC, it's gonna be a major step up from their average-at-best high school teams. There's no harm in getting a head start.

There isn't a gym locally, but a few years back David put a treadmill and a weight rack in the detached garage. That, mixed with the morning jogs through the woods and around the lake, does the job well enough.

“I think you’re secretly a sadist, Hollander,” Ilya pants, as he bends over and clutches his knees.

“You’re out of shape,” Shane teases him.

“You’re out of your *mind*,” Ilya retorts.

And afterwards - when he pulls off his sweat-damp t-shirt, lifts Shane over his shoulder, and throws him into the water - Ilya holds his arms out wide, and asks, “Am I still out of shape, now?”

Shane ducks his head back underwater to avoid answering the question. And to cool the fuck down.

On another day they end up taking Yuna’s car and driving out to the mini golf place. Ilya tries to talk him out of it, but Shane thinks it’s a fantastic idea.

The only problem is: Shane thinks it’s a fantastic idea *every* year. And then every year they get there, and suddenly they become the most competitive people who have *ever* existed.

Seriously. It turns them evil.

Shane tries to meticulously keep score, Ilya tries to distract him into miscounting, and they both try so hard to outdo each other that they inevitably end up getting yelled at by an angry parent (or two) when they start swearing too close to kids.

They leave with their tails tucked between their legs, and their cheeks red from trying to hold back their laughter. By the time they make it back to the car, they’re crying from laughing so hard.

And Shane never learns his lesson, because he’ll probably suggest they go again next year, too.

It’s just that everything with Ilya is always so *fun*, and for Shane - someone who’s used to performing fun, instead of actually experiencing it - it’s something he never wants to lose.

As a kid Shane used to wish on shooting stars, and birthday candles, and loose eyelashes, that Ilya could move to Ottawa. He imagined they’d live in the same house like they do during the summer, and they’d go to the same school, and play on the same team, and do every little thing together. He remembers begging his parents to let it happen. He even remembers begging Irina, as well.

And the truth is, Shane still wants the same thing now. He still wants every day to look like summer, if it means keeping Ilya with him year round. He wants the same house, and same school, and same team, and same *life*.

He’ll bury the love, swallow it down and keep it trapped in his chest. He’ll hide for the rest of his life, as long as he gets to keep Ilya.

He wants to hold onto all of this so desperately that his fingers ache.

There's a last time for everything, Shane knows that.

One day his mom put him down, and never picked him back up again. One morning he turned his rocket ship nightlight off, and never turned it back on. There was a last time his dad carried him from the car into the house, and a last time he sat on his Grandpa's knee, and a last time he played hopscotch over the broken flags on the street outside his house.

Things end. It's a part of life. Shane understands.

But as they sit down by the lake he looks at Ilya, at the way the sunlight makes his curls look golden, and the way the water reflects in his eyes and makes them gleam, and he hopes with everything in him that this isn't their last summer like this.

He hopes this is one thing that never has to end.

Because Shane wants more fighting over mini golf, and shoving each other into the lake, and driving their moms mad. He wants more late nights by the fire pit, getting eaten alive by mosquitoes, and more early morning wake up calls with Ilya diving on him and tickling him.

He knows things will change soon. They're going to college, and it will demand different things of them. Then they'll be drafted, and that will demand even more. Maybe they'll even end up on opposite sides of the continent. But he prays to a god he's never believed in, that this won't be the last summer they get to spend like this.

He plucks a dandelion from by the water, blows the seeds, and wishes.

However far life takes them, however much it all changes, he hopes they always find their way back here. To the cottage. To each other.

Sitting on the shoreline with their legs crossed beneath them and their knees pressed together, they turn to each other and smile.

"I had fun with you today," Ilya says.

"I had fun with you, too."

It takes a week for Ilya to convince Shane to go to another party.

Although, it's not a *party* party this time; it's more of gathering on the beach, and it's during the day, too, which somehow makes it better. There's something about the cover of nightfall which makes parties feel more oppressive, like there's more pressure to act a certain way. A gathering on the beach just after midday is no big deal.

Plus, Shane has spent the last week or so doing whatever he can to keep a smile on Ilya's face.

He knows everything that happened with Grigori and Alexei has been lingering in the back of Ilya's mind, so he's taken it upon himself to keep him distracted and happy. They don't get to

ruin Ilya's summer. Shane will make sure of it.

It's crowded by the time they arrive, though not as bad as the last one. There's music playing from a speaker, but it's not the same heavy, synthetic playlist from before, so Shane doesn't mind it this time.

They don't know *everyone* here; there are the regulars they've known for years, and some newer faces that started showing up a couple summers ago, but there are some strangers, too. Shane and Ilya have always much preferred each other's company over other people's, so they're not really part of the close-knit group of vacationers - they kind of just float around the outside of it, instead.

"You sure you're good?" Ilya asks for the dozenth time.

"Yes," Shane insists. "I'm fine, I told you."

"And you're not gonna ditch me again, right?" Ilya asks, and Shane knows he's teasing but there's a hint of honesty hiding in voice, as well.

"Well you were pretty pre-occupied that night, so--"

"Shane Hollander, were you *jealous*?" Ilya questions, as a slow grin stretches across his face.

"No!"

"Oh my *god*, you--"

"Hey guys! You made it!" A voice thankfully interrupts them.

It's Leo, who had hosted the last party along with his brother and cousin. He's just a guest today though, like everyone else; they're gathered on a stretch of the shoreline that's between cottages, not belonging to anyone in particular. It means, beyond the responsibility to pick up your own trash, no one has to worry about anything getting broken or damaged.

"Here we are," Ilya announces, holding his arms out wide. "Nice to see you've recovered from last time."

Leo's face goes a little pale. "God, don't. I still feel nauseous if I move too quick."

Shane snorts, and Ilya laughs, then Leo disappears into the crowd with a wave goodbye. It leaves Shane and Ilya alone, like they so often find themselves, which is exactly how Shane likes it.

It's stupid, he knows, but he always wants to keep Ilya for himself. His stomach still turns over now, when he thinks about the girl Ilya had danced with - when he wonders what happened in the time between Shane leaving, and Ilya making it back to the cottage. He'd wanted to ask, once he and Ilya had bridged that awkward gap of Shane's own making, but he couldn't quite bring himself to.

Sometimes it's just better not to know. That way it can't hurt him, he can just ruminate over it for hours on end as intended.

It's laughable, honestly, that Shane managed to skip most of the typical teenage angst - too focused on hockey to care about girls (*obviously*), or friendship drama, or the existential 'what am I going to do when I'm older?' - only for it to hit him full force by having him fall in love with his best friend. His gorgeous, funny, sweet, *straight* best friend, who's had girls falling all over him for years.

Ilya throws his arm over Shane's shoulders and says, "Come on. Let's sit down."

There are fold-out camping chairs and towels laid out on the ground for people to sit on, but Ilya drags them over to a fallen tree trunk instead. It's been like that for as long as Shane can remember, and no one has ever bothered to move it, so they sit down beside each other and begin to survey the growing number of people.

It really is chill today. There are little clusters of people standing around talking to each other, a few splashing in the shallows of the water, and some - like Ilya and Shane - who have taken a seat a little bit further away from it all.

"Do you remember the first time we went to a party together?" Ilya asks, and Shane doesn't need to look at him to know that he's smirking.

"Oh god, don't."

Shane drops his head into his hand and pinches the bridge of his nose. He remembers with startling, humiliating clarity.

"You were so drunk," Ilya laughs.

"It wasn't even my fault!"

"Shane--"

"We were all, like, fifteen! How was I supposed to know it was alcohol?"

Ilya snorts. "Right, because a group of fifteen year olds would sneak onto the beach after their parents fell asleep to drink soda."

"It tasted like pure sugar!"

"I told you to slow down," Ilya laughs.

As it turned out, the *pure sugar* was cans of those fruity, pre-mixed cocktails you can get. The guy who'd brought the drinks, Eli, had begged his older sister to score them some alcohol with her fake ID, and - mostly just to fuck with him - she'd bought the fruitiest, "*girliest*" drinks she could find.

They'd tasted really fucking good going down. Not so much coming up, though, as Shane had learned on their walk back to the cottage, when he'd keeled over and thrown up the entire

contents of his stomach.

Ilya, who'd 1) drank before, and 2) known those cans were alcohol, was in a much better state than Shane.

He'd rubbed Shane's back while he vomited until his stomach was empty, then wound his arm around Shane's waist and helped him stagger the whole way home. Once they made it back to the cottage, Ilya managed to get Shane upstairs, help him brush his teeth, then get him into bed without waking their parents.

Shane wishes he could say he passed out instantly, but unfortunately, as the neurotic, anxious disaster that he was - *still is*, honestly - Shane had proceeded to have a panic attack. He'd been convinced his mom would find out and yell at him, and *no one* comes away scot-free from a Yuna Hollander lecture.

But Ilya had sat in bed with him, holding Shane's hand and reminding him to breathe until the panic had subsided. He passed out eventually, with his head on Ilya's lap and Ilya's hand in his hair.

Their parents never found out. Or, if they did, no one ever mentioned anything to Shane and Ilya. He still feels a little guilt about it, though.

"I haven't been drunk since," Shane admits. "It fucking traumatised me."

"At least your dad never told Yuna."

Shane's whole body goes cold, and he whips his head around to look at Ilya.

"What."

"David? He never told Yuna."

"*He knew?*" Shane splutters.

Ilya giggles. If Shane wasn't currently experiencing a mild crisis, he would probably note the way Ilya's eyes sparkle as he laughs, and the way that's probably Shane's favourite sound in the world, even above the cut of blades across ice.

But, he *is* freaking out. So-

"Ilya - seriously? My dad knew?"

Ilya covers his mouth like he's trying to hold back the laughter, and nods his head slowly. When he regains control of himself, he sucks in a breath and explains:

"He heard me bringing you upstairs. You kept saying *I'm so sorry* pretty loudly," Ilya says, smiling fondly. "Your dad peeked his head out the door to see if you needed help, but he saw that I had you so he left us to it."

"Oh my *god*," Shane groans. "Why the fuck didn't you tell me?"

“When? Between the panic attack, and you passing out in my lap?”

Shane whacks the back of his hand against Ilya’s chest. “The next day, you asshole.”

“Why? Yuna and mama spent the whole day out of the house and you were fine by the time they got home. Your dad never said anything to them about it, so I didn’t want you to freak out all over again.”

Shane drops his head into his hands again, and lets out a long, low groan. He remembers telling his dad he wasn’t feeling too great that morning, and his dad didn’t say a single word. He just made Shane breakfast, kissed the top of his head, and told him there was paracetamol in the bathroom cabinet if he needed any.

God, Shane had thought they’d been *so* sneaky.

“I really thought we’d gotten away with it,” Shane chuckles.

“You would make a terrible criminal, Hollander,” Ilya teases him.

There’s so much affection in Ilya’s voice that it kind of bowls Shane over.

He’s used to Hayden, J.J., and Rose teasing him for how introverted he is - how few parties he comes to, and how he refuses to drink, and how little he cares about anything other than hockey and school. They don’t do it in a mean way, but still.

It lacks the gentleness that softens Ilya’s words when he says similar things.

He calls Shane boring like it’s a badge of honour, and tells him he’d make a terrible criminal like it’s the most endearing thing in the world to him. When Shane wants to read quietly by the water, or simply sit in silence together, Ilya acts as if Shane’s presence is a gift in itself.

Shane playfully elbows Ilya in the ribs, because he can’t bear the way this moment suddenly feels weighed down by all the things that Shane cannot say out loud - by all the feelings he isn’t allowed to feel.

Ilya grabs his arm and pulls until Shane falls across his lap, then he starts tickling Shane until he shrieks loud enough to draw attention to them. Ilya laughs thunderously and allows Shane to pull away from him, but when Shane fixes him with a narrowed glare, Ilya just bats his eyelashes.

“I hate you.”

“No you don’t,” Ilya sings.

No. No he doesn’t.

Shane is sipping on a ginger ale that Ilya acquired from somewhere, and Ilya is rambling on about how Cliff nearly got arrested before the last game of their season, when something catches his eye. Or *someone*, rather.

The girl from the last party, the one with long braids and glitter on her skin, is standing in the shallows of the water. She's wearing an orange bikini top with denim cut-offs, and half of her hair is wound up into a bun on the top of her head.

And - oh. She's waving. At Ilya.

Shane watches as Ilya, still mid conversation, raises his hand and waves back. He smiles at her, big and bright enough for her to see from all the way over there, but he doesn't break his flow even once. He turns back to Shane, still talking, and continues on as if the most beautiful girl maybe ever hadn't just tried to wave him over.

It's ridiculous, and petty, and so fucking childish, but Shane can't stop himself from feeling smug about it. *He picked me*, Shane thinks.

As the day drags on, the gathering starts to get a little busier. A little rowdier. It's still mostly chill, at least compared to most of the parties that happen on the lake, but Shane is kind of hoping they can start to make their exit soon.

In fact, Shane is starting to soft-launch their departure by yawning and grabbing Ilya's wrist to check the time on the watch he's wearing, when a commotion catches their attention.

There's some guy Shane doesn't recognise - a little older than them, probably his first time visiting - who's squaring up to a couple of the regulars. He's laughing in their faces, arms waving wildly as Blake, a local named Joey, and a girl who Shane thinks is called Serenity, all try to smooth the situation over.

"Don't," Shane immediately says, when he feels Ilya shifting beside him.

"I'm not doing anything," he denies.

"You're *thinking* about doing something."

"I'm observing."

"You're not getting involved," Shane tells him.

Ilya isn't reckless.

While Shane has never played with or against him on the ice, he's seen enough videos of Ilya playing to know that he's tough, and aggressive on the puck, and can take a hit that would flatten most high school players. But off the ice, Ilya is exceptionally level-headed.

Maybe it's from a childhood spent walking on eggshells, prepared to try and diffuse any situation or step in if necessary, but Ilya is a pro at staying calm. He doesn't get into fights, and he refuses to take the bait when people are trying to good.

He doesn't, however, stand for bullies.

But maybe that's from his childhood, too - from a father and a brother who thought they could always get their way by being cruel.

And this new guy is coming into their space, with the people they know, and is trying to throw his weight around like he's important. Like being the loudest person here means he's owed reverence, or respect. Ilya doesn't need to know what exactly is going on, to know that this guy is on a high fucking horse. Even Shane can see that.

When the guy turns his venom on Serenity, finger pointing in her face as he yells, Ilya and Shane are out of their seats in a flash.

"Is there a problem here?" Ilya demands as he stalks toward them.

The asshole glances over his shoulder, looks Ilya and Shane up and down like he's sizing them up, then drops his hand and takes a small step back from Serenity. Shane's gaze flickers in her direction to check on her, but her arms are still crossed over chest and she's glaring like she's thirty seconds away from punching this idiot.

"It's none of your fucking business," the guy retorts.

"It's my business when you're getting in people's faces, yelling for no reason."

He scoffs. "Do you know who I am?"

"No. But you're about to know who I am, if you don't--"

"Ilya, please. Let's go," Shane quietly interrupts.

He knows Ilya is in the right, and he also knows Ilya could make light work of this guy if it came down to that. But, more than anything, Shane knows Ilya doesn't *like* fighting, and Irina certainly won't like it if he comes home with busted knuckles.

It'll be easier if they just send this guy on his way, and then go back home to the cottage.

But then the asshole sets his sights on Shane, and he sneers as he says, "Who's this? Your fucking boyfriend?"

Ilya shifts slightly in front of Shane, instantly going into protector mode. Shane sighs. The guy should have just kept his mouth shut. If Ilya was ready to throw hands before, he'll be willing to kill now that Shane has been dragged into it.

"Don't talk to him." It's a warning - a threat wrapped up in carefully restrained words.

"Ohhhh, so he *is*--"

Ilya darts forward like he's about to swing.

The asshole flinches backwards, and Shane instantly reaches out. His hockey reflexes come in handy as he grabs the first thing he touches: Ilya's waistband.

He slips his fingers into the back of it and tugs sharply. If Ilya was really going for the guy, if he wanted to lay him out, the motion wouldn't have done anything at all. But Ilya was just

doing it to spook him - he wasn't going to drop the gloves unless he didn't have another choice - so he laughs at the guy's fear as he lets Shane pull him backwards.

Ilya's back bumps into Shane's chest, but Shane doesn't let go of Ilya's waistband. The asshole mutters, "Whatever," under his breath, and scurries away before he really has to deal with Ilya's wrath.

"Are you guys good?" Ilya asks Blake, Joey, and Serenity.

"Yeah," she says. "Thanks, Ilya. Shane."

"No worries," Ilya says.

The party had gone quiet around the altercation, but it starts to buzz back to life as Shane and Ilya turn their backs on it and start walking back to the cottage. It's only then that Shane releases Ilya, his fingers brushing against the bare skin of Ilya's back as he slips them out of the waistband.

Shane feels Ilya's eyes on the side of his face, so he turns to look at him. Ilya's expression is sheepish, and he glances away quickly.

"You're mad at me."

"What?" Shane asks. "No, of course not."

"You told me not to."

"Well, yeah. But he was an asshole, so..." Shane shrugs, leaving the end of his sentence open.

"So...you're *not* mad?"

Shane bumps their shoulders together, waiting patiently for Ilya to turn and look at him again. When he does, Shane smiles at him, and watches as the tension leaks out of Ilya's body.

"I could never be mad at you, you know that," Shane says. "Remember the incident with my brand new Centaurs jersey?"

"That was an accident!" Ilya insists.

"Sure, if that's your story," Shane teases him.

"No one could have predicted--"

"What? That paint would stain it?"

Ilya tries to look guilty for approximately five seconds, but then they both burst out laughing.

God, as if Shane could ever truly be mad at Ilya for anything. He makes Shane's heart race just by fucking laughing, makes him breathe easier by a brush of their arms, makes him

happier than anything else has ever made him, even hockey.

Ilya could call Shane to ask for help burying a body, and Shane would drive to Boston with a checklist of ways to conceal the crime.

The day after, Shane and Ilya head into town for lunch.

Shane gets a grilled chicken sandwich, and Ilya gets a grilled cheese with tomato soup from the cafe, then they finish it off with a slice of cherry pie each. They'd already been on a five mile run this morning, so they've earned a little treat for themselves.

They're walking down Main Street when they bump into two guys who'd been at the beach yesterday. Gil and Pat have been spending summers here for years, but Shane and Ilya have always tried to avoid them whenever possible. They're assholes of the subtle variety; they come across as fine most of the time, unless you don't fit in with them, then they become vicious.

"Hey man, what's up," Gil says, reaching out his fist for Shane to bump, while Pat does the same to Ilya.

"You missed a hell of a party after you left," Pat says.

Ilya shrugs. "We'd had enough by the time we left."

