honey, tell me, are you good at staying still?

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honey, tell me, are you good at staying still?

by justhockey

Summary

Life feels so chaotic for Shane sometimes, with all the loud noises and the unwritten rules he's expected to follow, even though no one ever taught them to him. It's why the bookstore feels more like home to him than anywhere else in Boston. It doesn't ask Shane to be anything other than himself. Doesn't ask for any more than he can give.

He can just exist here.

Shane likes slow, likes taking his time. And Ilya - without saying or doing anything in particular - makes Shane feel like that's okay. Like he isn't doing anything wrong by standing still sometimes.

(Or, Shane works in a bookstore, Ilya plays hockey, and they both go to the same college. They fall in love in every universe.)

Notes

Title from *Staying Still* by Noah Kahan.

See the end of the work for more notes

The bookstore feels safe in a way that few things do.

It's far enough from campus that it's not most students go-to, but still close enough to get the foot traffic needed to keep it in business. It's small - not like the college one, or the franchise store that's closer - with narrow aisles, and towering stacks of books, and a faintly dusty smell that lingers no matter how many windows Shane opens, or how many times he cleans it.

He hardly ever sees the owner - a little old lady called Hattie, who either sticks to the back room or simply leaves Shane alone to work once he's here. She gave Shane a set of keys after only a month of him working at the shop, and he treats them like a prized possession.

The store is perfect. Warm, and cosy, and homey in a way that nowhere else here is.

There's a familiarity to it that makes it easier for Shane to breathe when things get loud, and busy, and too much. The books are organised the way Shane likes, and the bell above the door is a quiet chime that doesn't grate on him. He knows this place inside and out, knows the flow and the rhythm of it, knows that - while everything else here is all hustle and bustle - the store remains quiet, and steady, and unchanging.

There are no surprises here; nothing catches him off guard. He knows the kind of people who come into the store - some of them frequent enough visitors to be considered regulars - and he knows how the new shipments are arranged, and how the overflow stock is stored. He created the system, after all.

It's a routine carved into Shane's bones, in the way rivers carve paths through the countryside. Slow moving, certain, reliable.

Shane likes routine.

He likes knowing what's going to happen and when it's going to happen, and he doesn't like being caught by surprise. No sudden changes of plan, no rearranging the bookshelves, just the comfort of the same routine, day in and day out.

It's a Monday when that routine is disrupted.

It's the first week of the New Year and Shane has only been back in Boston for a day. His first task was taking down the Christmas lights, and the little tabletop Christmas tree that had been perched precariously on a stack of books since the day after American Thanksgiving. The store is feeling a little empty now, in the way rooms always do after Christmas, when all the decorations have been put away until next time.

It'll take Shane a couple of shifts to adjust to the change.

He's sitting behind the counter, re-reading the same dog-eared, cracked-spine version of *Aristotle and Dante* that he's read a dozen times before. It's a comfort book for Shane, one that makes him feel seen in a gentle, non-threatening kind of way. Not like he's being called-out, not exposed, just understood.

It was the first queer book he read, back when he knew there was something different about him - aside from the obvious - but he just didn't know *what.*

He likes to go back to it when his life feels messy, and there's nothing messier than this: the start of his final semester at Boston College.

The last three and half years have crawled by at a snails pace, and Shane has spent too much time wishing he could just hurry up and graduate with his English Lit degree so he could go home to Ottawa. He doesn't *hate* college, not in the slightest - he found Hayden and Rose here, after all. He's come to miss the slower pace of home, though.

But, now that the time is almost here he finds himself already starting to miss it.

His friends, who will be off to all different corners of the continent - Rose to New York, Hayden to Seattle for Jackie's med school, and J.J. to Quebec. The city of Boston, even though she's often too loud, too much for Shane. BC itself, with Gasson Hall's gothic revival bell tower overlooking the entire campus.

And most of all, this bookstore that feels like a tiny slice of peace amongst the chaos.

He's reading intently, even though he knows the book back to front by now, and he's just reaching a part where the pages are crinkly from all of Shane's tears, when the bell above the door chimes.

After almost three years working here, Shane is somewhat of an expert at discerning what kind of person has walked through the door, just by the sound it makes. Which is why he knows, before he even looks up from his book, that the customers entering are *not* his kind of people.

A bitter gust of early January wind precedes them, making the pages of Shane's book flutter.

They're instantly loud, their conversation from outside following them into the quiet of the bookstore without a change in volume, shattering Shane's peace. A group of guys, boisterous and unselfconscious, and definitely not the usual demographic that the store sees.

In fact, they're the exact demographic that Shane usually avoids.

This isn't high school, with the cliques and the popular kids and the bullies. But even in college - maybe *especially* in college - student athletes carry a certain gravitas with them. They enter every room like they own it, and seem to assume everyone thinks they're as important as they deign themselves to be.

The Eagles hockey team are legends at BC, and once upon a time, Shane could have been one of them. He doesn't like to think about that, though.

"Excuse me, hey, sorry," one of the guys says as he approaches the counter.

"Can I help?" Shane asks, always polite.

"Yeah, I need a book."

A few of the other guys snort loudly behind him, and one of them says, “We’re in a fucking book shop, Hazy. Of course you need a book.”

“Fuck off,” the first guy - Hazy, apparently- gripes. “He knows what I mean. Right?”

Shane nods. “Sure. What book are you looking for?”

Hazy - you gotta love hockey nicknames - slams his backpack down onto the counter making Shane flinch, and his perfect row of pens scatter all across the desk. It makes Shane’s eye twitch.

“Sorry,” he winces apologetically, as he roots around in his bag for something.

He - dramatically and triumphantly - pulls a scrunched-up sheet of paper from the bottom of the backpack, and starts smoothing it out on the counter. The crinkle of the paper, and the chatter from his teammates, and the chaos of Shane’s pens being all out of order, makes his skin feel fizzy.

But he bites his tongue, and waits patiently, because this is his job and he’s damn fucking good at it.

“Oh, this one! *Risk Management for Enterprises and Individuals.*”

“That’ll be in our business section,” Shane tells him. “It’s in the back left corner. Ordered alphabetically. I think we still have a couple copies left.”

“Oh thank god,” Hazy sighs. “The library and store on campus are all out, and I *will* fail without it.”

“Maybe if you hadn’t saved your least favourite requirement for your final semester…” another of the guys teases, and Hazy just flips him off.

They’re still noisy as they meander through Shane’s carefully curated aisles of books, still noisy as they read titles out loud for the fun of it, still loud as they taunt and bicker and talk over each other - five different voices all at once.

There’s a joke in there somewhere: *how many hockey players does it take to buy a book?*

Shane wishes the answer was zero. He wishes they would all get the fuck out of his store and stop disturbing his peace.

It takes them ten minutes to find and buy the book, and Shane’s teeth are starting to hurt from all the fuss they’re making. But just as they start to leave - just when Shane thinks he’s getting the shop back to himself - one of them waves the rest of his teammates on ahead of him, and hangs back.

“Sorry about them,” he says, the accented words rolling off his tongue in a way that almost sounds melodic. “They are…too much, I think, sometimes?”

Shane can feel himself flushing, embarrassed that his discomfort has been picked up on so easily by this complete stranger.

He's usually very good at hiding the worst parts of himself away from prying eyes.

"It's fine."

"I told them to be quiet, but I am only their captain on the ice."

Oh, *of course.*

Shane knows who this is.

Blond curls and arresting hazel eyes, 6'3" of pure muscle, with a Russian accent that makes every word out of his mouth sound like a sin. It's the smile he's wearing that catches Shane most off guard, though, because - for as intimidating as he probably *should* be - the smile he's wearing just makes him look like sunshine.

Ilya Rozanov.

You can't claim to know about hockey without knowing Rozanov's name.

The Russian phenom who all but turned his back on his homeland when he came to the US for college, lead the Eagles in points for the last three seasons, and is set to make his NHL debut for the Boston Bears next season. The most anticipated rookie in a decade.

And he's standing in front of Shane, in the middle of his quiet bookstore, smiling like there's nowhere else he would rather be.

"Well, thanks for trying," Shane says.

Ilya grins even wider. "I am Ilya Rozanov."

"Shane Hollander. Nice to meet you," Shane introduces himself, awkwardly offering his hand for Ilya to shake over the counter.

For a moment he worries this man is going to laugh at him for doing something so silly, but Ilya's grin slips into something a little softer, and he presses his warm palm against Shane's and shakes his hand. Steady, firm, but not like he's trying to make a point.

"It's nice to meet you, too," Ilya says. "Sorry again for my teammates. They are not housetrained yet."

Shane laughs, surprised by Rozanov's humour and his gentleness.

He's not as brash as his teammates were, not as…overwhelming. There's something about him that's almost peaceful, even. Unobtrusive. Like the edges of him have been sanded down so there are no sharp corners to disrupt Shane's comfort.

"I should catch up with them," Ilya announces, nodding his head in the direction of the door.

“Right, yeah, of course. It was, uh, good talking to you,” Shane says.

And, for some unknowable, embarrassing reason, he reaches his hand out for a second time. The moment he realises what he’s doing - and how fucking stupid he looks - he moves to pull it back, but Ilya is quicker. He takes Shane’s hand and shakes it carefully, not a shred of mockery on his face.

“Goodbye, Shane Hollander,” he says, as he slips out the door and disappears.

Oh no, Shane thinks. *He could be very, very dangerous.*

The bookstore is always quiet on Wednesday evenings; Shane isn’t sure of the reason behind it, but it’s been true since he first started working here. It’s one of his favourite times to be here, when the sun is going down and the footfall outside has mostly subsided, and there’s a kind of tranquility to it all.

He’s sitting behind the counter, making a start on the reading for his Asian literature class because he’s already done everything else that requires his attention.

Less than a chapter into *No-No Boy,* the bell above the door chimes softly.

Shane looks up on instinct, expecting perhaps one of the regular customers or a new face who’s unfamiliar with the unofficial way of things. But the breath is snatched from his lungs when he realises who is standing in the doorway watching him, a curious look on his face.

“Shane Hollander.”

“Ilya Rozanov.”

The smile Ilya gives Shane in response is dazzling. He has to force himself to look away for a moment, convinced that if he doesn’t then his cheeks will start to flush and give away this… this *feeling* swirling inside him.

After Ilya left the store a few days ago, Shane had given himself a very stern talking-to. A *get-a-grip-Shane* and *he’s-a-hockey-player-Shane* and *don’t-even-think-about-it-Shane* kind of talking to. It was a very thorough internal conversation.

He’d listened to it, and proceeded to complete disregard every single word.

Shane hasn’t been able to stop thinking about Ilya since.

And now he’s back again, and he remembers Shane’s name, and he’s smiling at him like he’s as happy to see Shane as Shane is to see Ilya. Big, *big* problem. Huge, in fact.

“Can I help you?” Shane asks him.

Ilya nods. “Yes, please. There is something very urgent I need to discuss with you.”

Intrigued, Shane sits up straighter on the stool he's perched on. Ilya digs around in his backpack as he approaches the counter, and just as he reaches it he pulls something out of his bag. A book, which he places carefully on the counter in front of Shane, sliding it towards him without knocking the row of pens or stack of paperwork.

It's *Aristotle and Dante.*

"That's - it's one of my favourite books."

Ilya nods his head again. "Yes, you were reading it when I came in on Monday. I wanted to see why you liked it so much."

Shane's heart stutters in his chest, like he's just missed a step on the stairs, and there's that moment of suspension before you land on solid ground again.

"How did you know I liked it?"

"The book was all worn and-" he makes a scrunching motions with his fingers, "-wrinkly. You've read it lots of times."

It's nothing, really. A very easy thing to pick up on. Shane shouldn't feel so taken aback by something so small, it's just. He's not sure if any of his friends could name his favourite books, or even his parents. How worn a book is, well - it isn't the kind of thing most people would pay attention to, is it?

Shane isn't used to being noticed like that.

"Yeah, I have," Shane acknowledges. "I know it pretty much by heart at this point."

"It's a beautiful book."

"Yeah. Yeah, it really is."