"You'll never fucking guess what happened," Gil says, laughing as he shoves too hard at Shane's shoulder.

"Oh, what's that?" Shane asks him, mostly just to hurry this along so they can head home and go swimming.

Gil and Pat glance at each other, chuckling like two hyenas, and Shane has to resist the urge to look at Ilya and roll his eyes. These guys are a year or two older than Shane and Ilya, and yet they're still acting like they're in middle school.

"You know Jamie, right? Kai's little brother?" Shane doesn't, but he nods anyway. "Well, he was caught - he was caught kissing a fucking *guy*."

"None of us had any idea he was a fag," Pat sneers in disgust.

Shane's entire body goes cold, like he's just been plunged into the lake in the dead of winter. He feels frozen in place, the blood in his veins turned to ice.

Pat and Gil's mouths keep moving but Shane can't hear a single thing, until--

"Are you fucking serious?" Ilya asks

Shane can't breathe.

“Yeah man,” Gil says. “He’s fucking-“

“No,” Ilya interrupts. “I’m not talking about Jamie, I’m talking about you. Seriously, you’re just gonna toss that fucking word around?”

Ilya is - *oh*.

He’s calling them out on it. His voice made of iron, his face carved from steel, he’s looking both Gil and Pat in the eyes and calling them-

“You’re fucking assholes,” Ilya spits. “Don’t use that word.”

“Bro, what the fuck?” Pat laughs nervously. “What’s your deal?”

“My deal is I’m not a homophobic dick,” Ilya snaps.

He doesn’t give them time to react, doesn’t wait for their response, he simply walks away from them without even looking back over his shoulder to see if Shane is following. Shane, who just stood there in complete silence while two guys used a slur, and he said absolutely nothing.

The moment that word left Gil’s mouth, it took Shane right back to the locker room.

When he was younger and guys would say stuff like that - homophobic bullshit - Shane would keep his mouth shut because he felt like he had no other option. He was already The Asian Kid on the team, and it often felt like he was only tolerated in the predominantly white, conservative space because of how fucking talented he is. If he’d called anyone out on their shit, he would have been shunned completely.

Then, more recently, he kept his mouth shut because he didn’t want anyone to look at him too closely. Didn’t want them to see the thing he’s been hiding.

He should have said something then, and he should say something now, but instead he just walks away.

He catches up with Ilya a minute later, but the walk home is silent. It’s not until the cottage comes into view that Ilya finally breaks it.

“What was that?”

“They were being-“

“I know what *they* were being, Shane. I mean, why didn’t *you* say anything?”

He doesn’t even know how to respond. There’s no answer he could give that isn’t terrible, or cowardly, or selfish.

Ilya is mad at him.

The realisation settles over Shane like smoke, thick and oppressive and stinging his lungs. He doesn't think Ilya has ever even come *close* to being mad at Shane before. It's such an unfamiliar experience, even, that it took Shane a second to place the grit in Ilya's voice as anger. He's never heard it directed at him in all the years they have known each other.

Not the time Shane accidentally broke Ilya's brand new phone when he dropped it in the lake, or even when Shane ghosted him for a week after Ilya got his first girlfriend - which, in hindsight, makes a lot of sense now.

But he *is* angry over this.

And Shane feels sick.

"You're fine with them just throwing that word around, like it's nothing?" Ilya asks.

"I mean, it's not like we don't hear it in locker rooms all the time, right?" Shane tries, but as soon as the words leave his mouth he wants to take them back.

Ilya actually flinches.

"No, Shane. I don't. Because I shut it the fuck down. No one says that shit in my locker room."

For a moment Ilya just stares - a disgusted, *hurt* expression on his face, as he looks at Shane like he doesn't even recognise him. Then Ilya sighs sadly, his shoulders drooping as he shakes his head and walks away.

Shane wants to call after him, or follow along behind him - he wants to beg and plead, wants to *fix* this - but his feet feel glued to the ground. He can't move, can't breathe, can't even think anything, except for *he hates me, he hates me, he hates me*.

Shane is sitting on the back porch freaking out, when his mom finds him.

"Shane?" She says, hesitant like she already knows something is wrong. "What's happened, honey?"

She takes a seat beside him, and rests a hand on his restless knee that keeps bobbing up and down. He can't look at her. If he looks at her he might cry, and if he cries she'll want to know everything - the whole story - and he can't bear to see that same disappointed look on her face, as he'd just seen on Ilya's.

Shane feels like he can't catch his breath. He's got pins and needles prickling in his finger tips, and his stomach is tying itself up in knots.

"Shane. Talk to me, please."

"I think I fucked up, mom."

"What do you mean?"

“I mean I-“

He doesn't even know what to say. How to say it. He can't explain it all without telling her that he's gay, and he isn't ready for that yet. Isn't ready for her to look at him differently all of a sudden.

He's spent his whole life working towards hockey, towards the NHL. His mom and dad have given everything to make sure he gets the best shot at it. And sure, things are a little different now - Scott Hunter came out and it was fine. But the few guys who came after him - the guys who weren't elite, Stanley Cup champions - all retired, or went playing in Europe, or faded into obscurity.

He can't tell his mom he's gay, and watch her dream of him making it to the NHL grow smaller in her eyes.

“I hurt Ilya. He's mad at me.” Shane's voice breaks, and he brings his hands up to cover his face.

“Oh, honey,” his mom sighs, as she wraps her arm around his shoulders. “That boy looks at you like you hung the moon. There's nothing you two can't fix.”

He hopes to god she's right.

Shane finds Ilya lifting weights in the garage.

His t-shirt is off, tossed to the side, and his short shorts ride up his thighs every time he squats to lift the bar. His curls are damp with sweat that beads at his temples, rolls down his face and neck, and pools in the hollows above his collar bones.

He looks beautiful. And furious.

Ilya finishes out his rep, then carefully racks the weights. There's no rush to his movements, if anything it feels like he's dragging them out - going slower to test Shane's patience. That's fine. He'll wait all day if he has to.

He's determined to fix this, whatever...*this* is.

Shane knows it's fucked up that he didn't say anything, that he didn't call Gil and Pat out on their shitty behaviour. And he knows he shouldn't have tried to minimise it by acting like it's normal, like using slurs like that is no big deal. No amount of self-preservation is worth that.

He just - he didn't expect Ilya to react quite so angrily.

“Can we talk?” Shane asks quietly.

Ilya shrugs in response.

“Ilya, please. I'm sorry.”

“Are you?”

“Of course I am. I should have said something.”

“Yes,” Ilya snaps. “You should have. But you didn’t.”

“I didn’t think it would bother you so much.”

Ilya, who’s been avoiding looking at Shane until that point, whips his head around to glare at Shane with a vitriol he’s never seen before.

“Oh, so because you think it doesn’t affect us, that means you just shouldn’t say anything? That it’s fine for them to hurt *others* with that word?”

“No.” He’s fucking it all up. “No, I didn’t mean it like that. I just-“

“I’m bi.”

“...what.”

“I’m bisexual, Shane.”

Say something, Shane thinks. Tell him you’re proud of him, that you love him. Tell him you’re gay. He’ll understand. He would have always understood. This is Ilya.

He stares at Ilya, opens his mouth, but he can’t get the words out. Can’t make himself brave enough to speak.

Ilya watches him, eyes wide and vulnerable and begging, *pleading* for Shane to say something - the *right* thing. Ilya waits and he waits, for longer than Shane probably deserves, but he still can’t get his mouth to move. Can’t spit out the words that are blocking the back of his throat, making it difficult to breathe.

Ilya’s face falls, and tears well in his eyes, and Shane watches as he walks away. He still can’t unstick his feet from the ground.

Ilya avoids him for the rest of the day.

Shane watches out of his bedroom window as Ilya leaves through the front door, meets the girl from the party at the end of the driveway, then disappears past where Shane can see.

He feels sick.

So guilty, and heartbroken, and furious with himself. Because in that moment, Ilya needed him. His best friend, who never asks for anything from Shane at all, needed his support. He needed Shane to get a fucking grip and tell him it was okay, hug him, prove that nothing was going to change.

Instead, Shane had stood there with his mouth gaping open, unable to say a goddamn fucking thing.

And now Ilya, the sweetest, kindest, best person that Shane has ever known, is out there thinking Shane doesn't support him. Thinking that thirteen years of friendship has been flushed down the drain, all because of who Ilya loves.

Shane doesn't eat dinner. He doesn't say a word to his mom or Irina. He just hides away in his room until the sun sets, and the sky goes dark, and he runs out of tears to cry.

It's hours before Ilya comes back home.

Shane is in bed, reading the same sentence for the fifteenth time because he can't get his mind to focus, when he hears the click of the front door.

He listens to the familiar sound of Ilya's footsteps, and the way he misses the seventh step on the staircase so it doesn't creak. And this time, as Ilya passes by Shane's door, he doesn't slow down. He doesn't stop. He just carries right on past without a single hesitation.

Shane gives Ilya enough time to brush his teeth and get into bed, and then he climbs out of his own. He follows Ilya's footsteps to his room, quietly knocks on his door in warning, and then pushes it open.

"Ilya," he whispers.

Ilya doesn't respond.

He's under his covers, turned away from the door, pretending to sleep. Shane knows that he's pretending because they've shared a room - shared a *bed* - enough times that he's memorised the pattern of Ilya's breathing when he's asleep. He knows the rhythm of Ilya's deep, slow breaths like the back of his hand, and right now they're too shallow, too rapid for him to be sleeping.

Shane closes the door, leans back against it, and tries not to cry all over again.

It feels like he's losing his grip on everything: the summer, Ilya, *himself*.

He thinks about going back to his room, crawling into his empty bed, and lying there with nothing but his thoughts for company, and he just can't do it. So he sneaks back down the hall in the other direction, and he sleeps into his mom's room instead.

She's still awake, the bedside lamp bathing the room in a pale yellow glow as she flicks through a file with a pen between her teeth. The second she hears the door, she glances up.

She takes one look at Shane's face, pulls the pen from between her teeth, and sighs.

"Oh, my boy."

His mom pulls back the covers and pats the empty space beside her. Shane feels like a little boy as he climbs in bed beside his mom - something he hasn't done in probably over a

decade.

“I made it worse,” Shane whispers, his voice raw from all the tears he’s shed.

“It’ll be okay,” she promises. “I know you, and I know Ilya. Whatever this is - whatever’s happened - you boys will find a way to figure this out.”

Shane’s not ready to talk about it. He wouldn’t know where to begin, even if he wanted to. So he leans his head on his mom’s shoulder like he used to do when he was still smaller than her, and he lets the sound of her pen scribbling on paper lull him to sleep.

He’ll fix it tomorrow. It’s a promise he makes to himself, and to Ilya.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

He's built so much of who he is around Shane, that now it feels like he is caving in on himself.

Ilya feels like he has been flayed open.

It's like all the skin and muscle and sinew has been peeled back from his chest, his ribs have been cracked open, and his heart is exposed for everyone to witness the way that it is aching.

His best friend has broken his heart.

He doesn't even know how to be in the same room as Shane, let alone look at him.

And the worst part of it all? The worst part is that Ilya *misses* him. It's like something has been stolen from him: a limb, a rib, his fucking soul. Ilya doesn't know who he is without Shane. They've been part of each other's lives since they were five, and sometimes Ilya isn't sure where he ends and Shane begins.

He's built so much of who he is around Shane, that now it feels like he is caving in on himself.

Ilya hadn't told Shane he was bi because he wasn't sure if he could say it yet, without accidentally confessing his feelings at the same time. There was nothing more to it than that. He hadn't once, not even in his worst nightmares, imagined that Shane wouldn't be okay with it. It had truly never even crossed his mind.

He doesn't know what to do with himself.

It feels like he is floating around, haunting the cottage like some kind of ghost. Mama and Yuna both know something is wrong; it would be hard for them to miss it, with the way Ilya leaves a room every time Shane walks into it. His mama has asked about it, but Ilya's throat got choked up and he couldn't find the words.

It's too hard to talk about. Too painful to even fully understand.

She's out of the cottage this morning. There's a yoga studio a thirty minute drive outside of town, and on Tuesdays she goes with Shane. She says it keeps her young, and Shane says it keeps him flexible for hockey.

Ilya's glad they're both out of the house for a few hours; he needs a break from his mama's worried looks, and Shane's incessant attempts to talk.

Whatever he wants to say, Ilya isn't ready to hear it yet.

It's been three days, and he can still see the look on Shane's face when Ilya had told him he was bi. He can see the shock, the disbelief, the fucking *panic*, and every time Ilya pictures that face in his mind, he feels his heart sink all over again.

God - what's going to happen about college? Can Ilya still go to McGill after this? It feels like everything is falling apart.

Ilya makes himself a coffee with two sugars and too much of Yuna's fancy vanilla creamer, then he takes it out onto the back porch and sits down.

It's an overcast morning, but the temperature and humidity is still high. His curls will be insane by the end of the day - he can practically feel them beginning to frizz, even as he sits here. Without a breeze the air feels stagnant and thick, like it's pressing against Ilya's skin. Suffocating him.

Ilya remembers learning about pathetic fallacy in high school; it feels scarily fitting right now.

He's sitting alone for maybe ten minutes, just watching the world slowly wake up around him. There are a couple of boats setting out for some early morning fishing; David took Shane and Ilya a couple of times when they were younger, and while it was fun enough, the hobby never really stuck for them.

At the memory, Ilya gets a pang of homesickness right in the middle of his chest. Not for any place, but for Shane.

He's surreptitiously wiping away a tear from the corner of his eye when he hears the patio door crack open behind him. He doesn't have to look to know who it is; mama and Shane are out, and David isn't due back at the cottage until this afternoon.

Yuna takes a seat on the Adirondack chair beside Ilya.

She doesn't say anything for a while. They sit in companionable silence, watching the boats on the lake and the birds swooping down for their breakfast, and Ilya tries to pretend he doesn't feel the question that's hovering in the air between them.

Finally, he feels Yuna turn to look at him.

"How did you sleep?" She asks.

Ilya hums noncommittally. "You?"

"Not bad."

The silence swallows them again. There's something she wants to say, something she wants to *ask*, but she can't quite bring herself to. Or maybe she doesn't know *how*.

This isn't something any of them have ever had to navigate before; Ilya and Shane have never been anything less than completely obsessed with each other. Sure they chirp each other, they disagree, they compete like every little thing is the Cup final, but they've never once argued with each other.

"Do you want to talk to me about what's going on with you and Shane?"

Ilya shrugs. "Hasn't he told you?"

Yuna sighs tiredly. "No. He won't tell me what happened."

"Well, it's not really up to me then."

As much as he is furious with Shane, and as much as he is *hurting*, Ilya still can't shake the instinct to protect Shane. He hasn't said anything to Irina or Yuna because he doesn't want them to be mad at him, too. He doesn't want Shane to feel like he has no one on his side, even when he *is* the one who's in the wrong.

"Ilya, sweetie, Shane slept in my bed a few nights ago because he was so heartbroken. And you're clearly devastated, as well."

Ilya squirms in his seat, and he can feel his brows furrowing as he frowns.

He hadn't known that. Hadn't known that Shane was so torn up by all of this that he slept in Yuna's bed. It makes Ilya want to fix things, because that's always what he's tried to do for Shane. But that isn't *fair*; it shouldn't be his job this time, not when Shane is the one who screwed up.

But, then again...Shane *has* been trying, hasn't he? He keeps trying to talk to Ilya, but Ilya is too *hurtangriscared* to listen.

"It's complicated."

"So is the CBA, and I handle that just fine."

Ilya snorts. It's true that Yuna is completely formidable. He and Shane have always said that if (*when*) they get drafted, they're both hiring Yuna as their agent.

"When we went into town the other day," Ilya begins, "we bumped into a couple of guys we know and they were talking about the party on the beach, and this guy, and - they used a slur. Like, a homophobic one."

Yuna frowns, but nods her head for Ilya to continue.

"I called them out on it, obviously, but Shane - he didn't say anything. So when I asked him why, he acted like it wasn't a big deal because we 'hear it in locker rooms all the time'."

She nods her head slowly, like she's trying to process. "I see."

“And I just - I didn’t get why he seemed fine with it? Like, that’s not who I thought he was? But then...”

Ilya hesitates for a moment, because this is always the scary part.

He’s come out to people before, and while he never doubted that those people would have his back, there’s still that rush of anxiety you get - still that fear as you open yourself up to someone, and hope they won’t turn their back on you.

“I came out to him,” Ilya confesses, “as bi. Bisexual.”

Yuna takes in a measured breath. “And...?”

“He just - he *stared* at me, Yuna. I told him this fucking *terrifying*, important thing about myself, and his face just went blank. He didn’t say a word to me. I waited, I gave him a chance, but he couldn’t even fucking *speak* to me.”

Ilya’s voice breaks, and tears well in his eyes again, and he furiously rubs them away. He doesn’t want to look weak - doesn’t want to *feel* it - but it’s like he’s coming unstitched at the seams. There is nothing to hold him together.

“What am I supposed to do with that, Yuna? He’s my best friend, and he - he...”

Ilya can’t finish the sentence, because even he’s not sure how it ends.

He’d thought Shane was disgusted with him, but would he be trying so hard to talk to Ilya if that was the case? Or maybe he wants to ask Ilya to leave. Maybe he wants to go back in time, pretend that Ilya never came out at all.

“Well for starters, thank you for sharing that with me. I’m so proud of you, Ilya, and I love you always, okay?” Yuna says, softly placing her hand on Ilya’s forearm.

“I love you, too,” he replies.

“Now for Shane - that doesn’t sound like my boy at all.”

“I know,” Ilya agrees. That’s the worst part.

Shane has always meant safety for Ilya. It feels unfair that that’s been taken from him now.

“I’m so sorry he made you feel that way, Ilya, I truly am. But - have you tried talking to him about it?”

“I don’t know how. What if he - god, Yuna, what if he hates me because of it?”

“Oh, honey,” she murmurs, and then she’s shuffling to the end of her seat and leaning over, so she can wrap her arms around Ilya. “He couldn’t possibly hate you. Never in a million years.”

“He might.”

“He won’t. You boys love each so much, and Shane is *not* a bigot. I’m not sure why he reacted the way he did, and I’m definitely not saying it’s okay, but I’m certain there’s more to it.”

“It’s scary,” Ilya whispers.

“It is,” Yuna agrees. “But the Ilya I know has always faced his fears.”

This feels different, though. Before, Ilya had stood up to his dad and his brother - both people he wasn’t afraid of losing, even back then.

But this is *Shane*. Ilya’s best friend, his favourite person. The one who Ilya calls at the end of a long day just to hear his voice, the one who texts Ilya late at night because he “had a weird feeling”, and it always happens to be right when Ilya needs him the most.