"It made me cry," Ilya confesses, with an ease that surprises Shane.

"It's, uh, not the kind of thing I'd expect you to read," Shane points out.

If someone had asked Shane what kind of books a Russian, almost-pro-athlete would like to read, a queer YA book wouldn't even make it onto the list. Though, for a literature student who works in a bookstore, maybe Shane should be a little bit better at judging books by their covers.

After all, Ilya is absolutely nothing like Shane would have expected.

He's seen him around Chestnut Hill a couple of times in passing, usually with his teammates or a beautiful woman on his arm. He's also caught a handful of hockey games too, and on the ice Ilya is…he's *ferocious.* Strong, and powerful, and enigmatic; it's almost impossible to take your eyes off him.

But standing here, in Shane's safe haven, it's almost like he's trying to make himself smaller. Trying to take up less space. Conscious of himself in a way that Shane hadn't expected of someone like him, who's usually larger than life.

"No?" Ilya asks, a knowing smirk on his face. "Why is that?"

Shane doesn't want to say, *because it's gay.* That would just be stupid. So instead-

"I just didn't know hockey players could read."

Ilya stares at him for a beat, and then he bursts out laughing. It's a low, rich sound that Shane can feel in the pit of his stomach.

"Oh, so you are asshole?"

"No," Shane denies, but he can feel his mouth curving upwards into a wry grin.

"And here I was, thinking you seemed like such a good Canadian boy…" Ilya teases.

And the thing is, *he is.* It's the kind of remark Shane might make to Hayden or J.J. or maybe even Rose, but certainly not to a stranger - to a potential *customer.* He's usually the perfectly Canadian boy his parents raised him to be.

There's something about Ilya, though. Something that makes Shane feel like he can let his guard down a little, like he doesn't always have to brace for impact.

Which is…yeah. Absolutely fucking terrifying, and a terrible, no good, very bad idea.

"How do you know I'm Canadian?"

"Your backpack," Ilya says, pointing to where it's hanging on a hook behind the counter. "You have a pin of the flag."

"Oh, right. Yeah."

They both just look at each other for a moment that feels slightly too long, but Shane doesn't know what to say that won't sound stupid, and Ilya seems more than happy to sit in the silence for a while.

That shouldn't be nice, but it is. Most people are so eager to fill silences instead of letting them breathe.

"So. This book," Ilya finally says, as he places his palm gently on top of it, "taught me a new word in English."

"Oh, yeah? What's that?"

"Inscrutable," Ilya says, and the way he focuses so hard on getting it right makes Shane smile.

“It’s a good word,” Shane tells him.

“I think this word is you, no?”

Yes, Shane wants to say. *Yes it is.*

Much like Ari in the book, Shane has always felt unknowable. Like there’s something inside of him that is different than everyone else, that doesn’t work quite how it is supposed to. His parents often don’t understand him, and it’s the same with his friends, but Shane feels so impossibly lucky that they love him anyway.

He knows how hard he makes it. His rules, and routines, and peculiarities make his world very small sometimes.

“I think maybe you are hard to understand,” Ilya continues. “But I also think you are worth it.”

Shane feels frozen, like a fossil preserved inside a glacier. He can’t move, he’s not even sure if he’s breathing.

There’s a part of him that wants to weep at the sweetness of Ilya’s words - weep over the fact that this stranger, who is so astronomically different from Shane, has seen something in him that he thinks is worth knowing. But the other part of him - the bigger part, that likes rules and order and structure - is starting to panic.

This is too much. *Ilya* is too much. Suddenly Shane isn’t sure he likes the way Ilya looks at him, like he can see through the facade.

Shane feels too vulnerable. Too exposed.

But before he can say anything, before he can ask Ilya to leave, he picks up the book and starts walking backwards towards the door.

“I’ll see you soon, Shane Hollander,” Ilya says.

Then the bell above the door rings out, and Ilya is gone.

He’d not come here this evening to disturb Shane. He had no expectations, or requests, or anything like that. He’d slipped in, confused the ever loving fuck out of Shane, and then slipped back out again - no trace of him left behind, except for the way Shane’s heart is beating too fast.

He finds himself staring for far too long at the empty space that Ilya just occupied. Shane’s mind is so fast, so jumbled, that he can’t string a single coherent thought together.

He is so lost in thought, so completely surprised by everything that Ilya is, that he doesn’t hear the door to the back room creak open, or shoes shuffling across old hardwood. He doesn’t notice Hattie’s presence until she rests her wrinkled hand on the counter besides Shane’s - not touching, she knows he doesn’t like that, but just close enough.

“That boy likes you,” she announces like it’s a fact.

“I barely know him,” Shane argues.

“So? Doesn’t stop him from giving you the googly eyes.”

Shane almost chokes on his own tongue. “What? *Googly eyes?* C’mon, Hattie. No. He was just - just asking about a book.”

“Your favourite book. That he read because he knew you liked it.”

Shane feels his cheeks turning red as he stammers, “How do you even *know* that? You were hiding away in the back!”

“I see and hear everything, kiddo,” she tells him, offering a knowing smile.

The thing about Hattie is that she’s usually always right, and the problem with that is - this time - he really wishes she wasn’t.

Shane doesn’t know how to be liked. Not in the way Hattie is implying, at least. Not seriously, and certainly not by another man. Shane’s gay, he’s known for years now, but there’s never, like, *been* anybody for him. Sure, he’s had messy kisses and one uncoordinated handjob by a stranger in a bar, but not by someone he liked, who liked him back. Not in any kind of way that mattered.

And Ilya…Ilya feels like someone who could matter. Maybe. In some alternate universe where Shane was the kind of person that people fell for, and Ilya was the kind of guy who was into other guys.

The next time Ilya comes into the bookstore, it’s a dreary Monday evening. The wind is howling, and the rain is a deluge lashing against the windows.

Hattie had left an hour ago, telling Shane not to worry about their regular closing time and to just close up the shop whenever he was ready to go home; it’s not like they’ll get any customers in this kind of weather anyway.

But for all that Shane loves the bookstore, he loves it the most when it’s like this.

He loves being inside on a miserable day, listening to the sound of the wind and the rain. It feels like he’s inside one of those rain shakers they used to bring out in music class when Shane was a kid - like he’s in a warm, safe cocoon, while the world rages on around him. In here, with his books and his order, it feels like a port in the middle of a storm.

It’s bitterly cold out, and the rain stings sharp against skin when it catches you, so Ilya could have been forgiven for barging into the shop unceremoniously. Shane would have understood. But he doesn’t do that at all. Instead, the door chimes as softly as it always does, Ilya steps inside, and he gently closes the door behind him.

“It’s raining,” he points out unnecessarily, as he pulls down the hood of his not-so-waterproof jacket.

“Yes,” Shane agrees. “You’re dripping all over my floor.”

“Sorry,” Ilya says, in a way that makes it clear he actually isn’t sorry at all.

It shouldn’t make Shane smile, but it does anyway. That seems to be a pattern when it comes to Ilya Rozanov. And the fact that Shane has a pattern *at all* when it comes to him? Well. That’s not something he has the capacity to even think about right now.

Not as Ilya stands in front of him, dripping all over Hattie’s hardwood floor.

He still manages to look, well, *beautiful*. He’s soaked through to the bone, his curls are darker because they’re wet, and flattened against his skull, and his cheeks are flushed from the cold, but he’s still smiling like he doesn’t have a care in the world. Like this is nothing more than a minor inconvenience.

“You should, uh - there’s a coat rack behind you,” Shane informs him, pointing over Ilya’s shoulder to it. “You can hang your jacket up, if you want to.”

Ilya does, and Shane tries not to get excited about the fact that it might mean he’s planning to stay for a while.

Ilya’s wearing a maroon Eagles hoodie underneath his jacket, with a gold 81 printed over the right side of his chest. It’s clear that the rain has soaked through his coat because the shoulders are a darker shade of red, and his dripping hair just keeps adding to it. Ilya doesn’t seem to mind, though, as he saunters up to the counter and rests his arms on it like he’s exactly where he belongs.

“Hello, Shane Hollander.”

“You know you can just call me Shane, right?”

Ilya grins. “Okay, *Shane.* It is nice to see you again.”

Shane finds himself tapping his fingers against his thigh in a nervous rhythm, as he asks, “Are you here for another urgent discussion?”

The last urgent discussion had been more of a quick debrief over Shane’s favourite book, and an all-too-accurate read on Shane being *inscrutable.*

He’s not sure what reason Ilya could possibly have for coming back here. There’s a library on campus, and two other bookstores closer than this one. It’s hard to imagine there’s another reason for Ilya to be here other than, well, *Shane.* But as someone who is all too familiar with the way disappointment weighs on your lungs like an anvil, Shane tries his hardest not to get his hopes up about that.

“Nope. This time, I am just here to see you,” Ilya confesses, as casually and easily as breathing. Like it’s no big deal at all to admit something like that.

“Me?”

Ilya hums in confirmation. “Yes. You. You make me curious, Shane.”

The way he says it is kind. Honest. Not an insult. Not a *”I don’t* get *you, Shane,”* like he’s heard so many times before. Not like Shane is a mess that needs to be untangled. Ilya says it like Shane is a puzzle that he wants to take the time to solve.

Like Shane is someone who is worth that kind of effort.

“Sounds dangerous,” Shane says, the words trembling softly as he speaks them.

Ilya just shrugs his shoulders and smiles. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

There’s something about Ilya that feels so *patient.*

Everyone is always in such a rush these days, and Shane knows that makes him sound like an old man but it’s *true.* Everything is about speed, about immediate gratification, about trying to speedrun through life.

But if you’re always rushing through life to get to the good parts, you end up missing the *best* parts.

Life feels so chaotic for Shane sometimes, with all the loud noises and the unwritten rules he’s expected to follow, even though no one ever taught them to him. It’s why the bookstore feels more like home to him than anywhere else in Boston. It doesn’t ask Shane to be anything other than himself. Doesn’t ask for any more than he can give.

He can just exist here.

Shane likes slow, likes taking his time. And Ilya - without saying or doing anything in particular - makes Shane feel like that’s okay. Like he isn’t doing anything wrong by standing still sometimes.

“Can I get you a drink?” Shane offers suddenly. He wants to give Ilya a reason to stick around for a while.

“I would like that.”

“Tea? Coffee? How do you take it?”

“Coffee, please. Black. Two sugars,” Ilya tells him.

“Okay. I’ll be quick. You can sit down, if you want,” he says, gesturing to the second stool that’s next to his behind the counter.

Only Shane and Hattie are technically allowed near the till, but, well. He thinks he can maybe bend the rules just this once.

On his way through to the room in the back - which is half office, half break room - Shane pauses in front of the door. He thinks about it for a second too long, and then he flips the sign from *open* to *closed.* Hattie said he could close up at any time, so it's not like he's doing anything wrong.

And he doubts there'll be any more customers today; only a crazy person would show up in this weather.

Ilya doesn't mention it, but Shane sees him smiling as he slips into the back.

It doesn't take more than a couple of minutes to make their drinks. Black coffee, two sugars for Ilya. Green tea with honey for Shane. His hands don't shake as he carries them, but his heart is beating faster than it probably should be.

Ilya is sitting on the stool beside Shane's when he comes back, and Ilya smiles at him sweetly.

"Good game on Saturday," Shane says as he hands Ilya his steaming cup of coffee and sits down.

He'd been rehearsing that as he waited for the kettle to boil. Repeating the question in his head as he'd heaped the sugar and instant coffee that Hattie always buys into a mug with a v-shaped chip on the rim, and the words *DON'T FUCKING TALK TO ME* in pink lettering on the side.

It still comes out a little weird, but Ilya's eyes light up the second the words leave Shane's mouth.

"You went to the game?"

"I just saw the score," Shane lies. He'd watched the livestream. "Two goals is impressive."

"Oh, so you are stalking me."

It's not even a question; it's said with such blunt confidence that Shane almost sprays tea out of his nose.

Ilya laughs, his eyes sparkling with mischief as tea drips down Shane's chin. It should be unbearably embarrassing - the kind of mishap that would usually send Shane spiralling. But instead he finds himself feeling all warm and fuzzy in a good way, when Ilya lifts a hand and carefully wipes Shane's chin with the sleeve of his hoodie.

"There is no need to drool over me, Shane," Ilya teases, in that sweet way that manages to never sound like an insult.

"I am *not* stalking you," Shane denies. "And I'm not drooling over you, either."

The second part is true at least, but the first part maybe not so much. Though *stalking* is such a strong word. Sure, Shane has checked the Eagles' instagram two or ten times, in search of

snapshots of Ilya, and he might have checked his *Elite Prospects* page a couple of times as well, but that's hardly considered stalking.

It's a totally reasonable thing to do, in Shane's opinion.

(Shane is an expert at lying to himself.)

"If you say so," Ilya sings, then takes a sip of his coffee. "Mm. Just right. Thank you."

Shane likes following rules and instructions, he likes getting them right, and he likes doing a good job. He's glad he made the coffee right, glad Ilya is enjoying it, glad Ilya is here at all, occupying a space that - instead of just barging into - Ilya has allowed to gently expand around him, so he can fit inside of it alongside Shane.

Shane has never been very good with people.

Ever since he was a little boy, he's often felt like he was on the outside, looking in. Like everyone else was playing a game that he didn't know the rules of.

You're supposed to always tell the truth, except for when it's considered impolite (but when is it impolite?). You're supposed to make eye contact when someone is talking to you, but not *too* much (and how much is too much?).

People don't always say what they mean or mean what they say, and you're supposed to somehow just be able to tell the difference. People will smile at you while being profoundly unkind, or frown when they're being sincere, or cry when they're happy, and none of those things fit the emotions they're trying to convey, but somehow you're supposed to understand it anyway.

So Shane learned, and he studied, and he copied, until he could just about pass for normal, but he still doesn't get most people.

And he certainly doesn't make friends easily.

He met Hayden when he transferred to Shane's high school during their junior year, and - for some reason - Hayden liked Shane enough to be his friend. When they found out they both loved hockey, and they both wanted to go to BC, well, they were inseparable after that.

Rose came next, in Shane's freshman year of college, when she sat next to him in a script-writing class and they bonded over their mutual hatred of terrible book-to-screen adaptations.

J.J. was Hayden's friend first, really, because they were freshman roommates, but they got on well enough that they've formed a nice little group. One that has seen Shane through the best and worst parts of college here in Boston.

But sometimes Shane feels like he is tricking everyone around him into liking him. Like if he took off the mask, if he showed them the real version of himself, they might not like what they see.

It doesn't feel like that with Ilya.

Ilya is clear and straightforward and he doesn't make Shane guess what he is thinking, because he has no problem in just saying it.

He also seems to like Shane exactly as he is, even when he's not performing. Somehow, in the impossibly short time they have known each other, Ilya has managed to make Shane feel comfortable in a way that he rarely does. Not just around strangers, but around people he knows and loves as well.

"So…you're here to see me?" Shane asks.

Ilya nods his head. "Yes. I am."

"Okay. Why? What are you-" Shane pauses. Adjusts. "I mean, I'm glad you're here. I just don't really get *why.*" Shane is entirely unremarkable.

Even as Ilya sips on his coffee, his smile is visible from the way the corners of his mouth peek over the rim of his mug.

"You're glad I'm here?"

"I - well, yes," Shane admits. "I am."

"Good," Ilya says. Then, "You caught my attention."

Shane feels his cheeks warming as he asks, "When you were here with your teammates?"

Ilya nods his head, then shakes it, then nods it again. In lieu of even trying to figure out what that means, Shane simply raises an eyebrow. Ilya laughs softly, then wipes the corners of his mouth with his finger and thumb even though there's nothing there.

"Yes, you caught my attention then. But also, before that."

Shane's brows furrow. "When?"

Sure, he's seen Ilya while walking around Chestnut Hill campus, but that was only in passing, in the same way he's seen thousands of other students. He may have never even noticed Ilya at all if Shane didn't already know who he was (that's another lie; Ilya is far too beautiful to ever go unnoticed).

He's not sure when Ilya could have possibly noticed *him* though. For as large as he is - 6'0" of hard-earned muscle - Shane tries his absolute hardest to remain completely anonymous.

"We shared a class together last year," Ilya tells him. It catches Shane by surprise.

"We did?"

Ilya hums in acknowledgment. "Introduction to Russian Literature."

Ah, that makes sense then. Shane can't help but smile. He wishes he'd known back then, wishes he could have paid attention to Ilya. It would have been nice, he thinks, to have

known him for longer. He suddenly feels like he's missed out on so much time.

"You were…I don't even know the word," Ilya says, smiling softly. "Every time you raised your hand to speak, I couldn't take my eyes off you. You and those freckles."

Oh.

Shane doesn't even know what to think, or say.

It might be the nicest thing anyone has ever thought or said about him, and Ilya just drops it so casually, like it costs him nothing at all to make Shane feel like he someone worth paying attention to.

In all of Shane's efforts to remain under the radar, Ilya had managed to see something in him that was worth noticing. Something that he *liked,* when so many people find Shane strange, or off-putting, or unlikeable.

"Was that too much?" Ilya questions, looking worried for the first time since they met.

Shane instantly shakes his head. "No," he promises. "Not too much. Just - unexpected, I think."

Ilya frowns a little at that. "But you know you are beautiful, yes?"

Shane chokes. "What? *No,* that's-"

"Shane, you are so beautiful it kind of hurts to look at you. You take my breath," Ilya says, as he pats a hand over his chest. "And the way you talk…it is like every single word you say matters. Like you care about everything very deeply. It's, I don't know - captivating?"

Shane wants to cry.

He bites his lip to try and hold it in, but he can feel his eyes starting to water. As much as Shane has always tried to control and conceal his emotions, his eyes always give him away. *Windows to the soul,* his dad always calls them, and right now Shane's soul feels like fireworks.

To be noticed - and truly *seen* - by *anyone* has always seemed like a pipe dream for someone like Shane. But to have a man like Ilya not only pick him out of a crowd, but see past the mask and down to the heart of Shane, feels like a gift he could never truly deserve.

"Shane? Did I make you sad?" Ilya asks, concern bleeding from every word.

Shane shakes his head. He doesn't know *what* he's feeling, exactly. He just knows that it's big. So big it hardly fits beneath his ribcage.

"No," Shane assures him. "That was a really nice thing to say."

Ilya just shrugs his shoulder, impossibly nonchalant, and insists, "It is just the truth."

Ilya is right, about Shane treating every single word like it matters. Language - as much as he loves it - can be hard for him sometimes, given that people don't always say what they mean, and that sometimes they hear things even when you do not say them, reading between lines and inventing narratives that don't exist.

Shane is used to being misunderstood, and so he's always careful with his words. Intentional, so he can't possibly be misunderstood.

But Ilya - he's so free with his words. So honest, even if it means showing his soft underbelly. Even if it means he risks being misunderstood. Shane is equal parts jealous, and in awe of him.

Before he starts crying, Shane shakes his head a little to recalibrate himself, and asks, "So, are you looking forward to the Beanpot? It's coming up soon, right?"

The Beanpot is a college hockey tournament where the four D1 hockey teams in the Greater Boston area compete for a trophy and, most importantly, bragging rights for the next year.

It's a big deal for anyone in Boston who gives a crap about hockey. And, well, it's *Boston,* so *most* people care about hockey.

Ilya's eyes widen in surprise, and a grin stretches slowly across his face. "You know hockey." He says it like it's an accusation, and Shane just shrugs his shoulders.

"I know a little," Shane lies. He knows a lot. More than he's ready to talk about, though.

"It should be fun," Ilya says. "We're against Harvard first…"

They talk for entirely too long, given that they're holed up in the bookstore. They talk about hockey, and Shane's classes, and Ilya's too. He's studying sociology with a concentration in health and medicine, which absolutely blew Shane's mind when Ilya told him.

The sun went down while neither of them were paying any attention to the passage of time, and Shane suddenly becomes aware that he should have locked up and left almost an hour ago.

Before he can worry about how to broach the subject and tell Ilya that they both kind of need to leave, Ilya sighs and slaps his hands onto his thighs.

"Well, I should be probably go home now," he announces, like he can read Shane's mind. "I have practice in the morning before classes."

Shane finds that he doesn't *really* want Ilya to leave. Instead of his company being an unwelcome intrusion - a disturbance to the quiet comfort the store provides Shane with - Ilya is someone who adds to it. His presences settles instead of disrupts, calms instead of stresses.

Ilya Rozanov is like taking a hit of pure oxygen, after only ever breathing in polluted air.

But it's dark out, and Shane has an early class tomorrow as well. So he nods in agreement, and they both stand up together - Ilya to get his jacket from where it's hanging on the coat

stand, and Shane to put their long-empty cups in the sink in the back room.

Ilya hovers at the door, a hand on the shiny, brass doorknob as he looks back over his shoulder at Shane.

“Is it okay if I keep visiting you?” He asks quietly.

Shane can feel himself blushing as he nods and says, “Yes. Please. I’d like that.”

The rain has softened to a drizzle by the time Ilya walks out the door. And when Shane locks up shortly after, it’s stopped altogether.

By the time Shane gets back to the dorm room he shares with Hayden, he’s got a bright pink post-it note folded into the palm of his hand that’s warm from how many times Shane has opened it and looked at it. Ilya left his number for Shane, without Shane even realising.

He keeps checking to make sure the numbers are still there - that he hasn’t imagined the whole thing.

It’s close to nine o’clock when he finally steps back into his dorm, and suddenly the exhaustion that seemed to disappear when he was with Ilya comes rushing back at full speed. Shane was in the gym by six-thirty this morning, he’s had a full day of classes, and then stayed at the store an hour past closing time because he got lost in Ilya. Shane wants nothing more than to sleep.

Unfortunately, Hayden has other plans.

“Hey, are you - oh my god.”

“What? What’s wrong?” Shane asks, instantly concerned.

“What’s wrong with *me?* What’s wrong with *you?*” Hayden gasps. “You’re - oh my god, Shane. You’re *smiling!*”

“What? No I’m - oh, fuck you,” Shane says, because, well, it’s not like he can deny it. He’s grinning like a madman.

Hayden is watching Shane like he’s some kind of elusive wild animal as unpacks his bag and puts everything back where it belongs.

“What?” He eventually snaps, when Hayden is *still* staring at him after he’s changed into a pair of ratty sweats and a t-shirt.

“Seriously, dude. What the fuck? Why are you smiling like that?”

Shane rolls his eyes. “Can I not be in a good mood?”

“Sure you can, but your good moods don’t usually look like-“ Hayden waves his hands around, gesturing at Shane, “-like *this.*”

He's right, of course. Hayden has been his best friend for five years, and they've lived together for the past two. He's witnessed Shane shut down and be unable to speak, witnessed him scratch his arms bloody when he's overwhelmed, witnessed him deliriously happy when he won first place in a writing competition last year.

He's still probably never seen Shane like this: a quiet, settled kind of happy that sinks into his bones instead of just settling on the surface.

"I just had a good day, that's all," Shane tells him and, thankfully, Hayden gives in.

Shane reads a couple more chapters of his latest book while Hayden scrolls through TikTok or something - headphones in, of course, because the sound is grating - and then, when he can barely keep his eyes open, he flicks off the lamp on his bedside table.

And, just before Shane falls asleep, he enters a new number into his phone and sends a text:

Shane: *Goodnight, Ilya.*

Ilya: *Goodnight, Shane.*

Ilya keeps popping into the store, sometimes unannounced - a change in routine that, for the first time in his life, Shane finds he doesn't mind much at all - or sometimes with a five-minute warning text just to give Shane a heads up.

Sometimes he has questions about a book he's reading because Shane mentioned it to him.

Sometimes he's still sweaty after the gym or practice.

Sometimes he stays an hour past closing time, talking until the sun starts to go down.

Sometimes he only pops his head in for a moment, just to say hello and see Shane's face crack wide open with a smile.

Ilya shows up one Saturday, on the morning before a game. It's bitterly cold out and there's snow in the sky, and Ilya's nose is pink when he pushes open the door and steps inside.