Ilya is more afraid of losing Shane than he’s ever been of anything.

“Does your mom know?” Yuna asks. “About you?”

“That I’m bi?”

Yuna nods her head and hums in confirmation.

“Yeah, she knows. Don’t worry, I’m not asking you to keep a secret from your best friend,” Ilya says with a grin.

Yuna smiles back, and rolls her eyes. But then she says, “I would for this. If you needed me to.”

And Ilya knows it’s true without a single doubt.

He loves Yuna so much, and she loves him right back. She’s the person who made his mama laugh again, and who gave her a soft place to land when the earth collapsed beneath her feet. Yuna is the person who cleaned Ilya’s knees, but a bandaid on, and then kissed them better when he fell while learning how to ride a bike.

Above all of that, Yuna is the woman who raised Shane. Ilya knows he is always safe with her because she has spent the last eighteen years raising the sweetest man Ilya has ever known.

“You should talk to Shane,” she says.

Yeah. He knows.

Shane’s bedroom is like a time capsule.

It’s filled with over a decades worth of memories that Shane has collected over the summers. He’s got a double bed now, the old wicker toy box in the corner is gone, and most of the

glow-in-the-dark stars have fallen from the ceiling, but everything else is basically the same.

He still has old Ottawa Centaurs posters stuck to the wall with drying blu-tack, the corners curling with age. He's even got the same light shade from when they were kids - the midnight blue one with holes poked in it in the shape of constellations, so the light can shine through.

As Ilya browses around the room, he feels overcome with emotion. It settles in the back of his throat, hard to swallow around.

Stuck next to the light switch by the door, there's a strip of four photographs from a photo booth.

They're probably fourteen. In the first one, they're both just smiling at the camera. In the second, Ilya has bunny ears behind his head courtesy of Shane's fingers. In the third, the bunny ears are still present, but Ilya is licking Shane's cheek in retaliation. And in the fourth, they're both half keeled over, laughing so hard the image is blurry.

It makes Ilya's jaw ache from trying not to smile.

He continues on through the quiet room, looking at the same slate-blue walls that Shane had when they were little, and the perfectly folded laundry in a pile on the end of Shane's bed, and the neat row of shoes Ilya can see through the half-open closet door.

On the dresser - the one with the creaky floorboard in front of it - there is a framed photograph of Shane and Ilya.

They were maybe nine years old at the time, standing on the dock and holding up the fish that David helped them catch. Ilya is looking at the camera and grinning with every one of his teeth on show. Shane, however, is looking at the fish with an expression of absolute disgust. It makes Ilya huff out a laugh.

There's a trinket dish next to the photograph. It's made of cracked clay, and painted atrociously, but it was a gift Ilya made for Shane in art class, so many years ago that he can scarcely remember it.

Inside the dish there's a gold chain Ilya is certain he's never seen Shane wear. There's a tiny little glass jar with a cork stopper holding sand inside, from the time Shane went to California for spring break with his parents.

And then there's a ring.

It's tiny, made of sparkly purple plastic, with a heart on the front.

Ilya has a matching one in pink.

Years ago, when they were still too young to stay at the cottage by themselves, mama and Yuna had dragged Ilya and Shane along with them to the grocery store twenty minutes outside of town. In the entrance to the store they had those little toy vending machines, where you put in a coin, turned a handle, and out popped a plastic capsule that had a toy inside.

On the way out of the store, as a treat for not complaining the whole way around, Ilya and Shane were both allowed one.

Ilya's capsule had a bouncy ball in it, that he'd lost in the lake ten minutes after making it back to the cottage. But Shane's...Shane's had two tiny plastic rings inside, one for each of them.

They'd worn them on their index fingers all summer, only taking them off to swim so they wouldn't get lost. When the time came to go their separate ways, they'd had promised - had sworn on their hockey teams' seasons - that they would keep them forever.

Ilya hid his in a box under his bed, so his father or brother wouldn't find it and throw it out. He's still got it now, in the drawer of his nightstand.

He hadn't realised Shane's had been here the whole time.

As Ilya turns around to lean back against the dresser, bowled over by the sudden weight in his chest, he notices something else. Sitting on top of the pillow Shane sleeps on, is a small hockey puck plush. Ilya had won it for Shane at the fair.

He can't quite believe all of the memories and all of the love that this bedroom holds. It's like a scrapbook.

Ilya used to think Shane had been designed just for him.

All of five years old, new to the continent and the language, and already noticing the way his mama flinched whenever his father moved too quickly, Shane had felt handcrafted by the universe as an apology for everything else.

They liked the same things, and laughed at the same things, and Shane was gentle in all the places Ilya was being taught to be rough. He would cry when he was sad, and yell when he was mad, and he wasn't ever punished for his feelings.

At the end of that first summer together, when they had to say goodbye, Shane and Ilya cried and cried and cried, until their noses were snotty and their cheeks were red, and their chubby little hands were clammy from how tight they were holding onto each other.

Ilya feels a little bit like that boy right now, trying desperately hard to hold onto something as it slips between his fingers.

He's so lost inside his head that he doesn't hear the creak of footsteps until it's too late. The door pushes open and Shane steps inside. He freezes for a moment, when he sees Ilya standing in his bedroom; his eyes go wide, and his mouth parts slightly, and his fingers tighten around the doorhandle.

They stare at each other for a second, before Shane steps fully into the room and closes the door behind him.

"Sorry," Ilya says. "I was just--"

“-I don’t mind. This room is as much yours as it is mine, really.”

Ilya offers him a half smile. “I guess that’s true.”

Shane doesn’t sit on his bed. He’s still sweaty from the yoga class he just took with Irina, so he leans back against the windowsill and faces Ilya.

They’re only on opposite sides of the room, but the distance feels impossible.

“Do you remember when you’d sneak in here every night?” Shane asks, and Ilya nods. “We would try so hard to be quiet, but you would laugh so much that I had to-“

“-cover my mouth with your hand,” Ilya finishes, grinning at the memory.

Ilya would lick Shane’s palm whenever he did that. At first Shane would balk at the gross gesture, snatching his hand back and wiping the saliva off on Ilya’s pyjamas, which only made Ilya laugh more.

It eventually ended up being such a common occurrence that Shane just became immune to it; he’d roll his eyes, call Ilya some variation of disgusting or gross or childish, but still refuse to move his hand away.

“I used to spend my whole year waiting to be back here...with you,” Shane says. “I still do.”

“Shane-“

“I miss you, Ilya,” he blurts out, “so fucking much.”

It makes Ilya’s heart thump erratically inside his chest, like it’s trying to break out and join Shane’s inside of his.

“I miss you, too,” Ilya admits. “But-“

“-I’m sorry,” Shane interrupts again. “I’m so, *so* sorry about what happened. About the way I reacted.”

His eyes are wide and glassy like he’s about to cry, and Ilya aches to go to him - to cross the chasm between them and fold Shane into his arms. To make it all better.

He grips the dresser behind him, instead. So hard that his knuckles turn white.

“If you have a problem-“

“-I don’t. Oh my god, Ilya, of course I don’t. I promise. I just - I panicked.”

Ilya tries to breathe around the fear in his lungs. “Why?”

Had all the nights they’d spent in the same bed flashed before Shane’s eyes, or all the times they had changed together? Did he think about that storm they got caught in a couple of years

back - the one that chilled and drenched them so thoroughly that they just jumped into the shower together?

Did he worry about how it would look, if he stayed friends with someone who was openly bisexual?

“Because I wanted so badly to say the right thing. I wanted to tell you how proud I was of you. That I - I love you, okay? No matter what. I wanted to say...”

Shane stops himself from finishing his sentence. He looks down at the floor like it's the most interesting thing he's ever seen - kicks the toe of his sneaker against a knot in the grain of the hardwood.

Ilya can see the tension in the lines of his body, the way he looks like a thread stretched so tightly that he's about to snap.

“You wanted to say...what?”

Shane takes a slow, deep breath, his chest and stomach and shoulders all rising with the force of it, then he looks back up. Right into Ilya's eyes. And he says-

“I'm gay.”

The words are unsteady, trembling as they leave Shane's mouth, like he's not yet familiar with the weight of saying them out loud.

Oh. *Oh my god.*

“*Shane.*”

“I'm not really ready to like, talk about it, yet,” Shane says. “But...yeah. I was just shocked when you told me, and I wanted so badly to tell you, but I - I couldn't get the words out.”

“Shane, I'm so sorry-“

“No, oh my god,” Shane says, his nose scrunching as he waves his hand dismissively. “*I'm* sorry. I made you feel like - like I had a problem with you. And when I didn't say anything to those fucking *idiots*-“

“Hey, no, it's okay,” Ilya rushes to soothe him. “I get it. I get it now.”

Shane looks up at Ilya through his damp lashes, eyes all big and beautiful and sad, and Ilya feels like dropping to his knees right there in the middle of the floor and thanking god for Shane.

“You do?” Shane asks.

“Yeah, Shane. Fuck, of course I do. It's so hard to call people out on that shit without feeling like you're gonna out yourself. I understand that. I'm so sorry for getting mad at you.”

Shane shakes his head. "You couldn't have known," he says.

But then his voice cracks, and the tears spill over and start rolling down his cheeks, and Ilya is completely helpless to stop himself from rushing across the room.

The moment he reaches Shane, he grabs onto him and folds him into an embrace.

He's almost six feet of solid muscle, but he melts into Ilya's arms like it's the only place he's ever wanted to be. His arms wind around Ilya's waist, and he burrows his face in Ilya's neck, and Shane somehow manages to make himself small as he clings to Ilya like he's the only thing keeping them both upright.

All the days of agony slip away. All the confusion, and the hurt, and the loneliness of missing someone who you're not even sure you're allowed to miss, just disappears as they hug each other.

"I'm so fucking proud of you," Ilya whispers. "God, Shane, you have no idea. You're so brave."

Shane snuffles and holds on even tighter, his damp face pressed tight against the skin of Ilya's throat. It's a miracle Shane can't feel the frantic thrumming of Ilya's pulse, or the thundering of his heartbeat.

Right now, Ilya is holding his entire world in his arms.

God, he loves Shane. He's Ilya's best friend and his favourite person.

Ilya likes him, and he loves him, and he's *in love* with him, too, and all of those truths are swirling around inside of Ilya like a tornado, just wreaking havoc on his heart.

He loves Shane so fucking much that, one day, Ilya is going to smile as Shane falls in love with someone else. He's going to stand in the sidelines and watch Shane get his happily-ever-after with a man who is so much better, so much less damaged, so much more deserving of Shane than Ilya could ever be.

And Ilya will be happy for him, because all he wants is what's best for Shane. Even if it breaks Ilya's heart.

"Thank you," Shane murmurs, his breath warm against the tear tracks he's left on Ilya's neck. "I missed you, Ilya."

"I missed you too."

"I don't ever want to fight like that again. It felt like I was dying."

"We won't," Ilya promises. "Never again."

They hold onto each other for a little while longer, because it's something they both need. Shane's laughter and his casual touches and his deadpan-jokes - they recharge Ilya, rejuvenate him. Without Shane, feels like half a person.

He's barely slept in days, but now that he can finally let himself relax, that exhaustion hits him suddenly. Ilya instantly feels the need to move, just to keep himself awake.

He pulls back, and steadfastly ignores the way Shane grips onto him even tighter for a second, before finally letting go.

"You wanna bake some cookies?" Ilya suggests.

All the ingredients have been sitting in the cupboard for days, because Ilya didn't want to make them alone.

Shane's face splits into a wide, honest grin. "Obviously," he says. "Can you just let me shower first? I'm all sweaty and gross."

"Sure. How was yoga?"

"Your mom is worried about us," Shane confesses, grimacing slightly.

Ilya snorts. "So is yours."

"Well, they're about to be pretty damn happy then, aren't they?"

Shane definitely spoke too soon.

The kitchen resembles a war zone. There's flour on the floor, and melted butter smeared on the worktops, and Ilya's pretty certain there are chocolate chips in the soil of the jasmine plant that sits on the windowsill behind the sink.

Ilya currently has Shane clinging onto his back like a spider monkey, arms and legs wound completely around him, as he tries to grab the mixing bowl from Ilya's outstretched hand.

"Ilya, no - give me--"

"-not a chance--"

"-it's *my*--"

"-you had the last--"

"-no, *you* had the last--"

A throat clearing makes them fall silent.

Ilya turns - Shane still wrapped around him like a backpack - to see David standing in the kitchen, his eyebrows touching his hairline as he takes in the disaster occurring in front of him. He's also holding his phone up in front of him, like he's just snapped a photo for possible future blackmail.

"Heyyyy dad," Shane greets him.

“Hi, David,” Ilya adds.

David’s mouth twitches as he tries his hardest not to laugh. Shane slides down Ilya’s back, comically slowly, and when his feet thud against the floor, David lets a slight chuckle slip out.

“Good to see you boys,” he says. Then, “Please clean this mess up before your mothers see it.”

An hour later, Irina and Yuna come back from their swim in the lake to a pristine kitchen and a freshly baked tray of chocolate chip cookies that are only *slightly* burned around the edges. Which was totally Shane’s fault, for the record.

They almost skid to a halt when they see Shane and Ilya sitting together in the living room, shoving each other playfully as they play a game of GTA on the PS5.

They don’t say a word, though.

Not as they head upstairs to shower, or as they sit down for dinner a little while later.

It’s clear they’re absolutely thrilled by Ilya and Shane’s reconciliation - they keep glancing at each other and smiling in a way that they definitely think is subtle - but it’s like they don’t want to risk mentioning it loud in case it ruins things.

Ilya understands.

However painful these last few days were for both him and Shane, they must have been equally as awful for their moms. They’ve watched for years as Ilya and Shane have grown to be as close as two people can be, and for them to suddenly not be speaking at all - for both of their boys to be in so much pain - must have been unbearable for them, too.

Shane kicks Ilya’s ankle under their table as Irina shoots them both another relieved glance, and Ilya has to choke down the laugh that wants to bubble out of him.

“Oh,” David says, “I forgot to mention before - I finally bought a new tent after you boys ripped the old one last year.”

“That was Ilya’s fault!” Shane whines.

“It was *not*, you little liar,” Ilya argues, making Shane grin smugly.

“Well, there’s a new one now. You can test it out tomorrow, if you’d like,” David offers.

Shane and Ilya glance at each other, then when they look back to the table they find their moms almost leaning forward, waiting with bated breath for their response.

“Yeah, sure. Sounds good, dad. Thanks,” Shane says, casually.

The look Irina and Yuna share is decidedly *not* casual.

Ilya isn't exactly a huge fan of camping - Shane always teases him for being a "*city boy*" - but he knows how much Shane loves it. And there are few things better than lying beside Shane, looking up at the stars, listening to him detail all the different constellations.

So. He's more than happy to go along. He'll do anything as long as it makes Shane smile.

Mama, Yuna, and David are all sprawled out across the couch, their own individual blankets tucked over their legs, and a bowl of popcorn on Yuna's lap for all of them to share.

Ilya is curled up on the loveseat with Shane at his side, so close that their shoulders, hips, thighs, and ankles are all touching. The blanket they're sharing is a big, pink, fluffy thing, tucked around their legs like a giant sleeping bag. And Shane has an arm curled around the plate of cookies that they baked earlier.

It's A Wonderful Life is just starting to play on the TV.

Of course it's summer, and they're still five months out from Christmas, but it's kind of become a running tradition for them at this point.

They don't get to spend Christmas together. In fact, they've *never* spent Christmas together. Ilya and mama are in Boston for the holiday, while the Hollander's are at home in Ottawa, or, on rarer occasions, at the cottage. Ilya and Shane always facetime each other, always keep each other up to date on what they're doing, and where they're going, and if they've got all their presents bought and wrapped yet, but it's not the same as actually being together.

So, years ago they compromised with this: Christmas movies at the cottage.

They'll occasionally watch something different if someone makes a particularly good case for it, but *It's A Wonderful Life* is everyone's favourite - apart from Elf, of course, but that movie has a habit of getting Ilya far too excited - so it's usually their go-to.

"I want to spend a Christmas with you, someday," Shane whispers to Ilya.

Ilya turns his head and finds Shane already looking at him. "Yeah," Ilya agrees. "Me too."

"Who knows, maybe we'll get drafted to the same team," Shane suggests.

"I'm cooking the turkey, though," Ilya insists. "I'm not letting you burn anything else."

"Okay, well that was actually your--"

"Boys!" Irina hisses. "Zip it."

Ilya and Shane's eyes widen, and - in sync - they both raise their hands and mime zipping their mouths closed.

"And stop tapping your foot, David," Yuna gripes.

Ilya has to look away from Shane so he doesn't burst out laughing and get them in trouble again, but beneath the blanket Shane presses their thighs closer together.

Silence settles over the cottage as they all quickly become engrossed in the movie. Ilya doesn't even glance away from the screen until Shane's hand, with a cookie clutched between his fingers, starts hovering in front of Ilya's face. Without hesitating, Ilya leans forward to take a bite.

"Mmm, it's good," he acknowledges, leaning in close to murmur in Shane's ear.

"We make a good team."

"We sure do," Ilya agrees.

He can just picture it now: Ilya and Shane in the apartment they share together, decorating the tree, and playing Christmas music, and baking gingerbread. They'd hang fairy lights in the window and stockings above the fireplace, and the whole place would smell like cinnamon and pine.

(He tries his best not to imagine kissing beneath the mistletoe.)

It sounds like something out of a hallmark movie his mama would cry at, and Ilya wants it so bad he can almost smell it.

Maybe once they're both at McGill - if Ilya ever finds the right time to tell Shane - they'll get to have something similar. A Christmas together, just like they have wanted since they were little kids. Maybe they'll come to the cottage since they'll be close by, and David and Yuna and mama can join them.

By the time the credits roll on the movie, Ilya has tears rolling down his cheeks, mama and Yuna are both sniffing, and David's eyes look suspiciously watery from where Ilya sitting.

Shane, however, is sleeping on Ilya's shoulder.

His eyes started to droop halfway through the movie, and when Ilya felt his head drop onto him he simply didn't have the heart to wake him up. He glances down at Shane, careful not to jolt him away, and takes note of the shadows his lashes cast over his freckled cheeks. He looks so precious in sleep, like all the stress leaves his body and he gets to be completely worry-free for a few hours.

It makes Ilya want to tuck the blanket up around his chin and keep him safe and warm.

"Ilya--"

"Shh," he whispers, "Shane is sleeping."

Yuna looks over at them, at her boy, and smiles sweetly.

"We're gonna head to bed, do you want to..."

“I’ve got him,” Ilya promises.

Mama kisses Ilya on his cheek and Shane lightly on his head, then whispers, “Goodnight, my love,” as she heads off to bed.