Before the door has even clicked shut behind him, he gets accosted by a group of freshman girls who - by the sound of it - are wishing him luck for tonight. He nods when they talk to him, answers politely, voice low and pleasant as he keeps a smile on his face, but his eyes keep darting over their heads to search for Shane.

He somehow manages to always make Shane feel like the most important person in the room, and for someone who has spent a long time trying to make himself less visible, that's a dangerous fucking thing.

Shane is in the middle of helping an elderly lady called Gwyneth buy a stack of spicy books she has no business in reading, but it's the feel of Ilya's eyes watching him that is causing his

cheeks to heat up. He hurries through the sale, places her books in a paper bag, and bids her a good day just as Ilya starts to make his approach.

“That woman just bought six books that would make a sex worker blush,” Shane says in place of a greeting.

Ilya snorts, his nose scrunching up in a way that makes him look so sweet Shane just wants to poke his cheek. Ilya wiggles his eyebrows salaciously as he says, “She probably has a sex dungeon in her basement.”

Shane laughs, rolling his eyes fondly. “Yeah, I bet you’d like that.”

“Hey, I don’t discriminate. Age, sex, gender, race...I have enough love for everyone.”

“Oh, so you’re an equal opportunity slut?” Shane teases him, the chirp coming easier with Ilya than it does with anyone else.

Ilya gasps, a hand over his chest like Shane has just offended his delicate sensibilities.

“See! What did I say? You are asshole. Everyone must know this,” Ilya insists, then he clears his throat and cups his hands around his mouth to announce to the now-empty shop: “Everyone! Shane Hollander is-“

Shane is out from behind the counter and slapping his hand over Ilya’s mouth before he can get another word out. Behind Shane’s hand Ilya laughs, his breath hot and damp against Shane’s skin as he tries to silence Ilya.

“Be quiet,” Shane huffs, even though he’s trying his hardest not to laugh as well. “My boss will hear you!”

Ilya scoffs as he wraps his long, steady fingers around Shane’s wrist and pulls his hand away from his mouth. He doesn’t let go, though, as they drop their hands into the space between them.

It’s not the first time they’ve touched in all the weeks they’ve known each other, but it’s the first time it hasn’t been incidental - a brush of hands, or a knock of their elbows, or their knees bumping as they sit side by side.

He wonders if Ilya can feel the way Shane’s pulse is thrumming erratically beneath his thumb.

“Hattie loves me, she won’t mind,” Ilya claims.

And, unfortunately, it’s true.

Ilya had shown up one windy day while Hattie was chatting with Shane, and he’d charmed her in an instant. He complimented her eclectic mug collection, and her knitted cardigan with ladybugs all over it, and that was that. They were joking like old friends by the time Ilya left, with a promise to come back and see her again.

Shane is half convinced Hattie would help Ilya get away with murder at this point.

“She’ll mind if you scare off her customers.”

Ilya looks around the empty shop. “Ah, yes. All these customers.”

“Fuck off,” Shane chuckles, rolling his eyes once more. Fond exasperation seems to be his most prominent emotion when Ilya is around.

Ilya grins cheekily in response, and then finally lets go of Shane’s wrist. Shane has to fight the urge to chase his touch - to take his hand, and lace their fingers together, and press a kiss to his knuckles.

He likes Ilya entirely too much. It’s starting to become a problem.

“So are you here for a reason, or just here to annoy me?” Shane asks.

Ilya grins as he leans one hip against the counter casually, like he’s got nowhere else to be and nothing better to do.

“Being here to annoy you *is* a reason,” Ilya argues. “But yes, this time I am here for reason.”

Shane waits for him to elaborate, but he doesn’t. He just stands there, leaning against the front desk and smiling, until gestures *more* with a wave of his hand.

“I was coming to tell you that I have a game tonight, if you would like to come.”

“Ilya,” Shane says softly.

He’s flattered beyond measure that Ilya would come out of his way to ask Shane that, instead of just texting or calling him. But he also instantly feels the pressure beginning to mount.

He loves hockey. So much that he kind of hates it a little. And he misses it more than he can say - more than he can find the words to talk about.

“No pressure, or anything,” Ilya promises. “Just - the offer is there, if you want it.”

And Shane instantly feels like crying, because, even though they never mean to, his friends sometimes make him feel guilty or like he’s boring for not wanting to go out with them to clubs, or events, or to games, where there are so many unknown variables that Shane has no control over. The kinds of things that make his head ache from how hard he’s clenching his jaw.

But not Ilya.

Ilya is offering, but not asking.

There’s no pressure or expectation from him, almost like he already knows Shane well enough to avoid that kind of thing.

“I’ll think about it, is that okay?” Shane asks, and he finds that he means it. That he wants to want to go, for Ilya’s sake.

Ilya smiles at him, slow and soft like the rising sun. “That is more than okay.”

Shane doesn’t end up going, in the end. But he texts Ilya *good game* after they win, and he gets a sweaty, post-game selfie of Ilya in his compression shirt in response.

If Shane saves it, well. That’s no one’s business but his own.

Life keeps both of them busy.

With classes and the shop for Shane, and classes and hockey for Ilya, their final semester of college is shaping up to be a busy one.

As January rolls into February - and the brutal weather doesn’t let up - their workload grows, and Ilya’s team keeps winning games, and somehow they still find ways to spend time together. It becomes a priority for both of them. A routine, if you will, and the familiarity of it does just enough to balance out the panic of Shane’s realisation that he likes Ilya. Far more than he should. Far more than he’s ever liked anybody before.

For a while, the bookstore and Ilya feel like one part of Shane’s life, and the rest of it - school, and his friends, and his parents - feel like another part. Two separate sides of him that never cross paths, never meet in the middle.

But that all changes one evening, when Ilya shows up at closing time just so he can walk back to campus with Shane.

“I’m just saying,” Shane continues with his rant, “that if you take a book from one of the shelves, you should put it back in the same place. Why would you pick it up, read the blurb, and then put it back on the shelf above?”

“This should be a crime, Shane,” Ilya agrees, completely deadpan. “We should contact the mayor and get them to do something about it.”

Shane snorts, listing sideways to bump his shoulder against Ilya’s playfully. “Leave me alone,” he whines. “I’m right, and it’s dumb.”

“Of course you are right. People are-“

Ilya is cut off when Shane’s phone starts to ring.

“Oh sorry, one sec.” Shane finishes his phone out of his pocket, and he winces when he sees the caller ID on the screen. “Sorry, it’s my mom. I gotta take it.”

Ilya doesn’t saying anything, just nods his head and gestures *go ahead* with his hand. Shane answers the facetime request, and his mom’s face - and half of his dad’s - appears on the screen. They’re both grinning widely, and holding the phone a little too close to their faces.

“Shane, sweetie! How are you? We miss you,” his mom says.

“Yeah buddy, you haven’t called us in a few days,” his dad chips in.

“Sorry, I’ve just been busy. Classes, and the store, and stuff.”

Ilya hops in front of Shane and starts walking backwards so he can mouth, *“And me.”* Shane fights the urge to roll his eyes, and Ilya winks at him. With his free hand, Shane flips him off out of the line of the camera so his parents don’t see.

“And it’s all okay?” His mom asks.

“Everything is great,” Shane answers honestly.

He knows they worry about him. He’s always been their oddball kid who used to cry if he could feel the seam of his socks, or the lights in the grocery store were too bright, or if he could hear the hum of the electricity when he was trying to sleep. They watched him struggle to fit in, struggle to make friends, struggle to be, well, *normal.*

They were relieved when he and Hayden decided to go to BC together, and even more relieved when Shane dropped Rose and J.J. into conversation, and they realised he’d actually managed to make friends.

But they know what he gets like. They have front-row access to the way he shuts down for the first few days of Christmas or summer break, when he’s back home in his childhood bedroom and the months of classes, and work, and people, and chaos all catch up to him.

It clearly comes as a surprise to see Shane so happy, so…relaxed, almost. He can tell by their faces.

“Well that’s good, kiddo,” his dad says. “You’re looking good. Happy.”

“Yeah. I am.”

He glances over to Ilya - the reason for Shane’s aforementioned happiness - where he’s walking back at Shane’s side now. He’s still watching Shane though, and when their gazes meet Shane sees something twinkling in Ilya’s eyes. Something cunning and nefarious.

Before Shane can figure it out, Ilya is stepping closer to him and throwing an arm over Shane’s shoulder. Ilya presses his cheek against Shane’s, forcing his way into the frame so Shane’s parents get a perfectly clear view of him.

Oh, Jesus fuck.

“Hello Mr and Mrs Hollander, it’s nice to meet you. I’m Ilya Rozanov, Shane’s best friend,” he confidently introduces himself.

“Hayden is my best friend.”

“Liar,” Ilya argues.

But he is so much more than Shane's best friend, in a way that he can't put a name or label to. Best friend doesn't seem like enough for the way Ilya has slipped into Shane's life and made it brighter, in such a short space of time.

"Oh," Shane's mom says quietly. "Hello, Ilya. It's nice to meet you."

"Shane says you make the best sushi in the world."

"Ilya," Shane chastises him, but he knows it's useless because he can see himself smiling in the camera.

Shane's mom's face lights up like a Christmas tree, and his dad laughs loudly and nods his head in agreement.

"He's right, Ilya. It's world class."

"I asked Shane to make it for me but he says he can't cook," Ilya says, sneaking a cheeky wink in Shane's direction.

"Oh, he's *awful,*" his mom chuckles. "Once he burned a pizza so badly that it basically turned to dust."

All three of them laugh at Shane's expense, but he finds himself laughing along with them anyway. He can't help it.

There's something about seeing Ilya interact with his parents like this, so casual and easy, that it makes his chest feel warm. They know Hayden, of course, and they've briefly met Rose and J.J. on the few occasions that they've visited Boston, but this feels different.

It doesn't feel like his parents are meeting his new friend. It feels like they're meeting someone…more.

"No. Absolutely not. You're not allowed to gang up on me, it isn't fair."

"But Shane," Ilya whines, "your parents are so much cooler than you."

Shane elbows Ilya. "You little-"

"Shane Hollander!"

"Sorry mom," Shane apologises, but he uses his free hand to pinch Ilya's side until he yelps.

They chat for a little while longer - or, Ilya chats with Shane's parents while Shane mostly just listens - but it's nice. Really fucking nice, actually. Ilya is in his element, charming Shane's parents like he's getting paid to do it, and impressing Yuna Hollander is *not* an easy feat, so it kind of feels like he's watching a miracle in progress.

They eventually say goodbye, but not before making Shane promise that they'll get to talk to Ilya another time.

“I can’t believe you did that,” Shane laughs a little manically, once his phone is safely tucked away again.

“Why?” Ilya asks. “You talk about them a lot. I wanted to meet the people who made my favourite person.”

Shane doesn’t know what the fuck he’s supposed to say to that.

He feels like laughing, or crying, or fucking jumping for joy. Instead, he bumps their shoulders together and doesn’t say a word; he’s not sure the right ones even exist for the way Ilya just made him feel.

He hopes the press of their shoulders speaks for him.

They walk mostly in silence for a while, and they’re almost back to campus when Ilya says, almost wistfully, “I like your parents.”

Shane turns his head to look at Ilya, and catches an expression on his face that he can’t quite figure out. It’s not one Shane has seen him wearing before. Ilya looks like he’s thinking really hard about something that hurts, that makes him sad.

Ilya doesn’t talk about his family or about Russia, and Shane doesn’t want to pry, so - for the briefest of moments - he takes Ilya’s hand and squeezes it tightly.

“They really liked you,” he says.

“You think?”

“Oh, I *know,*” Shane laughs. “I guarantee my mom will call me again later, just to talk about you.”

That makes Ilya smile and, for now at least, the sadness in his eyes is replaced with something soft and warm and light.

Shane likes that.

He doesn’t ever want to see Ilya hurting.

Shane has just finished putting away his clean laundry when his phone starts to ring.