Yuna does the same, pressing a kiss to Ilya’s curls and Shane’s forehead, before disappearing up the stairs with David following behind her, waving over his shoulder as Ilya as he goes.

And then they’re alone.

He knows it’s late, and if they’re going camping tomorrow then Shane will absolutely want to get an early workout in before they leave, but Ilya can’t quite bring himself to wake Shane up yet. He isn’t ready for this moment to end.

He has missed Shane so much, that it feels like his body is making up for lost time by being this close to him.

He’d live in this moment forever, if he could. Shane sleeping soundly on Ilya’s shoulder, both of them safe and warm in their favourite place in the whole world. He doesn’t want to wake Shane up and have him pull away, doesn’t want to trudge upstairs only for them to go to separate bedrooms and separate beds.

Ilya could just close his eyes and let himself drift off, and in the morning pretend it was an accident.

But Shane’s neck will ache if he sleeps for much longer like this, and Ilya doesn’t want to be the cause of it. So he takes one last look, one last moment - snaps a selfie of them together, just for good measure - then he whispers Shane’s name. When he doesn’t move, doesn’t even flinch, Ilya slowly raises his hand and begins to stroke Shane’s cheek with the back of his finger.

“Shane. Shane, wake up. It’s time to go to bed.”

Shane twitches and mumbles incoherently for a second, then his eyes flicker open and lock on Ilya. He smiles sweetly, leaning into Ilya’s hand on his cheek, before he realises what he’s doing and pulls away.

“Time is it?” He slurs.

“Late. Come on, let’s get you to bed.”

“Kay,” Shane whispers. He briefly drops his head back onto Ilya’s shoulder. “Thanks, Ilya.”

“For what?”

“Being my best friend.”

Ilya wants to say: *I’d be anything for you, I’d do anything for you. I’d give you whatever you asked for.*

Instead, he replies, “Thank you for being mine.”

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

“Shane, I swear to god, if there ends up being a spider like that one last year-“

“I’ll protect you, you big baby,” Shane laughs.

Chapter Notes

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

They set off not long after lunch, and they’re hiking for around an hour before they reach the clearing in the woods that Shane’s dad first brought them to years ago.

Back then, when they were just kids, it had felt like an entire world away from the cottage. It had seemed like such a big adventure to go camping so far into the woods, when Shane had only ever done it in their back garden before. He had felt like a real survivalist, meanwhile Ilya had acted like he’d been abandoned in the middle of the Amazon rainforest.

“This is a good spot,” Shane says, kicking at the ground to test it out.

“If you say so, Bear Grylls,” Ilya teases him.

It makes Shane flush, so he flips Ilya off and says, “Fuck off. Do *you* wanna pitch the tent?”

Ilya gasps in horror. “Oh, so you hate me?”

Shane rolls his eyes, but he has to turn away to hide the smile that he can’t stop from tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Ilya is such a city boy it’s actually unreal. Despite his muscles, and his height, and his occasionally macho exterior, Ilya is an absolute softy. Shane knows Ilya only agrees to come camping out here because Shane loves it.

He appreciates that more than he can find the words for...so he just lovingly bullies Ilya, instead.

“Shane, I swear to god, if there ends up being a spider like that one last year-“

“I’ll protect you, you big baby,” Shane laughs.

Last year they were *just* about to turn the flashlight off before going to bed, when - okay, fine, Shane can admit it - the biggest spider either of them have ever seen started crawling along the inside of their tent.

Ilya screamed so loud Shane was genuinely concerned someone would hear it and call the cops, meanwhile Shane just scooped up the spider and tossed it outside. It left Ilya so traumatised he stayed awake the entire night, and it left Shane with so much ammunition to use against him that it made the whole ordeal worthwhile.

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this again,” Ilya huffs, but he’s smiling as he says it.

As Shane gets to work pitching their new tent, Ilya settles on the stump of an old, felled tree, and simply watches.

Occasionally, he’ll throw out some shockingly unhelpful advice - “That doesn’t go there.” “Yes it does, Ilya.” - but he mostly just sits in silence, head tilted up towards the sun even though Shane *knows* Ilya didn’t put sunscreen on after his post-workout shower earlier.

It’s nice, though. Peaceful.

Ever since they were small, they’ve been good at just...*existing* together.

They don’t always feel the need to fill a perfectly good silence. It’s not like they need words to communicate, anyway. Shane catches Ilya staring at him and sees the *I’m so happy* in his eyes, without Ilya ever having to open his mouth and say it.

It doesn’t take long for Shane to get the tent pitched, and their sleeping mats and bags set up inside. They’d brought an air mattress once, but something managed to pop it and it ended up deflating overnight, so they hadn’t bothered with one since.

“All done,” Shane says with a huff, as he rests his hands on his hips.

Ilya giggles. “That’s the ultimate dad-pose right there,” he says, then lifts his phone up to snap a picture.

Shane sticks his tongue out. “You’re such a loser,” he says, but he doesn’t mind really.

They both have albums on their phone filled with hundreds upon hundreds of photographs from their summers together. Selfies by the lake, and at parties, and in town, or ones they’ve managed to snap of each other in secret, eating food or pulling strange faces or sleeping in the sun.

Shane isn’t sure about Ilya, but sometimes - when he’s having an especially rough day - he’ll flick through the album to make himself feel better. Seeing Ilya’s face has a 100% success rate, which is cheesy and embarrassing and maybe a little obsessive, but Shane just can’t help himself.

It’s kind of baffling, honestly, that it took him until last year to realise his feelings for Ilya are so far past friendly they’ve entered a different area code.

Shane looks back to real-Ilya, instead of thinking about photo-Ilya, and his breath catches in his lungs at the sight in front of him.

Ilya has pulled his tank top off and tucked it in the back of his waistband. He's bending over the tree stump, rooting through the backpack he brought with him, and his tongue is peeking out between his lips in concentration. As the sunlight filters through the trees it catches on Ilya's hair and makes his curls look especially golden, and his back muscles pull taut with every move that he makes.

He's so beautiful Shane can hardly stand it. He can't believe he gets the privilege of seeing Ilya up close like this.

When Ilya turns his head and catches Shane watching him, he just grins lazily, like he doesn't have a care in the world.

"We should put the picnic blanket in front of the tent," Shane suggests, searching for anything to pull his mind away from Ilya's smile.

"Good idea. And look," Ilya says, as he pulls a deck of cards out of his backpack, "I can finally teach you poker."

"Oh god, no," Shane whines, but his protests are completely futile.

Within ten minutes they're sitting on the picnic blanket with their shoes off, and Ilya is shuffling the deck of cards. He insists, repeatedly and earnestly, that it's super easy once you've got the hang of it, and that he's such a good teacher. Shane is in *great* hands.

Ilya, however, has both *underestimated* Shane's hatred of board and/or card games, and *overestimated* his own teaching skills.

They both give up expeditiously.

"Okay, so poker isn't for everyone," Ilya remarks.

"I told you."

"Well tell me something else, then," Ilya requests, as he leans back on his hands.

"Like what?"

"Like anything. We've been apart for ten whole months, Shane."

And back together for four weeks, which still doesn't feel like enough time.

"I already tell you everything, though," Shane says.

Well - not everything. Not quite.

Beyond their conversation in Shane's room yesterday afternoon, neither of them have mentioned the whole...*gay* thing. Shane very much gets the impression that Ilya *wants* to talk more about it, but he's following Shane's lead and steering clear of the topic for now.

It's not that Shane *doesn't* want to talk to Ilya about it - he's his best friend, for god's sake, of course he does.

The moment it had clicked for Shane, the moment he realised he was gay, his very first thought was, *oh my god, I have to tell Ilya*. But then it was quickly overshadowed by his second, much louder thought of, *oh my god, Ilya can never know*.

Because, for Shane, being gay is directly tied to being in love with Ilya.

He doesn't know how to talk about one without talking about the other - not when Ilya is the reason Shane realised in the first place. And that's simply not something Shane can ever mention.

Ilya being bi - which still kind of blows Shane's mind a little, honestly - doesn't automatically mean Ilya would be okay with Shane having feelings for him. And it *certainly* doesn't mean that Ilya would ever reciprocate.

So...it's just best that Ilya never finds out.

"Come on," Ilya moans, nudging Shane's hip with his foot, "there must be something you haven't already told me."

Shane pauses for a moment to think. "Okay, fine. You remember that guy I told you about..."

They talk, and talk, and talk, seamlessly switching from one topic to the next. They talk about hockey, and their teams, and their friends.

Ilya complains about the nightmare customers from the part-time job he suffered through for three months, before quitting on the spot after a grown man threw a drink on the floor while having a tantrum. Shane bitches about his - thankfully former - history teacher, who he has a personal, long-standing grievance with.

They talk about anything and everything, except the elephant in the room.

"...so anyway, he's going to Carleton now, instead of U of T."

Ilya gives him a disbelieving look. "He's eighteen years old and following his girlfriend of *six months* to her dream school?"

"Hey, Jackie is great," Shane laughs.

"Oh, it's not Jackie I'm doubting. Is Pike *insane*? One too many concussions, maybe?"

"Hey, don't be mean about Hayden," Shane says, even though he kind of - secretly - agrees with Ilya. "You don't even know him."

Ilya raises his eyebrows in that infuriatingly sexy way of his, and Shane has to slip his hands under his thighs to make sure he keeps them to himself.

“He’s from Manitoba...what else is there to know about him?” Ilya asks, sarcasm dripping from his every word.

Shane snorts, and the laughter he’d been working so hard to hold back comes flooding out of him.

He tries to kick Ilya, but Ilya just grabs hold of Shane’s ankle and starts to tickle the sole of his foot. Even through his socks it’s unbearable, and Shane screeches like a banshee, writhing and kicking until he accidentally-on-purpose catches Ilya in the ribs, and he lets go of Shane with a yelp.

“You’ve killed me, Hollander. I am dead,” Ilya pants, flopping down onto his back.

Shane joins him, shimmying down the picnic blanket until he can lie back, close enough to Ilya that their pinkies touch.

Neither of them bother to pull away.

Shane looks up at the canopy of trees above them - the way parts of them lean together, their leaves rustling like they’re whispering secrets to each other. Between their branches he can see patches of the clear, blue sky, and it seems so endless that it makes Shane feel small in the best kind of way.

Shane becomes abruptly aware that this is the kind of moment he’s going to look back so fondly on, when he and Ilya are apart again.

Desperately wanting to hold onto it, he slips his phone out of his pocket and opens the camera. He holds it above them, and when Ilya realises what Shane is doing he tilts his head closer so his curls tickle Shane’s cheek, and he grins wide. “Smile,” Ilya whispers, and Shane is helpless to obey.

He snaps a couple of pictures, then drops his phone down onto the blanket.

He wishes they could stay here forever.

“Hey, look,” Ilya says softly. He holds up his arm, where a ladybug has landed on him. “Shane, it’s you!”

Shane chuckles. “Ilya, what-“

“You have matching freckles,” Ilya explains, and he looks so excited about it that Shane wants to cry a little.

God, he’s so in love with him.

Later, after they’ve eaten the unreasonably large sandwiches that Ilya packed for their dinner, they lie back down on the picnic blanket.

As the sun goes down the moon and the stars slowly begin to make an appearance, blinking into existence in small pockets of light against the blue-black ink of the night sky. It's almost a full moon, and the bright, silvery light of it bathes their little clearing in an almost unearthly glow.

Shane turns his head to look at Ilya. He takes in the serene expression on his face, the way he's blinking slowly and smiling softly as he looks up at the sky. The moonlight shining through the trees casts shadows over Ilya's face, and it makes it look like he's underwater.

Shane looks back to the sky and shivers. It gets cool quickly out here, once the sun goes down, but it's not just the temperature. It's...everything.

It's the moonlight, and the beautiful boy lying next to him, and the reminder of all the things Shane wants, but can never have.

"Are you cold?" Ilya asks, his voice quiet almost like he's afraid to disturb the peace.

"A little," Shane admits. "I'm fine, though."

Ilya tuts. "Come here," he says, then he's shuffling closer to Shane and wriggling his arm beneath Shane's neck.

For once, Shane lets himself be selfish. He wants to let himself have this.

So he rolls onto his side and rests his head on Ilya's shoulder, settling against the heat of him as Ilya rubs Shane's arm to try and warm him up.

It's not like they've never done anything like this before. More than once, when Ilya would sneak into Shane's room when they were kids, Shane would pull his sniffling best friend into his arms, and they'd fall asleep curled up together.

It's different now, of course, given that Shane is in love with him - it feels a little like he's taking something that Ilya isn't offering - but he just can't help himself.

He's not strong enough to deny himself this.

"I told you, you should have let me bring that other blanket."

Shane snorts. "Don't start."

"I'm just saying--"

"You wanted to bring my mom's favourite blanket into the woods!"

"Shhhh," Ilya whispers, as if he isn't the instigator in all of this. Shane can hear the grin he's wearing when he says, "Don't ruin the moment."

Shane playfully slaps Ilya's stomach, but he does as he's told and keeps quiet.

Ilya's right about not ruining the moment, because this is about as perfect as summer can get and he'll miss this when it's over. He'll miss the ease of these summer weeks, where he doesn't have to be anything for anyone - where he only has to be himself, and that is always good enough.

When even Ilya starts to shiver a little with the cool temperature, they quickly make their way inside the tent.

Ilya makes Shane go in first, forcing him to check every nook and cranny in the tent for bugs. When he promises that the coast is clear, Ilya climbs in after Shane with a wary expression on his face, like he's not 100% convinced that Shane isn't trying to trick him.

There's not much room inside - it's only a two-man tent, after all - so it's a tight fit as they both change into sweat pants and long-sleeved tees to sleep in. But once they're dressed and settled in their sleeping bags, with a little battery powered lantern lighting up the tent enough for them to see each other's faces, it just feels cozy.

Shane can't help the loud yawn that slips out.

Ilya giggles. "Tired?"

"A little. You?"

"Hm. A little."

There's something tugging at Shane's chest, a question he's been itching to ask but too afraid of the answer to do it. But here, in the faded light of the tent, it doesn't feel so scary.

"Ilya?" He whispers.

"Yeah?" Ilya whispers back.

"Do you know how you're, well..."

"Bi?" Ilya fills in for him.

"Yes, that. And-"

"And you are super gay."

"Yeah - wait! I'm *regular* gay," Shane argues, and Ilya laughs. "But...yeah. How did you - I mean, have you ever-"

"Been with a guy?" Ilya says, and Shane is grateful because he's not sure he would have ever gotten the words out.

He nods, and Ilya must see the motion because he hums in confirmation.

"Yes."

“Oh.”

Shane has no right to feel jealous, but it burns hot and acrid in his stomach anyway. Inside his sleeping bag, he clenches his hands into fists.

It's fucking ridiculous. Ilya doesn't *belong* to Shane - not like *that*, anyway - but he hates that someone knows Ilya in a way he doesn't. He hates that there might be someone out there who is closer to Ilya than he is, and someone that Ilya is closer to than Shane.

He has to take a breath to steady himself.

“Uh, I mean, who?” He asks, and tries not to let the bitterness seep into his voice.

“Sasha,” Ilya replies easily.

Shane frowns. “He's Svetlana's friend, right? The one you've *also* hooked up with?”

He truly doesn't mean to, but there's definitely a hint of judgement in his voice. Thankfully, Ilya chuckles quietly.

“Svetlana is my friend,” he says with a shrug. “We were each other's firsts because we trusted each other.”

“Well, what about the girl then? From the party the other week?”

“Laila?”

Shane had mostly just been thinking of her as *The Girl* in his head, for his own sanity. But now she has a name and Ilya is saying it out loud, and that makes her more real. It's pathetic, he knows, but it kind of makes Shane hate her even more.

He nods anyway.

“No, no, nothing happened with her!” Ilya laughs. “She's nice, we hung out, but no. Not anything like that. Plus, she's a lesbian.”

“Oh. Okay.” That's one less person for Shane to be jealous of, at least. “So - you and Sasha...”

“Also no,” Ilya says. “I mean, we fooled around, sure. But there's definitely no, like, feelings, or anything.”

Shane has to bite his lip so he doesn't say *good*.

He wonders what it's like, with a guy. Shane messed around with Rose a little, back when they tried the whole dating thing out, but neither of them were really into it. It was fine, or whatever, but not exactly the fireworks either of them had been hoping for. (They kind of just mutually pretend that whole thing never happened, and have managed to remain great friends).

Does it feel different with a guy, though? They're broader, and stronger, and more angular. Are guys rougher with each other? Not always, obviously, but. Shane wonders what it would be like to feel small - what it would be like to get manhandled a little, like when Ilya-

Nope.

He stops that train of thought instantly. He can't go there. He can't get hard thinking about his best friend, while lying in a tent right next to him.

"What about you?"

"Hm?" Shane is startled out of his forbidden thoughts.

"Have you ever been with a guy?" Ilya asks, but he refuses to look at Shane as he does so.

Shane isn't ashamed of his inexperience. He's only known he's gay for a year, and in that year he's spent too much time spiralling over his sexuality and the Ilya of it all to really consider actually doing anything with anyone.

Plus, it's reckless.

If Shane is going to end up out of the closet - if he's going to risk his chances of being drafted - it would need to be for someone special, someone who is going to stay. Not some random guy he hooked up with just for the sake of getting it over with.

"No," he answers. "I haven't."

"Oh," Ilya whispers.

He sits up a little, leaning on his elbow so he can look down at Shane. It feels like he's being observed, like Ilya is trying to get a read on him about something, but Shane just doesn't know what. It's terrifying, though, because Ilya knows him better than anyone; Shane is basically an open book for him.

He looks back at Ilya, and he waits.

"You like someone," Ilya states.

Shane flinches. "What? No!"

But he can already feel his cheeks beginning to heat, and he knows they're turning red because Ilya's face slowly stretches into a wide, devious smirk.

"Oh my god, you *do*!"

"Ilya, no--"

"Tell me."

"I don't--"

“Shane, I’m your best friend,” Ilya pouts. “You can’t keep this from me.”

“There’s nothing to keep,” Shane insists.

“Tell me.”

“No.”

Ilya leans over Shane and pokes his shoulder. “Tell me.”

“Get off,” Shane hisses, trying to knock Ilya’s hand away, but he just presses it flat to Shane’s chest instead.

“Come on, tell me-“

“Ilya.”

“Please-“

Shane surges up and kisses him.

He doesn’t know what comes over him, doesn’t know what makes him do it. But Ilya is so close, hovering above him and grinning and touching Shane, and he feels suddenly, impossibly reckless.

He’s kissing Ilya, he’s kissing Ilya, he’s-

Oh my fucking god.

Shane pulls back instantly, like he’s just been burned. His entire body jolts away from Ilya, and he slaps his hand over his mouth in shock. For a moment Ilya just stares back at him, his eyes wide and glazed, and his mouth still parted, lips slick from Shane’s kiss.