He hurries over to his bed where he’d tossed it earlier, and - if he weren’t alone - the expression on his face when he sees Ilya’s name would be absolutely humiliating. He’s certain he looks like a teenager with his very crush. Which, honestly, isn’t all that far from the truth.

No one has ever given Shane butterflies before. Not the good kind, at least.

“Hello,” Shane answers.

“Hey, are you busy?” Ilya asks.

He’s taken to calling Shane recently. They still text - probably more than can be considered healthy - but he calls as well, usually when he’s got a question. *“Is easier this way. Things do not get so lost in translation,”* Ilya had once explained, and Shane knows it’s for his benefit, so he doesn’t misinterpret or misunderstand.

“I’m not busy. I just finished doing my laundry.”

“Did you use the right detergent this time? The other makes your clothes too scratchy.”

Shane finds himself squeezing his eyes closed and taking a second to just breathe, before he replies, “Yeah, Ilya. I used the right one.” He’s grinning like a madman.

“Okay, good,” Ilya says. Then, “Can I take you somewhere?”

Thirty minutes later, they’re sitting down on a picnic blanket down by Chestnut Hill Reservoir.

It’s mid-February so it’s still freezing out, but they’re both wrapped up warm, and the blanket is thick enough to insulate against the frozen ground. And Ilya - the unbelievably, impossibly sweet man that he is - has brought a thermos of green tea with honey in it. He doesn’t even *like* green tea; he grimaced and wrinkled his nose the first time he tried it. He brought it because Shane likes it.

And Shane…he can’t let himself think about that too much.

The next thing Ilya pulls out of the thermal bag - that he sneakily borrowed from Hattie - makes Shane cover his face and shake his head in disbelief as he laughs.

“I know it’s not your mom’s, but it’s very highly rated. I checked,” Ilya says, as he hands over the sushi.

“It’s perfect, Ilya,” Shane promises, because what else can he say?

This is the most thoughtful thing anyone has ever done for him.

They talk for a while as they drink their tea and eat their sushi, about everything and nothing. Shane mentions one of his professors who he’s absolutely certain hates him, and Ilya talks about how rude the former pro-athlete was that he had to interview for one of his assignments.

Conversation is easy, and flows naturally, until it turns to hockey.

The Eagles’ season is heating up and it’s looking like they’ll make it to the Frozen Four again this year. They’re aiming to win it back to back, Ilya claims proudly, and the longing burns through Shane’s chest like a wildfire.

That should have been him.

“I miss hockey,” he confesses, voice so quiet it’s almost carried away by the wind.

He doesn’t talk about this. Ever. But he kind of wants to, with Ilya. Shane thinks every single part of himself would safe in Ilya’s hands.

“You played?” Ilya asks, surprise evident on his face from the way his eyebrows shoot up towards his perfect hairline.

Shane nods. “Yeah. I was good, too.”

“Like, how good?”

“Good enough to go pro,” Shane admits.

“Wow,” Ilya murmurs. “You never mentioned anything.” It’s not a question, but it sounds like one.

“It’s hard for me to talk about,” Shane tells him.

Beyond telling his parents he wanted to quit - and begrudgingly, heartbreakingly explaining why - Shane hasn’t talked about it since. He didn’t have to explain to Hayden, who was on the team with him back in high school and saw how everything went down. And Shane just hasn’t found the courage to bring it up in all the years after.

It hurts too much, the wound so deep inside of him that he doubts it will ever fully feel.

“I’ll listen,” Ilya says quietly, “if you want to talk about it now.” No demands, just a gentle offer.

“I think I do. Is that okay?”

“Of course.”

“I loved it,” Shane begins. “I *lived* it. The second I could walk, I started skating. It is - *was* - all I ever wanted to do. And I was so fucking good at it,” he laughs.

He’s not arrogant, not trying to brag. He’s just being honest. He was leagues ahead of every other kid he played with or against, to the point where none of them really liked him, and their parents didn’t either. Even in high school he was untouchable, leading in points and goals and accolades.

He had scouts watching him by the time he turned fourteen, from colleges and NHL teams alike. He was going pro, there was no doubt about it.

“When I was sixteen, there was this boy I was kind of friends with. He was quiet, like me. Didn’t really fit in, like me. In hindsight, I don’t think I *really* had a crush on him, but it was the closest I’d ever felt to one.”

Until now, Shane doesn’t say. *Until you.*

“We were at the park one evening, and - and he kissed me,” Shane explains. “It was, I don’t know, fine I guess. I already thought I liked boys, and that more or less confirmed it, but it wasn’t anything special.”

It was better than the time Josie Wilkins kissed him behind the greenhouse when they were twelve, but that was probably the nicest thing Shane could really say about the kiss.

It felt right to kiss a boy, just definitely not *that* boy.

Still, it had felt important. Shane hadn’t given himself the label of *gay* up until that point, when he finally knew that it was true.

And *god,* he didn’t want it to be true.

Not because he thought there was anything wrong with it in, like, theory. But in practise? Hockey players can’t be gay, which meant that Shane couldn’t be either. He was already too different as it was. Too weird. Too *good.* He didn’t want to add another thing to the list, but that kiss confirmed it anyway.

It doomed him in more ways than one.

“Anyway, some other kid on my team had been riding past on his bike and saw it happen,” Shane continues. “When I walked into the locker room the next day, everybody knew.”

He can still remember the exact moment he stepped inside the locker room. Their rink was old, and the door creaked as it closed behind him. He can hear the thud of it even now, like a judge’s gavel passing down a life sentence.

When Shane looked up, every eye in the room was fixed on him.

Some of his teammates looked disgusted, some amused, some angry. Shane had a sinking feeling in his stomach, like the bottom of it had split wide open and all his organs were falling through.

“It was bad?” Ilya asks, voice gentle enough not to startle Shane.

Shane laughs, a cold, brittle sound. “Yeah. It was bad.”

Ilya shuffles closer to Shane on the blanket, and he leans his body against Shane’s. Their shoulders, hips, and thighs press together, and the weight is grounding. It keeps Shane here in the moment, instead of letting his mind wander back to those last few weeks of hockey.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” Ilya says.

Shane knows he doesn’t have to. That’s exactly why he *wants* to.

“It was only small things at first,” Shane tells him. “They’d hide my stick tape, or do things to mess up my routine because they knew it would make me freak out.”

Ilya frowns. “That is not small, Shane. That is cruel.”

Shane shrugs. “I could handle that. But then they started pouring water on my gear and in my skates, cutting my clothes, calling me - well, y’know. Then they started telling Coach I was looking at them while they were changing. I wasn’t, obviously, but…”

That had been the worst thing, probably.

The rest of it hurt, but he kept telling himself he could handle it. That in a few more years he’d leave all of them behind. But they made him out to be some kind of creep - like he was doing something wrong. And Coach knew it wasn’t true, told them to knock it off just like Hayden did, but it didn’t change anything.

And when that still wasn’t enough, when Shane still refused to quit-

“Some of my teammates went to my school, and eventually they outed me to everyone.”

Ilya mutters darkly under his breath, something in Russian that Shane understands without knowing the meaning of it.

Ilya rests his hand palm-up on Shane’s thigh, a silent offering of support. Shane takes it, slotting his fingers between Ilya’s and holding on tight.

“I just couldn’t stay on the team any longer. I was having panic attacks almost every day just thinking about walking into the locker room, I stopped eating, I stopped talking. I just couldn’t anymore.”

“Shane,” Ilya sighs.

He sounds so heartbroken that Shane finally works up the courage to turn and look at Ilya.

His eyes are shimmering with unshed tears as he watches Shane intently, but there’s anger in the clench of his jaw. He’s both devastated and furious on Shane’s behalf.

It feels comforting, to have someone sit inside the grief with him.

His mom and dad had kept trying to fix it for him, but that wasn’t what Shane needed. There was nothing they could do, anyway. Yuna is a force to be reckoned with, but high school boys are so ruthless in their cruelty. It was already done, there was no going back. Shane just needed to be sad about it, to grieve the sport he loved and the life he thought he was going to live.

Ilya sitting here with Shane, listening to him, mourning with him - it feels like catharsis.

“I’m sorry. I’m *so* sorry they took it from you.”

“I’d always wanted to play for BC. Hayden knew he wasn’t going to play in college, but we both decided we wanted to come here together,” Shane explains. “When it all happened…I just didn’t want to back out on the plan.”

“So…Boston?”

“Boston,” Shane confirms.

He has a love/hate relationship with this city.

She reminds Shane of all that he has lost, but she’s given him so much, too. Rose and J.J., Hattie and the bookstore. *Ilya.*

“I wish we could have been teammates,” Ilya says, so earnestly that Shane has to squeeze his hand so he doesn’t do something more reckless.

“Your team, they seem like good people,” Shane says.

From what Ilya has told him about the Eagles, they seem like a decent - if not slightly insane - bunch of guys.

Ilya talks about them like they’re the only family he’s got. Shane knows that they’re accepting of Ilya, and of Troy Barrett, too, who is openly gay and dating a communications student called Harris.

Shane wishes he would have known when he was sixteen, that being gay and playing hockey would be possible. That he could have been part of a team that accepted him. That - after the Admiral’s captain, Scott Hunter, came out on live TV - Shane could have been drafted after all.

“I couldn’t believe how accepting they were when they found out about me, and about Barrett. I was not used to that kind of response,” Ilya tells Shane.

“Did Russia make it difficult for you, y’know, being…”

“Bisexual?”

“Mhm.”

Ilya is quiet for a moment, pensive, like he’s thinking carefully about how to answer.

“Everything about Russia was difficult,” Ilya admits.

Shane squeezes his hand again. He had guessed as much, given that Ilya never talks about the homeland he gave up to come here. Never talks about the family that he left behind in Russia, either.

“Your family - you’re not close to them, are you?” Shane asks.

Ilya suddenly jerks his head from side to side. His brows furrow into a frown that Shane has to fight the urge to smooth away with his fingertips.

“No,” Ilya confirms. “I was close with my mother, but she’s been dead for a long time now.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Ilya. Is it okay if I ask what happened?”

Shane is not always the best at picking up on people's emotions or reading their expressions, but the agony on Ilya's face is as clear as day.

She might have been gone a long time, but Ilya still misses her desperately.

"It was an accident. She accidentally swallowed a whole bottle of pills," he says, and Shane thinks he can feel his heart breaking in two.

"How old were you?" Shane whispers, not trusting his voice to hold up against the weight of his devastation.

"Twelve. I found her."

Shane tries to swallow past the lump in his throat but he can't seem to make it go away. He wants to hold Ilya in his arms, wants to take away all of his pain, but he's not sure if Ilya would want that. Not sure if it would be the right thing to do.

Instead, Shane wraps his free hand around their joined ones and cradles Ilya's between both of his own.

"I'm so sorry."

"It's only my brother left in Russia now. My father died of Alzheimer's last year. He wasn't a good man. Neither of them are," Ilya explains. "Sometimes I miss Russia, but I do not miss them."

He says with such an air of finality to his words, like he's accepted it even though it's heavy. Even though it still hurts.

"I can't ever go home now," Ilya says, quietly. "I will get green card when I start playing for Boston."

Shane hasn't got the words to describe how desperately sad he feels for Ilya.

Since the moment they met, Ilya has felt like magic. Like sunshine that reaches to the deepest, darkest corners of Shane, and makes everything feel brighter and warmer. He can't bear to think about twelve year old Ilya grieving his mother alone, with a brother and father who weren't good to him.

Shane wishes he could have known Ilya back then, when they were both two lonely little boys just desperate for someone to see and to understand them.

"I have Svetlana, though. She has been my best friend since we were young. She works in the city, so I see her often enough."

"I'm glad," Shane says. "I'm glad you have her, and your team."

"And you?"

"And me," Shane promises.

Ilya smiles at him, and then makes a joke, and Shane doesn't always pick up on social cues but he knows a deflection when he sees one. So he allows the conversation to drift to lighter topics as they sit and watch the water rippling along the surface.

It almost feels like a date.

Ilya had called Shane beautiful, that one time. *So beautiful it kind of hurts to look at you,* he had said. *You take my breath.* But he hasn't said anything like that since, even though he's always so unbelievably sweet to Shane. Even though Ilya makes time for Shane despite how busy he is, and he shows up at Shane's job just to talk to him, and he does things like bringing Shane's favourite food and drink for a picnic by the water.

Shane isn't really clear on what that means, but he doesn't want to question it, either. There's a certain safety in yearning for something you know you'll never have.

Not knowing is good. They can float along in this liminal space without changing or ruining the connection between them. He'd rather only ever have Ilya as a friend, than risk losing him by daring to hope for something more.

The green tea has long since gone cold and there's snow in the clouds again, threatening to fall at any moment, but Shane leans against Ilya's side and stays quiet.

He wants to hold onto this moment for a while longer.

"A picnic?" Rose asks.

Shane, Hayden, Rose, and J.J. are all sprawled out in Rose's fancy off-campus apartment - though, everything seems fancy compared to the dorms. Shane has his feet in Rose's lap as they lounge on the couch, and Hayden and J.J. are watching him from the armchair and floor, respectively.

"Yes," Shane confirms.

All three of his friends stare back at him with varying expressions of disbelief, shock, and exasperation on their faces.

"A *picnic,* Shane?" Rose repeats.

"Yes. A picnic. Jesus, did you lose your hearing or something?" Shane huffs.

Hayden looks at J.J., who looks at Rose, who looks back to Hayden. They're all having some kind of silent conversation with their eyebrows that Shane isn't privy to, but is absolutely certain is about him.

They do this sometimes. Not always about Shane, and they often attempt to include him, but he doesn't know when everyone became fluent in *eyebrows,* he just knows he must have missed the memo.

“What?” He finally snaps, when they’ve silently been discussing him for far too long.

“Shane, buddy. Bro. My dude,” J.J. addresses him. “He took you on a picnic.”

“Oh my god. Yes, we’ve established that we went on a picnic. That’s a normal thing that friends do.”

Sure, Shane has never done it with any of *his* friends, but that’s beside the point. He’s certain that *other* friends do that kind of thing all the time.

Hayden loudly snorts his disagreement.

“Girl,” Rose sighs. “You’re not *friends.* He’s into you!”

Shane’s nose scrunches as he frowns. “I’m not a girl.”

“Sorry, can we circle back to the bit about Rozanov wanting to fuck you?” Hayden splutters.

“He doesn’t want to-“

“Yes,” J.J. interrupts. “He does.”

Shane sighs. “We’re just-“

“Nope!” Hayden yells.

“Any time you have to preface friends with a just, you are never *just* anything,” Rose claims, like this is just something that everyone should know. Like it is a fact.

The truth is, if Ilya wanted to fuck Shane, well. It’s not like Shane would say no.

His little…*crush* on Ilya is sort of getting out of hand. He makes Shane’s heart race, and his palms sweat, and he finds that he wants to be around Ilya all the time, which, for someone like Shane - who prefers being alone over literally anything else - is a big fucking deal. His screen time has never been so high, either, what with all the texting and phone calls and FaceTimes.

And, most of all, Ilya just *gets* Shane.

Of course he’s noticed that Shane is a little strange and a lot neurotic. He knows that Shane’s routines are vital, and he has never once tried to interfere with them. He’s never made Shane feel like his differences are a bad thing.

He’s absolutely certain that, if he were to sleep with Ilya, he would make it a night to remember.

“We’re friends,” Shane says with an air of finality to it.

Rose pinches Shane’s ankle as she says, “Whatever helps you sleep at night, babe.”

Shane and Ilya text too much, about everything and nothing at all - silly memes, or videos, or stories about dumb things their friends have just done. Shane finds himself sneakily pulling his phone out in class, just to see if he has a message from Ilya. He jumps for his phone the second that it sounds, on the off chance it's Ilya who's contacting him.

One day Ilya comes to the bookstore at closing time, and they spend thirty minutes picking out a book for each other to read.

They work out together when their busy schedules allow it, which is rare - between classes, and work, and hockey - but they do it as often as they can. Ilya's jaw just about touched the floor when he realised that Shane could bench press more than he could, and he went rep for rep in deadlifts as well.

They study together in the library now, too, in a place where they can be seen together. Shane isn't a secret that Ilya is keeping - not a thing that he is ashamed of.

It's quite interesting watching Ilya study. Sometimes when he reads a book he silently mouths the words, and Shane can practically see Ilya translating the words into Russian then back to English, just to make sure he's understanding them properly.

College is hard enough in Shane's *first* language. He can't imagine how difficult it is having to do it all in your second.

His awe of Ilya grows every day.

Ilya is already studying at their usual table when Shane arrives. His nose is scrunched up in concentration as he taps away at his laptop, with a pen hanging loosely between his pursed lips. He pauses, frowns, and then starts typing again.

Shane just watches him from the sidelines for a moment, because he gets so few chances to do so. Ilya is so in tune with Shane that he struggles to ever catch him unaware.

Then, because he hates being so close and yet so far from Ilya, Shane finally approaches him.

In a terrible impression of David Attenborough, Shane loudly whispers, "And here we have an incredibly rare sight: a hockey player who knows how to read."

Ilya glances up at him, his jaw falling open in shock as he fixes Shane with a look that is half disbelief and half humour.

"We must be very careful not to disturb it; they're known to lash out when cornered," Shane finishes with a smug grin pulling at the corners of his mouth.

Ilya tries and fails not to return the smile, as he shakes his head in mock disappointment.

"You are still asshole," he says, pointing his finger at Shane.

"No I'm not," Shane denies.

"Are you this mean to everyone, or is it only me?"

“I guess you’re just lucky.”

“Yes. I think I am,” Ilya says, unbearably soft.

Shane feels himself blushing even as he rolls his eyes and takes the empty seat beside Ilya.

Shane takes his time pulling out his laptop, and the textbook and notebook with all his class notes inside. He even sets up his row of pens in a perfectly neat line; he catches Ilya watching Shane’s hands organise the stationary with a small smile on his face.

“Did you manage to get ahold of that research paper you were looking for?” Shane asks.

Ilya nods. “Yeah, one of my professors got it for me. Did you finish the book?”

“Yep,” Shane says with a grin. “I started my outline last night.”

“Well stop talking and starting writing.” Ilya winks.

Shane is working on his analysis of *As I Lay Dying* for his *Intimate Narratives* seminar. Ilya is working on a paper about CTE in athletes, but it’s way beyond Shane’s scope to even try to understand how it relates to Ilya’s degree. Sometimes he will talk about his classes and Shane isn’t entirely convinced Ilya hasn’t accidentally slipped into Russian.

They work side by side in complete silence. It’s not like they can really help each other study, given that their majors are so vastly different, but there’s something about sitting together while doing their own thing that feels almost comforting.

The term parallel play slips into Shane’s mind, and he has to choke back a laugh in the quiet library.

“Shane?”

He’s not sure how long they’ve been there when a voice startles the quiet that’s settled between them.

Shane looks up, and he almost curses when he sees Rose, Hayden, and J.J. all hovering by their table. They knew he was going to be here, he’d told them as much when they asked if he wanted to hang out today. Which means they’re here on purpose. Here to meet Ilya.

Here to embarrass Shane, probably.

“Fancy seeing you here,” Rose says, all innocent and saccharine.

Shane’s glaring when he responds, “Wow. It’s almost like I told you I was going to be here.”

“Did you?” Hayden asks.

“I don’t remember that,” J.J. chips in, while smirking proudly.

Shane sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. His friends are lucky he loves them, or he'd be planning a triple homicide right about now, and Shane is so meticulous that he's almost certain he'd get away with it.

Ilya, on the other hand, smiles widely at Shane's friends, and then sticks out his hand in offering for them all to shake.

Rose goes first, then J.J., then Hayden - after glancing suspiciously between Ilya and his hand - reluctantly takes it and gives it a brief shake.

"It's nice to finally meet Shane's friends," Ilya says. "I was a little worried he was making you all up."

Rose and J.J. both laugh, and even Hayden can't fight the smile that spreads across his face.

"Oh, fuck you," Shane scoffs, shoving Ilya's shoulder gently.

And, in the midst of the teasing, Ilya's eyes lock onto Shane and there's a softness there that seeps beneath Shane's skin and warms him from the inside, out. Ilya smiles, something small and sweet, just for Shane.

"It's okay, we thought he was lying about you, too," J.J. chirps, making Ilya laugh.

"Nope. No, this isn't happening again. First my parents, now my friends?" Shane whines, even though he doesn't mean it at all.

Shane likes the way Ilya seems to slot so perfectly into his life, first charming his parents, and now his friends. It makes Shane feel like both parts of his life have now merged into one; there's no longer Ilya, and everything else. It's just his life. All of them together inside of it.

"You've met Yuna and David?" Hayden asks, his eyebrows raised and eyes wide with disbelief.

"Oh, yes. Yuna and David love me very much," Ilya says proudly.

"Unfortunately it's true. They ask me about him almost every day."

How is Ilya today, Shane? Is he eating enough? That hit in the third looked rough - is he okay?

And if Ilya is present, he'll pop his head in view of the camera and Shane will get to watch as Ilya and his parents' faces light up with excitement at getting to see each other. The first time he saw that happen, Shane got the strangest, most intense sense of *home* that he's had since moving to Boston all most four years ago.

He proceeded to shove it down, down, down, and try to forget about it.

"Well, I can't believe Shane has been keeping you from us all this time," Rose laments.

Ilya sighs, all wistful and dramatic, and says, “He knew we would be too powerful together, Rose Landry.”

God, he’s such a fucking charmer.

Shane watches as Ilya chats with his friends for a while - and there *is* a distinction between the two, because while Ilya is, of course, Shane’s friend, he also feels like so much more than that. He’s in a category entirely of his own.

Shane butts in sometimes, and it’s almost starting to feel like fun when someone very firmly shushes them from halfway across the room. They all grimace, Shane awkwardly holds a hand up in apology, and his friends finally leave Shane and Ilya alone.

A couple minutes after they leave, when both Ilya and Shane are back on track, Ilya leans over to Shane - their bare forearms touching, and Ilya’s breath hot on Shane’s - and he whispers, “I like your friends.”

Once Shane finally makes it back to his dorm later that evening, he gets the confirmation he was hoping for: his friends like Ilya too.

“He seems good for you,” Hayden says. “You’re like, I don’t know? Lighter when he’s around, I guess.”

Shane insists that there’s nothing going on between them, more for his own benefit than for Hayden’s.

Except, there is, maybe? It feels like it, anyway. Feels like there’s something in the way Ilya looks at Shane, like he’s his favourite thing in the whole world.

He thinks Ilya might like him, and he *knows* he likes Ilya. A little bit too much, perhaps. Dangerously so.

Shane falls asleep smiling anyway.

“Can you meet me somewhere?” Ilya asks, his voice tinny through the phone.

“Ilya, it’s 10 o’clock at night,” Shane chastises him, but he’s already wiggling his feet into the sneakers he’d left by the door and pulling on his coat.

He’s found he struggles to say no to Ilya, even when it means a change in his routine. It never seems so bad when he’s doing it for Ilya - never feels too daunting, when he knows Ilya always makes sure he’s comfortable without ever even needing to ask how.

“Please?” Ilya begs.

Which is how Shane finds himself standing outside the Conte Forum - the Eagles’ arena - at almost ten-thirty in the evening.

Ilya is already waiting when Shane arrives. He's got a maroon and gold toque pulled down over his curls, and despite the winter coat he's wearing his shoulders are hunched up towards his ears, bracing against the cold. As Shane gets closer he sees the tip of Ilya's nose, red like Rudolph, and he has no doubt that his own looks the same.

Ilya's eyes widen and a bright grin stretches across his face when he spots Shane walking towards him. He pulls his bare hands out of his pockets and rubs them together excitedly.

"You should be wearing gloves," Shane tells him.

Ilya rolls his eyes. "Alright, *dad.* C'mon. It's freezing, let's get inside."

"Inside?"

"Well I didn't invite you to hang around *outside* the rink."

"Ilya-"

"Is fine!" He insists. "I am the captain! Plus, Jerry - the caretaker - loves me. I'll give him the spare keys back tomorrow."