What did he just do?

Did he just ruin everything?

“I’m sorry,” Shane whispers. “Oh my god, I’m so sorry.”

“Shane-“ Ilya begins.

But Shane is already trying to scramble out of his sleeping bag. To go where, he’s not sure - he couldn’t make it all the way home in the dark like this - but he can’t just *stay* here. Not after that. After kissing Ilya so abruptly, without even giving him the chance to say no.

He’s fighting with the zip on his sleeping bag when Ilya’s steady hands cup Shane’s trembling ones.

“Shane, stop. It’s okay.”

“It’s not,” Shane whispers, unable to even look at his best friend.

“Look at me,” Ilya pleads, but Shane can’t.

If he doesn’t see anger on Ilya’s face, it will be pity. His brows will furrow and his mouth will twitch as he tries to think of a polite way to let Shane down. He couldn’t bear that.

He’s spiralling. His heart is beating too fast and his palms are starting to sweat, when a hand comes up to Shane’s face. Ilya takes hold of his chin, and gently tilts Shane’s head up until he can’t avoid the eye contact. Until he’s staring right into the *bluegreenbrown* of Ilya’s eyes.

“There you are,” Ilya whispers.

And then he leans in, and he kisses Shane.

It’s different from the first one. Soft, and sweet, and so unbearably tender that Shane feels tears welling in his eyes.

Ilya’s hand moves from Shane’s chin to the side of his face, fingers scratching the hair behind his ears as his other hand settles just above Shane’s waist, on his ribs. Shane doesn’t know where to put his own hands, settling for wherever he can reach - one on Ilya’s shoulder, the other grasping at his thigh.

Shane feels...weightless.

The whole moment seems so impossible, so surreal, and yet he still knows it isn’t a dream; even in his wildest dreams, kissing Ilya never felt *this* good.

Shane feels Ilya smile into the kiss, and when he starts to move away Shane can’t help but chase him. He doesn’t want it to end. Ilya laughs softly, graciously kisses Shane once, twice, three more times, before finally pulling away.

Ilya doesn’t go far, though. He presses their foreheads together and nudges his nose against Shane’s. Shane can feel a puff of Ilya’s breath when he chuckles.

When they finally separate enough to look each other in the eye, Ilya smiles, and whispers, “Hi.”

“*Hi*,” Shane breathes. “You kissed me.”

“Yeah,” Ilya says. “You kissed me first.”

Shane giggles. Like, actually giggles. He *kissed* Ilya, and - unbelievably - Ilya *kissed him back*.

He doesn’t know what’s going on, doesn’t know what any of this means, but he feels fizzy inside, like a soda can that’s been shaken and ready to explode. Or like there are poprocks crackling in his bloodstream.

Shane feels overwhelmed - completely overcome. There’s not enough space inside his chest for all the things that he is feeling.

Ilya brushes his thumb along Shane's kiss-swollen bottom lip. "You taste like ginger ale."

Shane flushes, looking down at where he's tying his fingers into knots. "Sorry."

"No, no," Ilya says, shaking his head. "I like it...I like *you*, Shane."

His head shoots back up, and he instantly notices the expression on Ilya's face: nervous, and afraid, and so fucking sincere.

Shane's heart is going to beat out of his chest.

"I like you too."

"Really?"

Shane laughs in disbelief, and playfully shoves Ilya's shoulder. "Yes, *really*. Why do you think I kissed you, you idiot?"

"To shut me up?" Ilya suggests with a lopsided grin.

Shane shakes his head. He never wants Ilya to shut up; he could listen to him talking all day and never get bored of it.

It's Shane's turn to touch Ilya's face. He starts with his chin, and then his lips, and then slides his fingers along Ilya's jaw, up to the soft skin beneath his eyes, and eventually threads his fingers into Ilya's curls. He shudders, and Shane smiles, completely in awe of the way his touch is affecting Ilya.

"You've been driving me mad all summer," Shane confesses.

Ilya's eyebrows shoot up as he asks, "What? Why?"

"Because you never wear a shirt, Ilya! And because you look like...that." Shane waves his free hand in front of Ilya's chest, and Ilya lets out a loud bark of laughter.

"Yeah, well you're just as bad!"

"Me? *How*?"

"Your freckles, all over your cheeks and your shoulders! How am I supposed to control myself around that? And when did you gain all this muscle?" Ilya asks, his hand coming up to squeeze Shane's bicep. "It's not fair."

Ilya is teasing, and Shane laughs and rolls his eyes, but he can hear the truth in it.

Shane can see it in the way Ilya's eyes keep flickering to his freckles as he talks. He's been doing that all summer, actually, and he's been touching Shane more, too. Casually little shoulder bumps, or a hand on his back, or their knees pressed together.

Shane had thought it was accidental, but. All of that was because...because Ilya *likes* him.

“You like me,” Shane says.

“Yes,” Ilya replies immediately, like it’s the easiest, truest thing he has ever said.

“Oh my god, Ilya, you have a *crush* on me!”

Ilya scoffs. “Fuck you! *You* have a crush on *me!*”

“That’s so embarrassing-” Shane starts to taunt him.

But before he can even get the words out of his mouth, Ilya is kissing him again.

It’s more insistent this time, Ilya’s lips parting to lick at Shane’s - to slip inside when Shane gasps for breath. One of Ilya’s hands cradles the back of Shane’s head as he lowers them down to the door, and then Ilya is straddling him. His knees are on either side of Shane’s hips, and his hands are holding his weight up on either side of Shane’s head.

He feels completely enclosed - blanketed by Ilya, and his scent, and his mouth, and his touch.

He’s such a good kisser that Shane instantly feels breathless.

Ilya takes and gives in equal measure, slow but certain as he explores Shane’s mouth. And Shane is helpless to do anything but whine, and grab at whatever of Ilya he can reach. He lets himself be kissed within an inch of his life, and just tries his best to keep up.

Shane’s hands slip beneath Ilya’s tee, sliding along the ridges of his stomach. He can feel the way Ilya sucks in a breath at Shane’s touch on his skin, and it makes him feel powerful.

Makes him want more, more, *more*.

Shane is hard, and he can feel that Ilya is too, pressing thick and heavy against Shane’s thigh in a way that makes him squirm and buck his hips.

But just as he wonders where this is going - how far they’re going to take it - Ilya’s kiss slows. He sucks on Shane’s tongue one last time, then starts to pull away. Ilya kisses the corner of Shane’s mouth, the tip of his nose, the freckles scattered across his cheeks, and then - with a regretful sigh - he rolls off Shane.

Shane, feeling cracked open and emotionally wrecked - in the very best way - whines.

He makes a grab for Ilya; he doesn’t want him to leave. Ilya laughs softly, teasing but not unkind. Instead of moving completely away from Shane, Ilya pulls him into his chest instead. They arrange themselves like they had done outside while they were stargazing. Ilya wraps his arm around Shane, and Shane rests head on Ilya’s shoulder, tilted so he can look up at him.

“You okay?” Ilya asks.

“You stopped kissing me.” Shane pouts.

“It’s late. And this is-“ Shane freezes, expecting the worst, but then Ilya continues: “- important to me. *You’re* important to me, Shane. I don’t want to rush this. Not when...”

“When it’s my first time?”

“Yeah.”

It’s so fucking sweet and thoughtful - so fucking *Ilya* - that Shane has to bury his face in Ilya’s neck and just take a second to breathe. He kisses the mole on the side of Ilya’s throat, and feels Ilya’s pulse stutter.

“But you do - you want me, right?”

“Yes, Shane. Of course. More than anything.”

Shane bites his lip. He doesn’t want to ask the next question because he’s terrified of the answer. But that is exactly why he *needs* to ask it.

“For like, a one time thing? Or?”

Ilya makes a choking sound in the back of his throat. He gently shoves at Shane’s shoulder, pushing him backwards so Ilya can hold Shane’s face in his hand and look him in the eyes as he says:

“For *always*. This is - it isn’t new for me, Shane. I’ve wanted you for, well, a while now. I won’t do this halfway with you. I *can’t*.”

Shane’s heart feels warm and fuzzy, and he feels a little bit like crying. The battery on their lantern is starting to run out, but it’s just light enough to see the look in Ilya’s eyes - the fierceness he gets when he wants something and is determined to get it.

Except tonight, the thing Ilya wants is Shane.

“Me too,” Shane confesses. “I mean, it’s not new. I want this.”

“Good, we’re on the same page then.”

Shane nods, then bites the inside of his cheek. Shane is good at following rules. Like, famously good at it. He likes things to be clear and precise, and perfectly spelled out so there’s no possible room for misunderstanding. He stills follows the instructions on the side of his tub of protein powder, for god’s sake.

“Right. Yeah. And that page is...?” Shane asks, just for the sake of clarity.

“Boyfriends?”

Shane can’t hold back the giddy little squeak that slips from between his lips. It should be completely humiliating, but Ilya’s face lights up in the most beautiful smile, and his pupils dilate so wide they almost swallow his irises.

“Yes,” Shane pants, breathless even though they aren’t doing anything. “Yes, boyfriends.”

Ilya kisses him again. Close-mouthed but intense, like they’re sealing a deal.

At some point the lantern dies and the tent goes completely dark, but they don’t let go of each other. Outside a loon calls, and Ilya flinches. They both laugh, and kiss, and whisper until their eyes droop closed, sleep finally claiming them only when they can’t fight it for a single second longer.

Morning arrives with birdsong, and sunlight filtering through the canvas of the tent.

Shane is warm and cozy, and there is something heavy draped over his waist. He’s slow to open his eyes, but when he does he sees that the weight is Ilya’s arm curled around him even in sleep, like two otters who don’t want to drift apart.

Shane can’t fight the smile that graces his face, even though there’s no one around - or awake - to see it.

For a few minutes he allows himself to just lie there and enjoy the quiet bliss of the first morning waking up with his boyfriend. His boyfriend who is also his best friend. His Ilya. His favourite person in the whole world.

Shane looks at Ilya’s sleeping face - at his mouth, slightly parted, and the way his lashes occasionally flutter against his cheeks as he inches closer towards wakefulness, and the arm that unconsciously tightens around Shane every time that he moves. Ilya is perfect. Handsome, and beautiful, and just so lovely to look at.

Shane can’t quite believe that this is happening - that Ilya is his, now, after so long wanting it but never believing it could be possible.

He wants to appreciate it for longer, wants to bask in the joy of getting to call Ilya his, but he wouldn’t be Shane if his fears didn’t try making themselves known - if the cold, bony hands of his anxiety didn’t hook their fingers beneath his ribs and tug.

Shane sits up, careful to slide Ilya’s arm off his waist without waking him. He just - he needs a moment to freak the fuck out.

What if...what if Ilya wakes up and regrets it? What if he sees Shane in the light of day, and decides that he made a mistake? It’s all happened so quickly. So suddenly. A dark tent in the middle of the woods is like a liminal space - it exists on the edge of reality. Maybe Ilya jumped into it without thinking, or - fuck, what if he just wanted to keep Shane happy? That’s the kind of thing Ilya would do, because he’s selfless to a fault.

Maybe Shane pushed him into this by kissing him.

He’s so lost in his head that he doesn’t notice the movement behind him. Not until Ilya is curling his arm around Shane’s waist, and pressing a kiss to the top of his shoulder.

“You’re thinking very loud for so early in the morning,” Ilya murmurs.

He kisses Shane’s neck and then his cheek, before resting his chin on Shane’s shoulder.

“Sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for,” Ilya promises him. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

Ilya playfully nips Shane’s earlobe. “Liar.”

Ilya’s always been good at that: seeing through all the bullshit, right to the heart of Shane. It’s one of the reasons he loves him so much. He also kind of hates it sometimes, too, because it leaves Shane with nothing to hide behind.

“Are you regretting last night?” Ilya asks carefully.

Shane immediately turns himself around to face Ilya. He’s got a cautious expression on his face, like he’s bracing for impact, and Shane hates that he’s the one who put it there.

“No,” he says truthfully, reaching out to hold Ilya’s hand. “No, of course not. I’m just-“

“Worried that *I’m* regretting?”

Shane sighs with his whole body. “Yeah,” he admits.

Ilya smiles at Shane like he’s his favourite thing in the world. He leans forward and presses a brief, chaste kiss to Shane’s lips. Shane sighs out a breath of relief, and all the anxiety the morning had brought with it rushes out of him in a flood.

No one else can do that for him.

Once, only a couple of years ago, after an awful day at school that was compounded by a terrible hockey practice, Shane had just totally freaked out. Hit with the debilitating fear of failure, and inadequacy, and letting down his parents who have sacrificed so much for him, Shane’s anxiety devolved into a panic attack he couldn’t pull himself out of. Even his parents were helpless as they stood watching him.

In a last ditch attempt to calm him down, his mom had facetimed Ilya. Within minutes Shane’s breathing was back under control, and the paralysing blanket of expectation had been lifted from his shoulders.

“No regrets here,” Ilya says.

“You still want to be my boyfriend?” Shane asks. “Because - because I’m not out, yet, and I’m not sure when I’ll be ready for that, with hockey. And I don’t want to-“

“-Shane,” Ilya interrupts, “I want it, okay? The rest we can figure out as we go.”

Shane isn't so good at the whole 'going with the flow' thing. Or, he is, as long as he knows when the flow departs and arrives, how fast it's going, and any and all turns it will be taking along the way. But with Ilya holding his hand, he thinks he might be able to handle it.

"Mama knows about me, so do a few people back in Boston. I'm not hiding, or anything," Ilya says. "So we take this at your pace. Whatever you need, okay?"

"Okay," Shane agrees.

He'll worry about it at some point, he's certain of it, but for now...for now, Shane just lets himself relax and enjoy the moment.

"Come on," Shane says. "I packed granola bars for breakfast."

"Kiss me first."

Shane scrunches his nose. "Morning breath."

"Kiss me anyway," Ilya pleads.

It takes 0.5 seconds for Shane to fold. He leans in and kisses Ilya, properly this time, not the chaste, closed-mouth kiss from earlier. It's a little gross, but Shane doesn't even care. It's *Ilya*, and Shane is *kissing* him, and they're *boyfriends*.

After they finally pull away from each other, they start their morning. They scoff down their granola bars and chase it with water, then rinse their mouths out with the mouthwash Shane brought along - god, he can't wait to brush his teeth when they get back. They both take a leak behind a tree - Shane *also* brought wet wipes and hand sanitiser - and then the mammoth task begins.

They have to pack the tent away.

Shane can pitch them no problem, but putting them back? He hasn't quite mastered that task yet. It takes them twice as long to wrestle it back into the bag than it did to put it up in the first place, though half of that was because they couldn't stop laughing (and couldn't keep their hands to themselves).

Neither of them really want to leave the bubble they've created out here; it almost feels like everything will change back to how it was before when they make it home. But Ilya winds his arms around Shane's waist and pulls him close so he can pepper his entire face with kisses, until Shane giggles.

"It's gonna be okay."

"You think so?"

"I know so." Ilya kisses Shane again. "We don't have to rush. We don't have to tell anyone before you're ready. We have time, Shane."

"Time, yeah," Shane says, but he's not sure he agrees.

Summer is going by too quickly, and soon Shane will be in Ottawa and Ilya will be in Boston, and they're going to have to find a way to navigate that distance.

"Come on. Moms will be freaking out if we're not back soon," Ilya says. "We should start heading back."

Shane snorts. "More like dad will be freaking out, wondering if we broke the tent again."

"Still your fault, by the way," Ilya reminds Shane with a taunting grin.

Shane shoves Ilya out of his arms. "Fuck off," he laughs.

The walk back towards the cottage takes longer than it did on their way out. They walk slowly, hands entwined, stopping to kiss whenever the mood takes them - which kind of feels like always, honestly. They talk and laugh like they always do, but it feels lighter somehow, now that neither of them are keeping secrets from each other.

They discuss telling their parents, and Ilya insists that there's no rush, but Shane *wants* to. He doesn't know how or when, but he knows he wants to do it soon.

Coming out hadn't felt like a priority before Ilya, not with school starting soon and the draft coming up. It had felt like this big, frightening thing that could simply be left to simmer on the back burner for a while, while Shane mostly just tried to ignore it.

He'd already decided that if he was ever going to risk the possible consequences of coming out, then it would have to be for someone special - someone who was going to last. But now, Shane has found him. So.

He'll do it. He *wants* to. He just needs some time first.

"Before the end of summer," Shane promises.

Ilya tugs on Shane's hand to stop him walking, then manhandles him until he's stood facing Ilya. "I'm not going anywhere. You don't have to do this for me."

Shane kisses the corner of Ilya's mouth, then says, "I'm not. I'm doing it for me. And for us."

"Okay. *Us*. I like the sound of that."

Much sooner than either of them are ready for the cottage comes into view, and as they step into its line of sight, they regretfully drop each other's hands. They stay glued to each other, though, shoulders bumping and knuckles grazing with every step that they take.

They kick their muddy boots off on the back porch and slip in through the open patio door. Shane's parents and Irina are sitting at the dining table with a full breakfast spread laid out in front of them, and the sight of it makes Shane's stomach grumble.

"Welcome home, boys," Irina greets them.

"Morning, mama."

“Is my tent intact?” Shane’s dad queries.

Shane rolls his eyes. “Yes, dad. The tent is fine.”

“Shane did not break it this time,” Ilya adds, smirking. He dodges the elbow Shane tries to sink into his ribs.

“Did you boys have fun?” Yuna asks over her mug of coffee.

Shane looks to Ilya, and Ilya looks to Shane, and they try to hold it in but they can’t help the way they start to laugh. Shane feels a little delirious from the weight of a *good* secret - one that belongs just to the two of them.

Fun? Oh, they have no idea.

Chapter End Notes

guys i’ve never been to manitoba i’ve just seen people talk about it being boring, no offence intended!!

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

“You look too fucking hot, Hollander.”

“I’m in my pyjamas,” Shane points out, with a shy smile.

“Yeah, exactly. Hot.”

Ilya has never had so much fun in his life.

What follows the night in the tent is a whirlwind of precious moments that he wants to keep forever, stored in the spaces between his ribs and the notches of his spine. He’s always loved every second he gets to spend with Shane, hoarded them like pieces of treasure, but it’s all so much more exciting now.

Nothing really changes all that much, which is probably the most revealing thing about their relationship.

Apart from the kisses and the touches, and the sneaking off to steal private moments together away from prying eyes, Ilya and Shane act basically the exact same as they always have done. They tease and taunt and push each other around, they laugh together, and chirp each other, and compete against each other relentlessly. Ilya takes joy in the way Shane’s nose scrunches and his brow furrows when he’s irritated. Shane always gets that smug look on his face when he successfully baits Ilya into a dumb reaction.

It says that their relationship has always been so much more than friendship - that whatever they were, whatever they were hiding from themselves and from each other, was always more than what it seemed on the surface.

Ilya simply can’t enough.

Their days are filled with secret touches, completely unable to keep their hands to themselves.

Ilya wants to touch Shane all the time, wants to hold his hand, and kiss him, and be so close that their skin starts to sweat in the places they are touching. He’d crawl inside Shane if he could, would carve out a space for himself in Shane’s bones and live there, never leaving him.

Ilya is walking down to the dock by himself when he hears the thud of Shane’s footsteps rapidly approaching behind him. He braces for impact, knowing exactly what’s about to happen, and within seconds Shane is jumping onto him. He wraps his arms around Ilya’s

neck, and his legs around his waist, and Shane presses his face to the side of Ilya's and laughs.

"Caught you," Shane says triumphantly.

Ilya laughs too, adjusting his grip on Shane's thighs and hoisting him further up his back so Shane doesn't slip. "Damn, I was trying to escape," Ilya teases.

"You had enough of me already, Rozanov?"

"Never," Ilya confesses, and it earns him a quick peck on the cheek.

"Come on," Shane says, tightening his thighs like he's riding a horse, "I want to swim."

"Oh of course, your highness. Whatever you wish, your highness."

They both laugh as Ilya carries Shane down to the end of the dock. Then, feeling reckless and alive and so fucking happy, Ilya steps out of his slides and jumps into the water with Shane still clinging onto him.

They separate underwater, Ilya surfacing just a few seconds after Shane. They're both spluttering, and pushing their sodden hair out of their eyes, but Ilya is still grinning maniacally. Shane, however, is glaring at Ilya like-

"I'm gonna kill you," he says, then launches himself at Ilya.

They splash in the water and lounge on the dock for hours. They eat dinner with the moms - Shane's ankle hooked around Ilya's beneath the table, and Ilya's hand on Shane's thigh just out of sight. It's all the same as it always was, but bolder and brighter and somehow so much better now.

When everyone else is sleeping, Ilya sneaks down to the kitchen late one night in search of a snack.

He finds it in the shape of Shane, the top half of his body obscured by the fridge door as he bends over and roots around inside it. He's wearing plaid pyjama bottoms and a baggy t-shirt that, when he stands up straight, falls off one of his shoulders and exposes the line of his collarbone. His glasses have slid to the end of his nose, which is scrunched up distastefully, clearly not satisfied with the selection of midnight snacks that are available to him.

He looks so cozy and cute that Ilya just wants to take a bite of him.

"Looking for something?" Ilya asks.

Shane flinches, a curse slipping out of his mouth when he swivels around, his eyes wide as he's caught red-handed. He slaps his palm over his chest when he sees Ilya standing there.

“Fuck, Ilya, you nearly gave me a heart attack,” he hisses. “How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough,” Ilya replies, making Shane roll his eyes.

“I’ve been waiting for you for ages,” Shane huffs as he closes the fridge and crosses his arms over his chest.

Ilya chuckles at his dramatics. “You were waiting two minutes, at most.”

Ilya walks forward slowly, and - like prey being stalked by a predator - Shane slowly starts to back up. Neither of them look away from each other as Ilya gets closer and closer, until he’s got his boyfriend exactly where he wants him. With Shane’s back pressed against the counter, and Ilya’s hands planted firmly on either side of him, he’s trapped.

But Ilya is caught, too - ensnared by the warm, chocolate brown of Shane’s eyes, as he looks up at Ilya through his lashes. The effect is absolutely devastating.

Shane had text Ilya to meet him down here, but now all Ilya wants to do is drag his boyfriend back upstairs and ravish him. He wants to touch and taste, and kiss and bite. Wants his hands and his mouth on every part of Shane - wants to learn the valleys and ridges and curves of his body, even better than Ilya already knows them.

They haven’t had sex yet, not all the way, at least. But every single day becomes more fraught with tension, every single day it becomes harder for both of them to hold back. The memory of Shane, hot and heavy on his tongue, is enough to make Ilya tip his head back and groan.

“You look too fucking hot, Hollander.”

“I’m in my pyjamas,” Shane points out, with a shy smile.

“Yeah, exactly. Hot,” Ilya reaffirms, as he runs his nose along the length of Shane’s neck.

“Ilya...” Shane says, his voice low in warning.

But Ilya just can’t help himself. He crouches just a little, to get his hands around the back of Shane’s thighs, then he’s lifting him up and setting him back down on top of the counter. Shane’s legs instinctively wrap around Ilya, tugging him forward as he also winds his arms around Ilya’s neck.

Their faces are so close that Ilya can feel Shane’s breath on his lips, and he’s helpless to do anything but kiss him.

Ilya closes the distance between them, and seals his lips over Shane’s. He tastes like toothpaste and smells like Ilya’s moisturiser that he keeps on stealing. That shouldn’t be such an irresistible combination, but underneath it all there’s just...*Shane*. His scent, and his taste, and the quiet little whimper he lets out as Ilya slips his tongue into his mouth.

It feels like Shane was made specifically to drive Ilya insane. Every little thing that he does makes Ilya crave him more.

Shane's hands clutch the back of Ilya's head, tugging on his hair as he digs his heels into the back of Ilya's thighs to pull him closer, to keep him near. Ilya allows his hands to wander beneath the hem of Shane's t-shirt, skimming up his sides and then settling in the perfect dimples above his ass. Fuck, if they weren't in the kitchen right now Ilya would drop to his knees in an instant.

"Thought you wanted a midnight snack," Ilya mumbles into Shane's open mouth.

"I'm having it."

"Fuck, Shane. You're killing me here," Ilya groans, and dives back in for another kiss.

But in the silence of the cottage, a footstep on the creaky seventh step of the staircase echoes loud enough to jolt them apart. Shane's eyes widen in panic and he unwinds his arms and legs from Ilya, who steps back so quickly he almost slips on the tiled floor. For an agonising second they just stare at each other as the footsteps get closer, then - as quick as his legs will carry him - Ilya darts back over to the refrigerator.

He's bending down to get a tub of ice cream out of the freezer, when mama slips into the kitchen. She flinches when she sees them, placing a startled hand over her heart.

"Oh!" She gasps. "You almost frightened the life out of me."

"Sorry, Irina."

"Sorry mama," Ilya echoes. "We were just sneaking some ice cream."

Mama's face softens, and she places a gentle hand on Ilya's cheek. "I'll let you boys off, I suppose. I was just coming for a glass of water."

"Here," Shane says, sliding off the worktop. "I'll get it for you."

He turns and reaches into the cupboard behind him, getting out a tall glass and filling it with water from the tap. As Shane hands it to her, mama leans in to press a kiss to his still-flushed cheek.

"Thank you, love," she says. "Don't stay up too late, boys. Okay?"

"Okay, mama."

They watch as she leaves, and neither of them move at all until they hear that seventh step creak. Shane lets out a long, relieved sigh. Ilya turns back around to look at him, and catches Shane dragging his hands down his face.

"That was close."

Shane snorts. "Oh, you think?"

They both start laughing, covering their mouths with their hands so they don't invite any more unwelcome guests down to the kitchen. Ilya takes a step forward and Shane meets him halfway, resting his forehead against Ilya's collarbone and slumping against him.

Ilya wraps his arms around Shane to hold him up, and they take a second to breathe and compose themselves.

"So. Ice cream?" Ilya suggests.

Shane giggles again, and pinches the skin above Ilya's hip. "You're impossible."

"Is that a yes?"

Shane leans back, rolls up onto his tiptoes, and kissing Ilya sweetly. "Yes, baby. Ice cream."

Baby. Fuck. The endearment on Shane's tongue is the sweetest sound Ilya has ever heard. He loves it. He wants to be Shane's baby forever.

"Can I stay in your room tonight?"

Shane rolls his eyes, but he's grinning as he says, "Obviously."

Ilya is looking through all the books on Shane's bookcase when Shane slips inside the room. He closes the door firmly behind him, then leans back against it in a way that probably isn't supposed to be sexy, but manages to be anyway.

Maybe Ilya's got a filthy mind, or maybe Shane is just that hot. It's probably both.

"They're gone," Shane quietly announces.

"Oh, yeah?" Ilya asks, as he places a book back on its shelf.

Shane nods. "Yeah...so. We're alone."

"So we are."

They've talked about it. Of course they have. They're eighteen year old guys, and they want each other desperately. But more than that, it's important. *Shane* is important, and Ilya wants to get this right.

Especially because it'll be Shane's first time.

And while Ilya doesn't believe in all that virginity bullshit, it doesn't make your first time with someone any less of a vulnerable experience. You're revealing yourself to someone in the most intimate of ways. Ilya just wants Shane to feel good, to feel safe, to feel cared for.

It's not like they've exactly planned for this; they didn't sit down and schedule a date and time. But last night their moms announced that they were going on an impromptu spa day

today, and Shane had glanced at Ilya, and...well. It had felt like a maybe. Something pencilled in, rather than inked in pen.

He slowly starts to walk towards Shane, who's still leaning against the door, and Ilya can see his throat move as he swallows.

"Ilya," he whispers.

"Yeah?"

"Please."

Ilya kisses him. It's slow, at first. Hesitant. He's unsure of how much to give, and how much he is allowed to take. But Shane is so eager, with wandering, grabby hands, and a body that bends towards Ilya like the branches of a willow tree.

Ilya has spent so many stolen, secret moments kissing Shane over the last couple of weeks. In the lake, hidden beneath the dock, out in the woods on a hike, in the kitchen after everyone else is asleep or before anyone else rises, hidden away in this bedroom in the dead of night. Ilya has kissed Shane chaste, and sweet, and filthy, and intense.

And still, he can't get enough of it.

Every single time feels as electric as the first, like Fourth of July fireworks are bursting in his chest. Ilya doesn't think he'll ever get over the marvel of this. He doesn't think there will ever be a time when he kisses Shane, and doesn't feel every single nerve ending catch fire.

"I want to, Ilya," Shane murmurs.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"We don't have to--"

"Ilya," Shane says, framing Ilya's face with his hands, "I want this. I want you."

Ilya kisses him again. "Okay. Okay, but you have to talk to me. If you like it, if you don't, if you want to stop. I need to know. I don't want to hurt you."

"I'll tell you, I promise. You won't hurt me, baby."

Ilya would rather cut off his own hand and never play hockey again, than ever hurt Shane.

Maybe that's why he's trembling as he leads Shane over to the bed; he wants to make it good for him. Shane's unwavering trust is not something that Ilya takes for granted. Shane gives it to him so freely, and Ilya is determined to prove that he deserves it. That Shane's trust, his faith, will never be misplaced when he puts it in Ilya.

The back of Shane's legs bump against his bed and he loses his balance, almost falling back onto it. He grabs onto Ilya's to keep himself upright, and laughs nervously.

"Sorry."

Ilya shakes his head. "You're perfect."

Shane flushes the sweetest shade of pink and tries to look away, but Ilya takes hold of his chin. He brushes his thumb over Shane's freckles and the blush beneath them, and then he kisses him again. With slow, careful hands Ilya lifts the hem of Shane's t-shirt, only breaking their kiss so he can pull it off. Shane, emboldened, does the same with Ilya's.

They lower themselves down onto the bed, Shane flat on his back and Ilya crawling over him. He kisses Shane's jaw, and his neck, and the hollow of his throat, and Shane shudders beneath him. He lets out a desperate, mewling sound, whimpering like a kitten as Ilya explores his body with his tongue - the freckles on Shane's shoulders, and the swell of muscle on his chest, and the dip of his sternum.

"Ilya," Shane pants.

And suddenly hands are in Ilya's hair, and Shane is tugging him back up to kiss him. It's slow, and filthy, and Ilya wants to eat Shane - wants to swallow him whole.

"You still want to?"

"Yeah, Ilya, I'm ready."

It's awkward as they peel their clothes off. It's hesitant as they learn each other's bodies, watching and listening for every slight reaction. It's clumsy as they figure things out together, and they almost spend more time laughing than they do kissing.

And then it's sweet, and it's slow, and it's so, *so* perfect.

As Shane shudders his release, tears leak from the corners of his eyes, and as Ilya follows him over the edge he feels so overcome with emotion that he can hardly breathe.

It's perfect. Every messy, shy, unsteady moment of it is absolutely perfect.

It felt good, and safe, and *fun*. There was no pressure to perform because there never is when it's the two of them. Shane is his best friend, and Ilya is Shane's, and that made it all the more wonderful.

"That was..."

"Yeah," Ilya agrees.

"Really?" Shane sounds nervous, and when Ilya looks down at him he sees the uncertain look in his eyes. "You're not just saying-"

Ilya kisses him. "It was perfect, Shane. Fuck, I can't even - I don't have the words."

A grin starts to spread across Shane's face, and he bites down on his bottom lip to stop it. Ilya raises his hand, bringing his thumb to Shane's lip to gently pull it out from between his teeth. It's already pink and kiss-swollen, but Ilya leans down to press another peck to it.

"I-*I love you*, he wants to say, but swallows the words down. "-I really, *really* liked it, and I really, *really* like you."

"Me too," Shane says. "About both."

"Yeah? You're sure?"

Shane nods. "I'm sure. I still can't feel my toes."

Ilya laughs, and kisses him again just because he can. "Thank you. For trusting me."

"Always."

For a while, they just lie there and hold each other. Ilya brushes his finger tips up Shane's arm, across his shoulders, and down his back. Shane traces the moles on Ilya's chest, kissing his fingers then pressing them to each one.

It's a slow unwinding, their bodies and brains rebooting in increments.

Eventually they get up and shower together, washing each other's hair and bodies, and kissing until they're breathless all over again. Then they saunter down to the kitchen to make lunch, and they eat it standing up. The sides of their bodies remain pressed together the whole time, because they can't bear to be apart.

After, they make their way to the living room. They're sated and relaxed, and Ilya flops onto the couch with a thud and a groan.

He lies back, holding his arm out and beckoning for Shane to join him. He doesn't put up any fuss, he just lowers himself down on top of Ilya so their chests are pressed together and his head is on Ilya's shoulder.

They wriggle around for a moment to get comfortable, then sigh contentedly.

"Comfy?" Ilya checks.

Shane presses a kiss to his sternum. "Very."

"What do you want to watch?" Ilya asks, clicking the TV remote with the hand that isn't scratching Shane's back.

"Can we watch *The Winter Soldier*?"

"Again?"

"Mhm. It's my favourite," Shane says.

“Yeah. I wonder why,” Ilya teases him, and Shane lightly slaps him on the stomach.

“Leave me alone.”

“Whatever you want, sweetheart.” Ilya kisses Shane’s forehead, and then he presses play.

When Ilya blinks his eyes open, he’s met with two phones shoved into his face.

Behind them, mama and Yuna are both looking down at Ilya and Shane, grinning almost maniacally. The sight makes Ilya flinch hard enough that Shane wakes up too. He grumbles for a moment, rubbing his eye with his knuckle, but he yelps when he sees their moms.

Shane tries to sit himself up quickly, but ends up kneeling Ilya in the groin in the process.

“Oh, you don’t have to move!” Yuna coos.

“You look so sweet, boys, we just had to document it,” mama explains.

“You know it’s usually frowned upon to take pictures of people when they’re sleeping, right?” Ilya says around a yawn. “Lack of consent.”

“Oh, behave.” Yuna dismisses him with a wave of her hand. “You’re our boys, it’s fine.”

“It’s *weird*,” Shane adds, eventually sliding off of Ilya’s lap and onto the tiny sliver of couch beside him.

He glances it down at Ilya and they share a shy, secret smile. Of course their moms don’t think there’s anything unusual about finding them asleep on top of each other - why would they?

Ilya and Shane have been weird about each other since, quite literally, day one. They’re just *Like That* about each other, and their parents have long-since accepted it as totally normal. It’s why they’ve been able to hide in plain sight so easily.

“How was the spa?” Shane asks.

“Oh it was wonderful...”

Yuna launches into a tale about all the amenities, and the massages they had, and the sauna. Ilya and Shane smile and nod at the appropriate moments, listening to both Yuna and Irina chatting away.

In the tiny sliver of space between Shane’s hip and Ilya’s waist, they lock their pinkies together. A secret moment, just for them.

“Would you boys mind heading to the store for us? I’m gonna make that pasta salad you like,” Yuna asks.

“Sure, mom,” Shane agrees. “Write us a list?”

The grocery store is quiet when they arrive, no more than a handful of customers wandering around inside it. Ilya grabs a shopping cart while Shane carries the list.

“Did you want to split up, or-“

“Or,” Ilya interrupts. “Definitely *or*.”

He flashes Shane a cheeky grin, and it makes Shane flush and smile back. He leans close to Ilya to bump their shoulders. They’d held hands the whole ride here, only dropping them reluctantly when they had to climb out of the car. But now they’re back to the subtle touches, like neither of them can keep their hands to themselves.

Ilya always wants to touch Shane, but now it just feels *more* somehow.

Ilya looks at him and thinks, bizarrely, *I’ve just had sex with him*. Then he glances around the store and wonders if anyone else can tell.

He feels like all the joy and excitement of being with Shane is just pouring out of him, and everyone in their vicinity can see how ridiculously in love with him Ilya is. It’s insane, probably, but Ilya can’t quite comprehend how can he feel so different on the inside, but look exactly the same on the outside.

It doesn’t seem possible, to be changed so thoroughly without anyone being able to see it.

Even their moms hadn’t noticed anything was different, despite that Ilya feels like he’s been re-wired. His body has been re-made by Shane’s hands into a more whole version of himself.

Ilya’s not sure why he still hasn’t told Shane about McGill yet - maybe he’s still feeling a little nervous, or maybe he’s still searching for the right time. But he knows that he needs to. Soon. He’s keeping something big from his boyfriend, and it feels wrong after all the trust that they have given to each other today.

“You feeling okay?” Ilya asks quietly.

“Mhm. Yeah, I’m good. A little achey,” Shane admits, with a shy smile, “but in a good way.”

“You promise? I didn’t hurt you-“

“Ilya.” Shane steps in close, covering Ilya’s hand where it’s white-knuckling the shopping cart. “It was perfect, and I loved it, and I would very much love to do it again. I promise.”

Ilya looks at his brown eyes - the way they’re so wide, and warm, and expressive - and he has to restrain himself from leaning forward and kissing him right in the middle of the grocery store. But clearly Shane has the same idea, because he glances around the aisle quickly and - when he sees no one is around - he darts forward to plant a kiss on Ilya’s lips.

Ilya hums quietly. He tightens his hands on the shopping cart so he doesn’t reach for Shane’s waist and turn this into something unsuitable for public consumption.

“Okay?” Shane checks.

“Yeah. Okay.”

“Good. Now, we need that expensive garlic olive oil...”