And Ilya looks so excited - eyes bright, and grin wide - that Shane can do nothing but acquiesce. He rolls his eyes fondly, and gestures for Ilya to lead the way, following along as Ilya bounds ahead of him like a kid in a candy store.

Shane starts to feel fizzy as they meander through the arena, and the closer they get to the locker room, the harder his heart starts to beat.

He hasn't stepped foot inside one since he was sixteen years old.

It's stupid to feel apprehensive about it, he knows that, but he can't seem to help it. These places hold so many memories for Shane. For a long time, they were mostly good. Cheering teammates, motivational pep talks, raucous celebrations. But all of that has been overshadowed, now. All of that pales in comparison to the panic Shane would feel in those last few weeks before he quit.

He doesn't feel panic now, not with Ilya. But there's something sitting heavy on his chest, like the weight of all his memories are pressing down on him.

"Are you okay?" Ilya asks, when Shane pauses outside the locker room door.

Shane takes a deep breath. "Yes."

"Are you sure? If this was a bad idea-"

"No. No, it's not a bad idea," Shane assures him, then follows Ilya into the room.

The smell is the same as every locker room Shane's has ever been in: sweat and musk and *man,* disguised with too much axe body spray and Lysol. Shane laughs, short and abrupt.

Some things never change, and he likes that. Likes the familiarity of it, even after all this time.

It's all pinewood cabinetry, with maroon and gold touches. The nicest locker room Shane has ever been in.

On a gold plate above a cubicle, it says *81 Ilya Rozanov* in black lettering. His skates are hung on the hooks, and his pads are on the shelves at the top, but there's an extra pair of skates on the seat.

"I wasn't sure if you still had your own skates," Ilya explains, "and if I asked, that would have given the surprise away."

"It's perfect," Shane says, and he means it.

The effort Ilya has put into this - getting permission, getting the keys from the caretaker, getting a pair of skates in Shane's size - is so fucking thoughtful. Shane had thought the picnic was the kindest thing anyone had ever done for him, but this might just have that beat.

Ilya is giving Shane hockey back, even if only for a little while.

They change into their skates quickly, and - to Shane's utter disbelief - Ilya drops to his knees at Shane's feet and ties his laces with expert hands. Shane finds himself enraptured, watching Ilya's fingers loop the laces and knot them tightly, exactly how Shane would have done it himself.

He hasn't had someone tie his laces since he was a kid, and he feels so cared for that it makes him giddy.

"I could have done that," Shane says.

"I know," Ilya answers with a shrug.

He stands up, holds a hand out for Shane to take, and then pulls him to his feet. They're so close that their chests brush together with every exhale, and for a moment Shane thinks maybe Ilya might kiss him.

But then he's stepping away, and tugging on Shane's hand to get him to follow.

"Come on. Let's skate," he says.

And skate they do.

When Shane first steps out, the sound of his blade cutting through ice sends a shiver down his spine. It's the soundtrack to a thousand of his best memories, and a handful of some of the worst moments in his life, but here - alone, with Ilya - it just feels like coming home.

Like all the dominoes falling into place, the last piece of the puzzle finally slotting in.

Ilya skates on ahead, doing a lap around the perimeter like he's trying to give Shane some time alone to adjust. Shane just finds himself watching Ilya, though. The grace, and power, and speed of him, as he glides around the ice like he owns it - like it was made just for him to skate upon.

Ilya is a marvel. He's so big - tall, broad shoulders, thick thighs - and yet he manages to skate so gracefully.

Since the first day Ilya walked into the bookstore, Shane has watched every one of his games. Curled up on his bed with the stream open on his laptop and his headphones plugged in, Shane watched every move Ilya made - every shift, every point, every goal. There's nothing like seeing him skate in person, though.

He looks so beautiful that Shane just wants to reach out and *touch.*

When he skids to a stop in front of Shane, showering him in a wave of snow, Ilya is absolutely beaming. It's infectious, and Shane finds himself grinning right back.

"You're okay?"

"I'm great," Shane tells him.

Then they skate.

Shane is out of practice, of course, but he still gives Ilya a run for his money when they foolishly decide to do a round of suicides. They skate from the goal line to the blue line and back again, and Ilya only beats him by a few inches.

All Shane's early morning runs and gym sessions have been worth it, after all.

"Fuck me, Hollander," Ilya gasps, and Shane is grateful his cheeks are already flushed from the exercise. "You could suit up and skate tomorrow, if you wanted."

Shane laughs. "I wish."

"I am serious. I bet you are better than some of my team."

"Ilya, I'm probably better than *you,*" Shane quips, and he's only half joking.

Maybe not now, but a few years ago - or if Shane had never stopped skating - he would have been better than Ilya. Not by much, probably, but still better.

"Asshole," Ilya coughs under his breath, and Shane laughs again.

"You love it."

Ilya gets an intense look on his face when he says, "Yes. Maybe."

They do a couple of laps to cool down, not racing, just skating side by side with their elbows brushing together. It feels good. Even before Shane quit hockey, he can't remember the last

time he skated just for the love of it - skated without the pressure of wins, or scouts, or having to be the best.

He's missed the ice so much that it aches.

"I miss it," he tells Ilya.

"I can tell." Ilya bumps their shoulders together. "You skate like you belong here. Like nothing else matters once your blades touch the ice."

"I wish I'd known then that it would get better," Shane sighs sadly. "But my whole life revolved around hockey, and suddenly it felt like hockey didn't want me anymore. I didn't know how to move past that."

He'd given everything to the game, to his teammates. His body, and his heart, and his fucking soul. And they'd thrown it back in Shane's face as soon as they found out something about him that they didn't like.

It's hard to love a sport that refuses to love you back.

"I love my degree, and the bookstore," Shane says. "It's not like my life feels empty without hockey, I just - I think maybe I haven't grieved it properly. It's made it kind of hard to let go."

"You don't have to let go completely. Not if you don't want to," Ilya tells him. "I'm sure there's a route back to it for you."

"I think I miss it more than I love it," Shane tries to explain.

Ilya nods like he understands. "There is always time."

Shane smiles at him, grateful that Ilya is trying to give him options without pushing him. The thing about Ilya is that he never tries to fix things for Shane, as if he isn't capable of doing it himself, Ilya just lets Shane know that the offer of help is there if he ever wants to take him up on it.

His parents and Hayden, and J.J. and Rose - though they always, *always* mean well - know about Shane, and so they sometimes try to step when he doesn't need them to.

"I'm autistic, you know?" Shane asks quietly.

Ilya nods his head. "I mean, I wasn't certain, but. I thought maybe yes."

And that's that. They don't really talk about it because they don't have to. Ilya doesn't treat Shane like he's different so he doesn't *feel* different, and that's all there really is to it.

Quiet, easy acceptance.

Afterwards, when Ilya has locked up the arena and they're standing back outside it in the freezing cold, it sort of feels like neither of them want to leave. Like they're both lingering to

extend the night just a little bit longer. It feels like they exist in some kind of bubble; the world around them has stopped, and they're the only two people in motion.

Shane knows her certainly doesn't want this night to end.

Ilya's hands are shoved into his pockets and his gaze is darting around shiftily, not quite able to meet Shane's eyes.

Ilya's voice is almost inaudible when he asks, "Can I hug you?"

"Yes," Shane doesn't hesitate to answer.

He's not a hugger. Not really one for any type of physical affection unless it's more or less forced on him. But he's been wanting to touch Ilya since the moment their hands first met, wanting to know what it feels like to be held by Ilya.

And as Ilya steps forward and wraps his arms around Shane's shoulders, Shane sinks into the embrace like he was always supposed to find his way here.

He winds his own arms around Ilya's waist, buries his face in Ilya's neck, and they both just take a moment together to breathe each other in. To hold each other close. To exist in this tiny patch of universe made only for the two of them. No words are necessary; the thundering of Shane's heart does all the talking for him.

He thinks he could spend the rest of his life in Ilya's arms. The thought doesn't terrify him as much as it should.

On the last day in February, Shane shows up at Ilya's dorm red-faced and breathless.

He'd received a text from him requesting his urgent attention and, knowing Ilya, it could be anything ranging from a spider in his shower to a traumatic amputation of one of his limbs. Shane figured it was best to assume the worst, and he'd run halfway across campus to get to him.

When the door swings open Ilya is standing there with all of his limbs intact, and no obvious signs of blood. In fact, Ilya is smiling brightly as he rushes Shane into his single dorm (that Shane is unspeakably jealous of).

"What's going on? Are you okay?" Shane asks.

Ilya closes the door behind them and then leans back against it. "Practice was cancelled. Coach is sick."

"Okay? And…?"

Shane struggles to see what that has got to do with him, and why it constitutes as some kind of emergency.

“And it’s the perfect time for a movie night!”

Shane stares at him, speechless.

A…movie night? Ilya had sent six frantic texts in a row, complete with a concerning amount of red exclamation point emojis, because he wanted a movie night.

Of course he did.

Shane isn’t even sure why he’s surprised.

He shakes his head in disbelief, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and finger. He can’t keep his laughter at bay for long, though, and soon both of them are giggling loudly, doubled over with their hands on their knees.

“Jesus, Ilya. You almost gave me a heart attack!”

“What? Why?”

“You said it was an emergency!”

“It is!” Ilya insists, and they both break down into laughter again.

Shane thinks he’s never laughed as much in his life, as he has done in these past two months since knowing Ilya. There’s something about him that just makes Shane feel lighter, like - without the pressure to perform for Ilya - Shane is slowly figuring out who he really is.

He’s figuring out what he looks like behind the mask, and finding that actually kind of likes it. Likes the person he is allowed to be in Ilya’s company.

“I’m revoking your right to use the word *emergency,*” Shane tells Ilya.

“But Shane,” Ilya whines. “I was lonely. I *missed* you.”

And what the fuck is Shane supposed to say to that?

He misses Ilya every second of the day. When they’re apart, he’s constantly checking his phone in case he’s missed a message from Ilya. He surveys the campus as he’s walking, in search of blond curls and hazel eyes. Every time the bell chimes while Shane is at work, he’s hoping to see Ilya walking through the door.

And even when they’re together, Shane finds himself craving to be closer. To touch Ilya, to kiss him, to crawl inside of his skin and burrow beneath his ribs.

It’s a problem, Shane knows, but he’s too far gone to turn back now. And this - it’s a date, right? That’s why he’s here? So he thinks maybe it’s okay to be a little bit obsessed.

“Oh my god, you’re impossible,” Shane sighs, but his burning cheeks and stubborn smile absolutely give him away.

“You wouldn’t have me any other way,” Ilya says, and - unfortunately - he’s right.

Ilya is nothing at all like Shane would have expected him to be before they first met, and yet everything he could have hoped for in a…friend? More? Whatever.

“What movie are we watching then?” Shane asks, with an exaggerated sigh.

Ilya just grins.

While Shane toes off his shoes and drapes his jacket over the desk chair in the corner of the room, Ilya loads something on his laptop. Shane crawls onto the bed in the spot next to the wall - he likes feeling enclosed with Ilya on the other side of him - and waits for Ilya to join him.

Ilya turns his bedside lamp on and the overhead light *off,* before Shane even has to ask. And it’s so sweet - so intimate, and personal, and understanding - that Shane wants to cry, or like, bite Ilya. Or something.

Even when Ilya gets comfy on the bed, even when he presses play on *The Shawshank Redemption,* Shane feels so overwhelmed by his tiny gesture with the lights, that Shane can barely concentrate.

He spends the whole movie just trying his hardest not to straddle Ilya and kiss him.

When Shane glances over at Ilya halfway through their second movie - *Moonlight* - he finds Ilya sleeping.

Shane should wake him, should tell him it’s time to call it a night and go home. But there’s something about a sleeping Ilya that is so vulnerable, and gentle, and *sweet,* that Shane simply can’t look away from him. Ilya’s lashes cast a shadow on his cheeks, and his mouth is ever so slightly open, and he looks more relaxed than Shane has ever seen him before.

He turns back to the movie and lets Ilya sleep soundly beside him.

Shane thinking they’re maybe, perhaps, *possibly* kind of dating now?