Shane stalks around the grocery store like a man on a mission, and Ilya follows him blindly; Eurydice following Orpheus out of the underworld. Or perhaps something a little less dramatic, though that’s how it feels to Ilya - like he’d follow Shane anywhere.

The following morning, Ilya finds Irina drinking tea on the back porch.

It’s still early, but already hot out. The sun is nowhere close to its peak yet, but Ilya can already tell he’ll be spending the day by the water. It’s his favourite thing to do during summer, anyway - just him and Shane, and no one else around to bother them. That’s always been true, even before everything changed.

His mama smiles at him as he takes a seat beside her. She raises her hand, warm from holding her tea, and strokes the side of his cheek. She runs her fingers through Ilya’s sleep-rumpled hair, and he leans into the touch eagerly.

“Good morning, my love.”

“Morning mama. You sleep well?” Ilya asks.

Irina hums in affirmation. “Did you?”

Ilya had slept in Shane’s bed again last night. He was far too hot, with half of Shane’s body slumped over him - Shane’s arm and leg wrapped around Ilya like vines. It was the best sleep he’s ever had.

“Yeah,” Ilya says. “I slept good.”

“You know, I peeked into your room this morning. Just wanted to check on you. But you weren’t there.”

Ilya stills. There isn’t really a question in her voice, it’s mostly just an observation. But he can hear the curious undertones - or, not curious, but *knowing*.

When Ilya came out to his mama, he didn’t tell her about Shane. That part had felt so much bigger than Ilya being bi, felt more important than the simple truth of his sexuality. Now Ilya thinks, perhaps, he didn’t have to. Mama doesn’t look away from the lake, doesn’t pressure Ilya with that look she sometimes gets in her eyes.

She gives him the space to elaborate, or to ignore her comment all together; she won’t push for more than Ilya is willing to give.

“Yeah, we were hanging out and then fell asleep,” Ilya says, which isn’t a lie, but it isn’t the whole truth either.

Irina nods her head slowly, and though she doesn't say anything else, Ilya feels a spark of nerves in the pit of his stomach.

Just for something to do with his hands instead of wringing them nervously, he reaches out and steals her mug of tea. Mama gasps, and Ilya smirks as he takes a sip of it, holding eye contact the whole time. When he hands it back to her, she playfully smacks the back of his hand.

"You seem a little different recently," she remarks.

"Oh yeah?"

"Mhm. Happier. It's like it's shining out of you," she explains. "You're glowing."

Ilya forces a laugh. "It must be the sun."

"Maybe."

They sit quietly for a while, just enjoying each other's company and the beauty of the view. It's peaceful, even though Ilya's heart is beating a little too quickly beneath his ribcage.

His mama is perceptive, just like Ilya. When you spend years living in a house like theirs, with a man like Grigori, you learn how to pick up on things. You derive meaning from the sound of their footfall or their sigh, you know what's coming by how loud the car door slams, or how quickly the keys are dropped on the side. They both read into the smallest of details.

It's a survival mechanism that neither of them have ever unlearned.

"Have you told him yet?" Irina asks, her voice cutting through the quiet. "About--"

"Hey," Shane suddenly interrupts, appearing in front of the porch. He's panting as he slows to a stop at the foot of the steps.

He's dripping, sweat beading at his temples and soaking through his t-shirt, making it cling to his chest. His cheeks are red with exertion, making his freckles look extra prominent today. He looks so good Ilya almost swallows his tongue, and he has to shake his head a little to compose himself before he can find the words to reply.

God, he's ridiculous.

"Hey, nice run?" Ilya asks.

"You'd know if you'd come with me," Shane teases.

He'd tried to drag Ilya out of bed earlier, but Ilya had been completely unwilling to lift his head from the pillow.

"Recovery day," Ilya claims, and Shane just rolls his eyes and grins.

"Morning, Irina," he says.

“Good morning, sweetie. You look well-rested.”

Ilya chokes, and Shane turns bright red, and mama just smiles innocently, like she’s completely oblivious to what she just implied.

There’s no point telling Shane she knows they slept in the same bed, though. Ilya doesn’t want to worry him for no reason. Irina might tell Yuna just about everything else, but she wouldn’t tell her this.

“Thanks,” Shane replies, awkwardly scratching the back of his head. Then, to Ilya, he says, “I’m gonna change into my swim shorts, then do you want to jump in the water with me?”

Ilya nods. “Ready when you are.”

Shane is out of sight for less than five minutes. Mama doesn’t say anything else beyond commenting on how it’s a nice day for a swim, and a just a couple of minutes later Ilya and Shane are waving goodbye to her as they rush down to the lake.

After a long dip in the water, to cool them both off and to wash the sweat from Shane’s skin, they both collapse on their towels on the dock. Ilya lies on his stomach, arms folded beneath his head with his face turned to the left so he can look at his boyfriend. Shane sits instead, leaning back on his elbows as he tilts his face up towards the sun.

“Don’t forget sunscreen,” Ilya teases.

Shane instantly turns to look at Ilya. “I’m already wearing it,” he says. “Are *you*?”

“Nope.”

Shane huffs, rolling his eyes as he flicks water into Ilya’s face. “We can put some on when we’re dry.”

“Only if you put it on for me,” Ilya negotiates, wiggling his eyebrows up and down just to make Shane laugh.

“Okay, fine. Deal.”

Ilya didn’t have to bargain very hard. He sees the way Shane looks at him, the way he can’t keep his hands to himself when they’re alone. They both get plenty of satisfaction from Shane putting Ilya’s sunscreen on for him.

The thought takes Ilya back to the first morning here, when Shane had done the same thing. He remembers the way Shane’s hands had felt on his skin, and the way he was dangerously close to getting a hard on while his best friend rubbed his chest.

That day almost seems like a lifetime ago now.

Ilya looks back to Shane, only to find him already watching Ilya intently. The sunlight catches on the flecks of amber in his eyes, and Ilya can see just how huge his pupils are as he ogles Ilya.

“See something you like?”

“Fuck off,” Shane laughs. Then, “Can I ask you something?”

“You can ask me anything.”

“How did you know? Like - what made you realise that you’re bi?”

“You really wanna know?” Ilya asks, grinning.

Shane squirms, like maybe he’s not entirely sure if he wants to know the answer. But then he nods anyway. Good. Ilya has been waiting to tell Shane this.

“You,” he answers easily.

Shane chokes on air. “*Me?*”

“Yeah,” Ilya says, attempting, and failing at, the appearance of nonchalance. He’s smiling far too wide. “It was you.”

It shouldn’t really be that much of a surprise. Shane was so many of Ilya’s firsts. His first friend when he moved from Russia - first friend *ever*; really - the first friend he had a sleepover with, first friend he built a fort with, and went swimming with, and went camping with. He was the first person Ilya loved, who wasn’t his mama, and the first person Ilya ached for when they were apart.

It stands to reason that he was the first boy Ilya ever had a crush on - the first, and only, person that Ilya will ever fall in love with.

“Not - not Sasha?”

Ilya’s laugh is loud as it bursts out of him. He props himself up on his elbows to better look at Shane as he says, “What? No. Sasha was convenient, but he definitely wasn’t...no. Not at all.”

Ilya had arrived back in Boston last fall, with a newly realised love for his best friend in the world. Figuring out he was bisexual had felt secondary to that.

Sasha was openly gay, interested in Ilya enough to fool around with him but not to want anything more, and - Ilya had foolishly thought - the perfect solution. If he could hook up with another guy, he thought maybe he might get it out of his system...might stopping feeling the way he felt about Shane.

It had definitely confirmed to Ilya that he was bi. It did, however, fail at everything else.

“So...me?” Shane asks, disbelieving.

“You remember last summer, when we went on that walk around the lake and I got my foot stuck between those rocks?”

Shane giggles. "Yeah, you grazed all your ankle pulling it out. I told you not to climb up there."

Ilya nods. "Yeah, well. Before that, we saw that bird. Do you remember?"

"The Rufous Hummingbird!" Shane recollects, excitedly. "They're considered near-threatened, you know?"

Ilya feels himself smiling as he watches the way Shane lights up, talking about the decline in insect populations, and climate change affecting the flower blooming season.

Ilya's heart is beating out of his chest.

It's a little bit insane, the effect Shane has on him. He's talking about birds, and climate change, and fucking breeding seasons, and Ilya finds himself watching Shane with complete awe. He wants to surge up and kiss him, kiss him, kiss him, except Ilya doesn't want to stop Shane from talking. He wants to hear every single word that he has to say.

"Yeah," Ilya says. "You did that exact thing. You got so excited, telling me all about the different wildlife that was native to the area."

Shane flushes, chuckling nervously. "Sorry."

"No, no," Ilya says. "You were talking, and I just thought - *I could listen to him forever*. That's when I realised."

"Ilya," Shane whispers, tears welling in his eyes. "Are you serious?"

Ilya nods.

It had hit him like a thunderbolt. One second he had been listening to his best friend, and the next he was listening to the boy he was in love with. Except - they were the same boy, it had just taken Ilya an embarrassingly long time to realise it.

And then he couldn't *un*-realise it.

It would have been like forgetting a fact of life; you can't unlearn that water is wet, just like Ilya couldn't unlearn that he was in love with Shane. It was too ingrained in him, tangled with his nerves and carved into his bones, and echoing through his body with every beat of his heart.

Ilya had climbed up on those rocks, got distracted by the way Shane's eyes crinkled when he laughed, and that's how he had slipped and got his foot stuck.

"Me too," Shane says. "I mean, not that moment. But that summer. Or - well. I guess it was before then, honestly, but that was when I realised."

Ilya slides his hand across his towel to hold Shane's. "Yeah. Me too. I think - I think it's been here the whole time, maybe?"

Shane nods. “I think so, too.”

Ilya leans down to press a kiss to the inside of Shane’s wrist. Ilya can feel Shane’s pulse thrumming against his lips.

When the sun has dried their skin enough, Shane pulls the sunscreen out of his bag and starts slathering it on his body. Ilya watches with rapt attention, unable to take his eyes off Shane’s hands and his thighs, and the pull of the muscles in his shoulders and chest. Shane catches him staring and winks.

Ilya has to hide his face in his arms for a moment to try and calm himself down.

That’s when he feels the cool drizzle of sunscreen on his own back and thighs, and he shudders when Shane’s hands follow. He’s gentle but thorough as he rubs it in, making sure to cover every patch of visible skin, and paying extra attention to Ilya’s smattering of moles.

“Done,” Shane says quietly.

“Thank you,” Ilya murmurs.

Only Shane’s hands don’t move away from Ilya’s skin. Instead, he feels Shane’s finger trailing along his back in steady motions. It takes Ilya a moment to click on to what he’s doing.

“Are you writing on me?” He asks.

Ilya can hear the smile in Shane’s voice when he says, “Maybe.”

“What are you writing?”

“Guess.”

Shane writes the word again, and then again even slower. It takes a second, but Ilya’s breath hitches when he figures out the word Shane is spelling out on his back.

“*Mine.*”

Ilya feels Shane’s lips press a kiss to the top of his spine, right where he’d just been tracing his skin.

“Yeah. Mine,” Shane confirms.

He lies back down on his towel. As he turns his head to the side to look at Ilya, he hooks their pinky fingers together between them and smiles.

“I never want this summer to end.”

“Me either.”

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

“Well. I think we can all agree that we saw this coming about a decade ago.”

Summer runs away from them, much faster than either of them can chase it.

When they were kids, these weeks together had felt endless, like they stretched out ahead of them infinitely. But now they feel more like grains of sand in an hourglass; the days are slipping through their fingers too quickly.

When Shane’s mom and dad first started dating, David would bring Yuna flowers on every single date. As they got older, got married, had Shane, every date became every Friday, instead. David would come home from work, kiss Yuna on the cheek, and hand her the flowers - a routine worn into their lives like the grain in an old tree.

Mom said she knew from the first date that dad was the one. So, with every new bouquet, she would take a single flower from it and press it between the pages of a book. *Something to treasure*, she’d still say now, if Shane asked.

It feels like he is doing the same thing this summer.

Every touch, every kiss, every moment with Ilya, Shane is preserving neatly in his mind. He’s taking too many pictures, he’s saving the movie theatre tickets, and the golf ball Ilya snuck into his pocket, and the receipts from *Sal’s*. He’s keeping the memories, like flowers pressed between pages, because each one is something he wants to treasure.

Because, like his mom, Shane has known from the beginning that Ilya is his one.

There isn’t enough time. It hardly seems fair that he and Ilya have finally found their way to each other, and they’re going to be separated from each other so soon. Summers just aren’t enough. They never have been, not really, but especially not *now*.

They’re going off to college, and they’re going to be even busier now. With classes, and hockey, and the lives they are supposed to build without each other, and Shane is terrified. Terrified that the distance will be too much, that they will drift apart, that they won’t have the kind of time for each other that they would need to make long distance work.

He doesn’t know how to talk about it, though. Not because talking to Ilya is difficult, but because facing the reality of it is. Shane is afraid that if he voices all of his fears out loud, it will make them real. And he isn’t ready for that. Not yet.

There is *something* that Shane is starting to feel ready for, though: coming out.

It had felt like such a far away concept only a few weeks ago, before Shane kissed Ilya and everything changed. But now - now he can't bear to hide this much longer. He *loves* Ilya, even if he hasn't told him yet, and it feels like he's doing a disservice to his boyfriend and to their relationship by trying to keep it hidden.

Ilya has never once pressured him - he hasn't even brought it up - but Shane feels itchy with the need to share their news. It's not like he's worried that their parents won't approve, and he knows his closest friends will be fine with it.

The other stuff is a little scarier, of course. Being out at McGill when he's a hockey player - when he's looking to get *drafted* - is a huge fucking step. But, Ilya is in the same boat.

And it's not like it was a few years ago, when there were *no* out players. Scott Hunter is still tearing the league up - "*He's so olddd, Shane,*" he can hear Ilya's voice say - and Barrett came out recently, too.

So it's not unheard of. It's not impossible. Shane might just get to have both.

Ilya had showered first after their late afternoon workout, and now he's downstairs helping their parents get dinner ready while Shane procrastinates in his bedroom. He's got a towel wrapped around his waist, his hair is still dripping water down his back, and his phone clenched between his hands as he looks at the group chat open on his screen.

The last message had been from J.J., complaining about how little sister getting glitter all over his bedroom again. Shane stares at it for a while before finally beginning to type, even though his hands are shaking.

Shane:

I need to tell you guys something.

It takes less than ten seconds before the speech bubble appears with three little dots inside it. Shane holds his breath.

Rose:

is everything okay, shane?

Hayden:

talk to us

J.J.:

sup captain?

Shane:

I'm gay.

I'm sorry for not telling you sooner.

J.J.:

hey congrats man! thanks for telling us

Rose:

thank you so much for trusting us with that. i love you, okay? nothing will change that.

Hayden:

oh no

oh my god

shane

dude

my brother in christ

Rose:

hayden?!!

J.J.:

bro wtf????

Shane feels sick. He hadn't planned for this - hadn't expected there to ever be a problem. His eyes blur with unshed tears as he types.

Shane:

Look, if you've got a problem you should tell me now.

This isn't going away. It's who I am.

Hayden:

what?

oh my god no

not like that!!!!

i'm cool with you being gay

i'm an ally

J.J.:

ok so what's your problem then man?

Hayden:

rozanov!!!!

i mean

it is rozanov right?

Rose:

oh my GOD

WHAT

SHANE?

Shane:

Maybe.

Okay, fine. Yes. He's my boyfriend now.

J.J.:
BRO?

Hayden:
*i'm happy for you dude i promise
but
he's so mean about my wrister shane :(*

J.J.:
*ha bet he doesn't have the same issue with shane's wrister
get it?*

Rose:
*jj you're gross
hayden you're an idiot
shane tell me everything!!!*

Shane feels giddy with excitement.

He did it. He came out, and it was fine, and his friends don't see him any differently - they don't love him any less. He's not sure how Hayden guessed so quickly, but maybe he's never been subtle about Ilya. Maybe he's never fully been able to conceal the way he feels; it's always been too big.

But suddenly, everything just feels a little bit more possible now.

He'd expected them to be good about it anyway, but the reality of it is exactly the kind of encouragement Shane has been needing.

He and Ilya can tell their parents. They can be out in college, even if it's scary. They can make the distance work because - because they love each other, right? They haven't said the words yet, but Shane feels it humming in his chest.

He's about to start typing a message back, but:

"Shane!" Ilya calls from the bottom of the stairs. "Hurry your ass up!"

He locks his phone. The groupchat can wait, his boyfriend can't.

After dinner - his dad grilled and Shane helped, while Ilya and the moms gossiped - they all gather around the fire pit.

The end of summer is closing in on them, and there's that muggy, humid feel to the air. The bugs are out, and the loons are calling, and the sun is setting slowly on the far side of the

lake. The fire burns bright, the orange of it flickering against the backdrop of the sky, making the view look like a watercolour painting.

David is sitting in an armchair, Yuna and Irina are together on one of the loveseats, and Shane and Ilya are beside each other on the other one.

They're so close that Shane - his legs criss-cross beneath him - keeps bumping Ilya's thigh with his knee. Ilya doesn't mind, though. In fact, he keeps pressing in closer every time they touch. And with his arm draped along the back of the couch, he's secretly brushing Shane's neck with his knuckles.

The night feels perfect.

He's surrounded by his favourite people, and for a little while, nothing matters but this.

Irina is talking about maybe hiring another teacher for her dance studio when they get back to Boston; with her gone over the summer, they've had to hold fewer classes.

Then Yuna talks about her work - the player who's refusing to budge on the NMC that he wants, and his team also unwilling to compromise. David doesn't talk much about his work, preferring to leave it behind when he comes home, so he listens attentively, and offers opinions when needed.

Shane and Ilya mostly just listen. They'll nod at the right moment, throw in a comment about the CBA or cap space occasionally, but mostly they just sit quietly, enjoying the company and each other's touch.

In a lull of silence, Ilya shifts slightly and then clears his throat.

"I, uh, I have an announcement."

Shane's whole body tenses except for his head, which whips around to look at Ilya. Shane's not opposed to coming out, not even to telling them right now, honestly, but they haven't discussed this. And he can't think what else-

"I'm not staying in Boston for college."

Somehow that's even more of a shock.

"What? Honey, I thought you were going to BC?" Yuna asks, leaning forward in her seat.

Irina doesn't move, though. She smiles proudly at Ilya, like she's been waiting for this moment. Like she's known all along.

Shane can already feel the slow build of panic, like when the water recedes before a tsunami hits. If Ilya isn't going to Boston, where is he going? Somewhere on the west coast? Will they be even further apart? Is that why Ilya has waited until now to tell him?

"Ilya. Where are you going?" Shane's voice wavers.

Ilya turns to Shane, looking at him like they're the only two people here. Like Shane is the only one who matters. And he says, "McGill."

Shane's heart stumbles in his chest. "What? Sorry. I must have misheard you, because I thought you said--"

"McGill. Yeah, I did."

"Ilya."

"Shane."

Ilya's eyes are wide, shifting up and down, side to side, scanning Shane's face like he's trying to read him - trying to figure out what's going on inside his head. He looks nervous, almost, like he's worried about Shane's reaction.

Shane mostly feels like he's dreaming.

"You're coming to McGill?"

"Yes."

"Seriously?" Shane asks, his voice and hands shaking. "Because you can't fuck with me about this, Ilya."

"I'm not. I *wouldn't*," Ilya insists, stretching his arm out to rest his hand on top of Shane's.

"Oh my god. Oh my *god*, you're coming to McGill?"

It feels impossible, unbelievable, too fucking good to be true. But Ilya is sitting in front of Shane, his smile like a sunrise as he watches the tears well in Shane's eyes.

"Yes, I'm coming to McGill," Ilya laughs. "And you should be grateful, because you know how I feel about Montre- *oof!*"

Shane launches himself at Ilya.

He feels such a sudden burst of excitement that he simply can't contain himself - can't hold himself back from touching Ilya, feeling him in his arms.

Ilya laughs, loud and bright, and he wraps his arms around Shane's back and pulls him close. Shane burrows his face in Ilya's neck, breathing him in as he tries to calm himself down. But the tears are spilling over anyway, and when they drop onto Ilya's skin and Shane sniffles, Ilya just holds him even tighter.

McGill. Oh my god, he's coming to *McGill*. They're gonna be together. Same city, same school, same team.

Shane pulls back. He sees the expression on Ilya's face, he sees the way he is looking at Shane with so much gentle affection, and he is overcome with so much love that he doesn't

know what to do with it. It's too big to fit inside of him.

He takes Ilya's face in his hands, leans in close, and he kisses him.

It doesn't matter that their parents are watching. Nothing in the world matters right now, except for Ilya. Except for the way he is holding Shane, and kissing him back, and the way his mouth is curving up into a smile that Shane can feel against his lips.

Shane laughs as he pulls back, giddy and overwhelmed and in love.

Ilya's smile is the most beautiful thing he has ever seen, and he can't stop himself tracing it with his thumb.

"I take it you're happy?"

Shane rolls his eyes playfully. "What gave you that idea?"

When Shane's mom coos behind them, they suddenly remembers they're not alone.

He meets Ilya's eyes for just a moment, for a little courage. Ilya looks back at him, strong and steady and fearless. He squeezes Shane's waist, Shane nods resolutely, and then they both turn to face the music.

Shane's mom is holding her cheeks in her hands, her bottom lip quivering as her eyes well with tears. Irina has her arm wrapped around Yuna, and she's smiling like she's excited, but not surprised. And Shane's dad is - oh. Shane's dad is wiping tears from his eyes while trying his hardest to hide the fact.

"So, uh - Ilya and I, we're together," Shane confesses, which is mostly unnecessary at this point, but he wants to say it anyway. "He's my boyfriend."

He finds he likes the way the words feel in his mouth.

"Oh, honey!" His mom cries, and then she's out of her seat and rushing forwards.

She scoops Shane into her arms, pulling him so he's standing as she hugs him so tightly he can barely breathe. He laughs and hugs her back, and he tries his hardest not to start crying all over again.

Before he has the chance to pull away, several other pairs of arms join in. Ilya first, then Irina, and the Shane's dad, all huddled like penguins as they hug each other.

"I'm so happy for you boys," Shane's mom says.

"You deserve this," Irina adds.

"Thank you, mama," Ilya says softly.

As they're all disentangling from the hug - except for Shane and Ilya, who quickly find each other's hands to hold - Shane's dad sighs loudly and rests his hands on his hips.

“Well. I think we can all agree that we saw this coming about a decade ago.”

Shane blanches. “*What?*”

Ilya laughs, and Irina tries to cover her smile with her hand, while his mom gives his dad *The Look*.

“Nothing, honey,” Shane’s mom says, as she slaps the back of her hand against his dad’s stomach. “We’re happy for you. That’s all that matters.”

And - okay. Yeah. That *is* all that matters.

His parents and Irina are happy for them, and Shane’s friends still love him, and Ilya...Ilya is *his*. They don’t have to go their separate ways, don’t have to spend months at a time away from each other. They don’t have to hide.

He pinches the inside of his bicep just to check he isn’t dreaming.

After their parents hug and kiss, and then hug them again, they all drift inside, leaving Shane and Ilya sitting alone by the fire.

Shane feels exhausted. Not in a bad way, but in a thorough, down-to-his-bones way. In a single day, Shane has gone from only one person in the world - his *boyfriend* - knowing he’s gay, to seven whole people. And all of them are people who are desperately important to Shane. It feels momentous, in line with the day he found out NHL scouts were looking at him, and the day he got accepted into McGill, and...oh my *god*-

“You’re coming to McGill.”

Ilya chuckles, and Shane can feel his ribs move up and down where he’s leaning back against them. Ilya tightens his hold on Shane, arm draped over his chest like a seatbelt, and presses a flurry of kisses to Shane’s cheek, his temple, his hair.

“Yes, sweetheart. I’m coming to McGill.”

“We’re gonna be on a team together,” he says, voice so thick with emotion that you can hear it.

“I might let you center me,” Ilya teases.

“Fuck off.”

Ilya laughs and kisses Shane’s head again, and Shane melts into him, tilting his head back to rest it on Ilya’s shoulder.

“I came out,” Shane says.

“Pretty dramatically, yeah.”

“God, this day is wild.”

“But...good wild, yeah?” Ilya asks, always checking in on Shane. “You’re feeling okay?”

“I’m...I’m perfect.”

“Now that is something we can agree on.”

Shane lets himself be held by his boyfriend, next to the firelight. Their parents are right inside and could look out at them at any moment, but Shane doesn’t have to flinch away or hide. He doesn’t have to pretend that Ilya is anything less than absolutely *everything* to him.

The reality of that sinks in, and Shane’s chest feels warm and full as his heart expands beneath his ribs.

He closes his eyes and lets himself savour this moment. It’s a memory to preserve like a flower between pages; something to always treasure.

“Shane?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“I love you.”

Shane doesn’t hesitate. He turns around, threads his fingers through Ilya’s hair, and kisses him.

“I love you, too,” he murmurs. “Oh my god, Ilya. I love you *so* much.”

He feels something damp on his cheeks as they kiss, but he can’t tell if it’s coming from him or Ilya. It doesn’t matter. They love each other. They’re *in* love with each other. And everything in the whole world feels right. It’s like the final puzzle piece has slotted into place, and now everything is complete.

Shane has always liked things tidy, has always like rules, and routines, and for everything to be in its place. Ilya is the one thing that has never fit neatly into his life; Shane has never been able to place Ilya in a box with a label on it, like he does with everything else. He’s always been too chaotic, too big, too bold to be confined like that.

Maybe it’s why he’s always made Shane’s world so much bigger and brighter. When he’s with Ilya, he isn’t confined either.

Shane pulls back to look at his boyfriend, to trace the curve of his smile and see the spark of warmth in his eyes.

For a brief moment, Shane sees his entire future stretching out in front of him. College, and hockey, and his family, and Ilya. Ilya, Ilya, *Ilya*, always. At the centre of it all. And for the first time, Shane doesn’t feel afraid. He doesn’t feel pressure or expectations, he just feels love - so much of it that there’s hardly enough room inside him to carry it all.

From now on, his whole life is going to feel like summer.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Back then, this summer life he got to live in for a while had felt like a too-big suit that Ilya was trying on. Now, it feels like he has started to grow into it.

Chapter Notes

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

The summer fair is always busy.

It's not just locals and vacationers who come, but people travel here just for this. It's not really anything special, in the grand scheme of things, just some rides, and games, and different food stalls, but it's a tradition.

Ilya and Shane have been coming here every year since they were five. First with their parents, wandering around with sticky hands and begging to go on rides they were far too small for. Then, as they got older, they were allowed to wander off by themselves, spending too much money on food, then going on rides that made them nauseous.

It's always been such a bittersweet experience. Fun, because everything with Shane is always fun. But sad, too, because the fair means the end of summer, and the end of summer means saying goodbye to Shane. Usually, this is the part where Ilya starts to miss Shane before they've even been separated.

This time, Ilya enters the fair holding Shane's hand. He enters knowing that, in just a few short weeks, they'll be back together again. For good, this time.

They separate from their parents with a promise to meet back up later, and then Ilya and Shane run wild.

"Where to first?" Ilya asks Shane.

He tugs on his hand, pulling him close so he can wrap an arm around his waist. Shane grins up at him, a sweet, shy blush on his face at the public display of affection. He doesn't pull away from it though. Instead, Shane leans in and kisses the corner of Ilya's mouth.

It feels surreal that this is happening to him. That the person he loves - has probably loved for most of his life - loves him back, and is touching him like this. Is claiming him publicly, and is letting Ilya claim him right back.

"Ferris wheel?" Shane suggests, his eyes lighting up in excitement.

“You sure you can handle it?”

“Fuck you,” Shane laughs. “That was your fault!”

“You *shrieked*, Shane,” Ilya reminds him.

Shane shoves Ilya’s chest and steps away. “Because you wouldn’t stop rocking it!”

They’ve been riding the little ferris wheel since they were tall enough to be allowed on by themselves. Ilya always makes it his mission to try and rock the carriage, and Shane holds on for dear life, gripping Ilya’s arm so hard he leaves crescent moons in his skin, all while promising retribution.

Last year they learned they’re far too big for that, now. Ilya had sent the carriage rocking so violently that even *he* had a brief moment of panic.

“No sudden movements this time,” Ilya says, holding his hand up in a three finger salute. “Scout’s honour.”

Shane gives him a dry, doubtful look. “You’re not a Boy Scout.”

They make their way over to the ferris wheel anyway. As they stand in the queue waiting, Ilya drapes his arms over Shane’s shoulders and pulls him back into his chest.

He knows exactly what they look like - one of those annoying couples who can barely keep their hands to themselves - but the truth of it is, Ilya doesn’t care. He’s spent a long time wanting Shane but not believing this could ever be something he would get to have, so he’s making the most of it now.

It feels a little like they’re making up for lost time, too. They’ve both been aware of their feelings for the past year, and that feels like so much wasted time they could have spent loving each other.

Ilya is just thankful they don’t have to spend anymore time apart.

When they reach the front of the line, they squeeze themselves into the *slightly* too small carriage. It’s a tight squeeze, but Ilya will take any opportunity at all to be pressed up against his boyfriend with nowhere for Shane to escape to. And Shane - well. He doesn’t seem to mind all that much, either.

“We’re gonna do this next summer, right?” Shane asks, as they’re slowly being raised higher.

Ilya snorts. “I don’t think we’ll *fit* next summer.”

“You know what I mean. *This*, the fair, summer at the cottage.”

Ilya kisses Shane’s temple softly. “Of course we will.”

“You know, I spent so much of this summer feeling like time was running out,” Shane confesses.

The ferris wheel jerks to a stop as someone gets off and someone else gets on at the bottom. Ilya takes Shane's hand, threading their fingers together and holding on tight.

"I get it," Ilya says. "It felt like - like everything was about to change, right?"

Shane nods his head.

Finishing high school and starting college feels like the end of something big. Ilya won't miss high school all that much - he's moving onto bigger, better things after all - but he knows that their lives will look different when they start at McGill.

And they're already eighteen, already men now, but this still kind of feels like the last summer of their childhood. The last summer where they get to just be kids without any major responsibilities.

This time next year, it will all look so different.

But as long as Ilya still has Shane and their parents and the cottage to come back to, it feels like anything is possible.

"I thought we were gonna be too busy to come back here. That maybe this would be our last summer together," Shane admits.

Ilya hates himself a little for keeping McGill a secret for so long. If he'd just told Shane straight away, instead of getting in his own head about it, then Ilya could have saved him a lot of anguish.

"We'll be busy," Ilya agrees, "with *our* classes, and *our* team, and *our* life. But we'll always come back here."

Shane looks at him with so much love in his eyes that Ilya wants to burst.

"I can't believe we're doing this together. It still doesn't feel real," Shane murmurs.

"It's real. We're even gonna get drafted to the same team as well. I can feel it."

"Oh, you can *feel* it?" Shane laughs.

Ilya nods, pulling their joined hands up to his mouth so he can kiss Shane's knuckles. "Oh, yeah. I'm always right about this stuff."

Shane snorts, rolling his eyes in fond exasperation.

The ferris wheel slows to a stop as they reach the very top of it, and they both take a minute to appreciate the view. The town is to their right, the cottage and the lake to the left. They can even see the long, winding road they take on their way home, when summer is over and they've said goodbye.

For the time since they started coming here, Ilya isn't dreading making that journey. He knows he'll be back with his Shane soon enough.

“Kiss me,” Shane orders.

“Demanding,” Ilya teases him.

But he kisses Shane anyway, sweet and slow, butterflies still fluttering in his stomach even after weeks of this. Ilya feels like he’s on top of the world.

Once they make it back down onto solid ground, they wander hand in hand towards some of the stalls. They’re mostly run by local vendors, selling honey, or greetings cards, or pastries, or handmade items.

When something catches his eye, Ilya tugs Shane to a stop in front of a stall selling jewellery. Laid out on a white table cloth there are two matching, woven bracelets made of brown leather, with metal clasps that have a love heart engraved onto them.

“How much for both of these?” Ilya asks.

“\$15,” the vendor - a teenage girl with ginger hair and black, winged eyeliner - says, barely glancing up from her phone.

Ilya hands the money over, and immediately grabs Shane’s wrist to fasten one of the bracelets around it.

“So we can match,” Ilya explains.

So when someone asks him about his bracelet, he gets to talk about his boyfriend.

Shane laughs. “You’re such a loser,” he teases, as he fastens Ilya’s bracelet onto his wrist with a happy little smile on his face. Then, “I love you.”

Ilya leans in, in search of a kiss, which Shane gives without any hesitation. “I love you, too.”

As they’re meandering through the fairground, making their way towards all of the games, Ilya spots someone in the distance. With her braids down her back, and shimmery gold top tied around her neck, Laila stands out in the crowd. She spots Ilya at almost the same time he spots her, and they wave enthusiastically before Laila turns back to her friend.

Beside him, Shane huffs. When Ilya looks at him, his brows are furrowed and he’s pouting all dramatically. He looks so cute, like an angry little kitten, and Ilya kind of wants to bite him. He can’t help but tap Shane on the end of his nose.

“What’s that face for?”

“Nothing.”

“Surely you’re not jealous?” Ilya laughs.

“Of course not.”

Shane’s never been a very good liar. At least, not when it comes to Ilya.

“She’s a lesbian,” he reminds Shane. “And, oh yeah, I’m *in love with you*.”

Shane’s frown slowly softens when Ilya peppers kisses on his hand, and then his cheeks, and then his forehead.

“You know, I mostly just talked to her about you.”

“Really?”

“Really,” Ilya confirms.

Shane thinks for a moment - Ilya can almost see the cogs turning in his brain - then he eventually nods his head. Satisfied that his boyfriend isn’t plotting some innocent girl’s death, they continue strolling through the crowd of people.

They don’t notice anyone else they know.

Maybe some of the people they’re familiar with see them - maybe even Gil and Pat, with their homophobic bullshit - but Ilya doesn’t care, and it’s clear that Shane doesn’t either.

He pulls Ilya around in whichever direction he pleases, knowing that Ilya will gladly follow along.

When they take turns competing on the basketball hoop game, Shane cheats by crowding up behind Ilya and winding his arms around his waist. He uses kisses to bribe Ilya into winning him another plush on the rifle game, where you have to knock down all the targets (it takes three goes, but Ilya eventually wins Shane’s a teddy bear with a cute rainbow bow tie around its neck).

Shane even jumps onto his back, letting Ilya carry him to meet their parents who are waiting for them near the food stalls.

Ilya can’t remember the last time he had this much fun, and he doesn’t think he’s *ever* laughed so much. It kind of feels like a fairytale, like something that happens in movies, or to other people. Ilya’s not sure what he’s done to deserve this, but he silently promises himself he’ll spend the rest of his life making sure he’s worthy.

“There you are!” Yuna calls out, when they finally find them.

Shane slides off Ilya’s back as they approach. “Hey, sorry. We got a little carried away.” He holds up his bear to show it off.

“Did you have fun?” Mama asks. She’s smiling at Ilya like he is every good thing in her world.

“So much,” Ilya tells her. Then he holds up his hand and says, “Look, we got matching bracelets.”

“Yuna, why haven’t you bought us matching jewellery?” David teases, earning a roll of Yuna’s eyes and a playful shove to his shoulder.

“You should be buying it for *me!*”

“Ha! Not on my salary. You earn more, darling.”

It’s sweet, watching the way they interact. Yuna and David were Ilya’s first ever example of a healthy, loving relationship. He remembers being so young, before he even really knew there was something wrong with his own family, and still wanting to be a part of theirs. Still wanting to belong to them.

Now he does.

As they make their way along the row of food carts, David gets funnel cake, Yuna gets chocolate covered strawberries, and mama gets a snow cone. Ilya and Shane, however, both get the cotton candy. Ilya gets the pink one and Shane gets the blue one, and they both stick their tongues out at each other as it dissolves in their mouths.

“Boys, smile,” mama says, and when they turn to look at her, she’s holding her phone up ready to take a picture.

It makes Ilya think of that photograph taped to the wall in his bedroom - the one where they’re clutching sticks of cotton candy, grinning with faces covered in melted ice cream. That was probably a decade ago, and look how far they’ve come. Look at the men they are becoming.

Back then, this summer life he got to live in for a while had felt like a too-big suit that Ilya was trying on. Now, it feels like he has started to grow into it.

He stands beside his boyfriend, their arms around each other, while they hold sticks of cotton candy in their hands. Right at the last moment, just as mama snaps the photograph, Ilya leans in and kisses Shane on the cheek.

“We can hang that up in our apartment,” Ilya whispers.

Shane hums softly in agreement. “Next to all the others.”

“We’ve got a lifetime of photos.”

“There’s still room for plenty more,” Shane promises.

Then he kisses Ilya, and Ilya kisses him back, and he feels like the entire world narrows down to this very moment. To cotton candy, and a summer afternoon, and a beautiful boy who loves him.

Shane used to belong to the summers, but now he belongs to Ilya.

so this is the longest thing i've ever written and i do *not* know how people write hundreds of thousands of words because oh my god. this reaffirmed why i write one-shots.

i did have so much fun, though! so i hope you guys enjoyed it :)

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