There was the picnic, and the skating, and the movie night in Ilya’s dorm. There was coffee on campus, and Ilya walking Shane to class afterwards. Not to mention all of Ilya’s visits to the bookstore, and the study sessions in the library, and the workouts in the gym. And while Shane isn’t great at picking up on subtleties, but this stopped feeling subtle a while ago.

Ilya is taking it slow, of course.

Never asking or pushing for more, never testing Shane’s boundaries, never making too big a deal out of anything. Ilya knows that Shane has never had a boyfriend before - and he knows that expectations make him anxious - so he’s probably waiting for Shane to make the first move.

Ilya is so big on all kinds of consent - *"Is it okay if I keep visiting you?" "No pressure, or anything." "Can I hug you?"* - that he's giving Shane the reins, here.

Shane thinks, finally, that he is ready.

He appreciates Ilya's patience, appreciates how slow he's allowing this thing between them to move, but Shane is tired of waiting.

He *wants* Ilya.

He probably has done since the very first moment they spoke, but now it's just impossible to ignore.

Shane finds himself watching Ilya's lips as he speaks, and wondering what he tastes like. He eyes Ilya's biceps in the gym while they're lifting, and wonders how it would feel to sink his teeth into them. He listens to Ilya talk about classes, or hockey, or nothing at all, and Shane wonders how the words *I love you* would feel on his tongue.

Because he thinks that's what this is. He's almost certain, in fact.

He has no frame of reference, no prior experience in loving someone, but he can't imagine this feeling in his chest being called anything else.

Shane has read probably close to a thousand books about love, and none of them prepared him for *this.* For the way he feels it in his whole body - the way it makes him feel safe enough to be reckless.

He's rushing across campus, almost late for class because Hayden moved one of his textbooks and Shane couldn't find it when he woke up. It's fine, he'll make it just in time to not be conspicuous when entering the room, but it gives him less time than he'd like. It throws his routine off.

He's barely paying attention to his surroundings, probably wouldn't have even noticed if it weren't for the laughter that echoes through the courtyard. But it's familiar, a melody he's heard hundreds of times before - his very favourite sound.

So, even in a rush, Shane stops and searches for the source of it. For Ilya.

But when Shane finds him, his blood runs cold.

Ilya's head is thrown back in riotous laughter, and there is a beautiful woman under his arm. She's tall and slender, with a mane of red curls and a smile that is blinding Shane even from this far away. Her head fits perfectly in the crook of Ilya's neck, and her hand rests on his chest, and - together - they look like the centre of the universe.

It's clear they know each other intimately by the way they touch each other, the way they move together.

And Shane thinks, *oh, of course, how stupid of me.*

He's always known Ilya's reputation, always known that he's infamous for only ever having one-night-stands. He's never judged Ilya for it. It's just - they've spent so much time together recently, that he'd assumed Ilya didn't have any time leftover for somebody else.

Shane shouldn't be surprised, though, that whatever the fuck they had going on wouldn't even be close to enough for Ilya. And it's not like they've ever even talked about what's happening between them.

It doesn't stop it from hurting, though. Doesn't stop the pain and humiliation tearing through Shane like a wildfire.

Shane is used to losing the things that matter to him; he's an expert in learning that the things you love always leave.

When he was an awkward little boy, before the word *autism* ever got tossed around in conversation, Shane's best friend in the entire world was his cat, Jupiter. He was his mom's cat originally, so he was already old by the time Shane really started paying attention to him, but he loved Jupiter so dearly.

He never asked anything of Shane, never looked at him with worried eyes when he did something strange, never wanted anything more from Shane than to just lay on his belly while he stroked behind Jupiter's ears. And Shane would whisper his secrets to Jupiter - all the things he couldn't say to his parents, the things he might have told his friends if he'd had any.

When Jupiter died, Shane didn't speak a single word for a whole week. He didn't know how to make his mouth work.

His grief was a physical thing.

Shane found himself desperately wanting to talk to Jupiter about it - wanting to bury his fingers in Jupiter's soft, grey fur, and tell him all about how he was feeling.

Jupiter was Shane's first big loss, but he certainly wasn't his last.

He'd make friends who lasted for a week, or maybe a month, before they decided that Shane was too much, or too intense, or just too different.

His grandpa died when he was ten. Shane didn't see him that often, but he remembered sitting on his lap as he told him stories. He remembered the smell of soft leather and tobacco. And his mom cried so much that Shane could do nothing except cry along with her.

When Shane was outed, he lost his teammates - his *friends* - and hockey, all in one go. It felt like something had been stolen from him; a bone or an organ ripped from his body, and all he could do was stand there and try not to bleed all over the place.

So. It makes sense that he also loses the first man he ever lets himself love.

Shane doesn't reply to any of Ilya's texts that day. Or the day after that. He exists in somewhat of a fugue state - present, but not really. Like a part of him is missing. Like a part

of him is *breaking*.

It's his own fault. He was foolish to assume they were something when Ilya had never said as much, and Shane hadn't wanted to ask. It was foolish to assume that - even if they *were* something - they would be exclusive, when Shane already knows Ilya doesn't do relationships. When they haven't even *kissed* yet.

What kind of idiot turns a hug into a love story?

It's close to closing time and Shane is alone in the shop, re-shelving a stack of books, when the bell above the door rings.

Shane freezes.

He doesn't need to look to know who has just walked in; he can feel it. The atmosphere changes, the air in the room shifts like it's making space for him. He's always commanded every room he walks into, and today is no different.

Shane finally turns around when he hears the click of a lock, and he sees Ilya flipping the sign on the door from open to closed.

When Ilya turns to face Shane, he looks wrecked.

His curls are flat, his eyes are dull and red-rimmed, and his mouth is turned down at the corners in a perpetual frown. He's wearing an old pair of sweats, and his coat is half unzipped to reveal a maroon hoodie with a stain down the front of it. Ilya looks as unkempt as Shane has ever seen him.

"Shane," he says, voice weary.

"Hi."

Ilya frowns. "What's going on? You have been ignoring me since yesterday."

"Ilya-"

"Did I do something wrong?" He asks.

And he sounds so earnest, so sad, that it breaks Shane's heart even further.

"I saw you yesterday in the courtyard," Shane tells him. "With that girl."

Ilya's frown deepens, his eyebrows furrowing until they almost meet in the middle. "What?"

"It's fine," Shane lies. It's not fine. It *hurts.* "I mean, I thought - but I was obviously wrong. So it's fine, I promise, I just-"

"*Shane.* What are you talking about?"

"The girl. Y'know, the beautiful one. With the curly hair."

The one who made you laugh. Who touched you like you were hers. Who looked like she belonged at your side, better than I ever could.

It's not fair to feel jealous, but Shane can't help it. His relationship with Ilya - whatever kind it may be - has always been so special to Shane. So important. So different from all the other relationships in Shane's life. He feels protective of it. Possessive, maybe.

He'd mistakenly thought it meant the same to Ilya - that it was special, *different* - and he feels white hot jealousy pooling in his stomach at the thought of Ilya having someone else who makes him smile like that, who makes him *feel* like that.

He'd thought that version of Ilya was just for him.

Ilya's face cracks wide open with emotion, and tears start to fill his eyes as he takes a step closer. Shane wishes the counter was between them, but there's only empty space that Ilya seems determined to cross.

"Shane, *no.* That's-"

"It's fine," Shane says, and he tries to mean it.

Ilya shouldn't have to feel guilty when he hasn't even done anything wrong. This was all Shane, making something out of nothing.

"No. You're hurting, that's not *fine,*" Ilya argues. "I promise, whatever you are thinking, it's not that."

Shane shakes his head. Ilya takes another step closer.

"The girl was Svetlana."

Shane's breath catches in his throat.

"What?"

"It was Svetlana," Ilya explains with a sad smile on his face. "She surprised me with a visit before she goes home to Russia for a few weeks."

Svetlana. Svetlana, Ilya's best and oldest friend. The person Shane has found himself silently, secretly thanking on more than one occasion, for always being the person Ilya could turn to, even when he had no one else. For loving him when no one else did. For holding his hand at Irina's funeral.

Shane closes his eyes and groans, then he covers his face as he chuckles in embarrassment and shame.

"Oh, fuck."

"Shane, it's okay."

“I’m so sorry,” Shane tells him.

God, he feels awful.

How could he do that? Judge without asking. Assume without any proof. Shane had no right to feel jealous in the first place, but he’d done it anyway. And in that jealousy, he’d assumed the worst of Ilya - of the person who has been nothing but kind and patient and sweet to Shane.

“No, no Shane,” Ilya says softly.

He rushes to close the distance between them, and even though Shane is still covering his face he can feel when Ilya stops in front of him. His body comes alive at the proximity.

Ilya is gentle when he curls his fingers around Shane’s wrists, and tugs his hands away from his face. Shane can feel his face burning in embarrassment, but Ilya just smile sweetly at him. Much kinder than Shane deserves right now.

“*I’m* sorry,” Ilya insists.

Shane shakes his head. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I should have made it clearer to you,” Ilya says. “I should have told you about how I felt right away, but I didn’t want to push you. I didn’t want you to feel like I expected anything from you. I was trying to wait until you were ready.”

Shane slips out of Ilya’s grasp, but only so he can thread their fingers together. Ilya looks down at their joined hands, then back up at Shane with an expression of hope and happiness and disbelief on his face.

“I’m ready now,” Shane confesses.

“I want to date you,” Ilya blurts out with zero hesitation. “I want you to be my boyfriend.”

And…*oh.* Okay. There’s no room for misinterpreting that. Ilya is being crystal clear.

There isn’t anything left for Shane to do except kiss him.

He reaches his hands up to tangle his fingers in Ilya’s hair, then he pulls him down and - and he *kisses him.*

Their mouths collide in a hungry, tender, long-overdue kiss. Ilya moans the second their lips touch, and Shane swallows it down greedily, desperate for more. For everything that Ilya is willing to give him. Shane would swallow him whole if he could.

The kiss…it’s like nothing Shane has ever felt before.

He feels it flood through his veins, humming like a current beneath his skin. It touches every part of him, even the darkest places he’s never let anyone but Ilya look at. It feels so much -

so *big*. Overwhelming, but only in the very best of ways. Like Shane is entirely surrounded by Ilya. By his goodness. By the safety that he provides.

Ilya's arms wind around Shane's waist and pull him in closer. Their noses bump, and their teeth clash, and they laugh giddily about the imperfection of it. It makes it feel more real, somehow. Makes it feel like something honest, that Shane can sink his fingers and teeth into.

He pulls Ilya's hair, bites at his plump bottom lip, simply because he can't get enough.

Shane has kissed people before, of course, but it has never been like this. It has never felt like he's holding the entire universe in his hands.

"Fuck," he pants against Ilya's lips when they finally part.

Ilya laughs, their foreheads bumping together gently. "Yeah," he agrees. "*Fuck.*"

"That was - it was okay for you?"

Ilya kisses him again, slower this time. Softer. The answer to a question.

"It was everything," Ilya whispers, his breath fanning over Shane's spit-slick lips. "*You* are everything."

Shane whimpers, rubs their noses together, presses closer like maybe he'll be able to sink into Ilya's skin.

"Ilya, I-" Shane bites his lip, swallows down the three words balancing precariously on the tip of his tongue. "I want you to be my boyfriend, too."

Ilya laughs. He kisses Shane's mouth, then his nose, then the freckles on his cheeks. When he pulls back, his smile is brighter than anything Shane has ever seen before.

He looks like sunlight, like magic. Like something Shane wants to bottle and keep forever.

"I like the sound of that," Ilya says.

Shane has never been happier in his entire life.

Shane had always assumed falling in love was a singular event - one big, obvious moment where it hit you like a wrecking ball. Where the person you were before them changes into the person you are now that you have them.

It turns out, that's not the case.

Shane thinks he *started* falling on a Monday in January, when Ilya Rozanov first walked into the bookstore. That's the moment it all started to change. But there wasn't one single thing - one definitive event - that Shane could point to and say, *there, that's when I fell in love.*

It was Ilya's smile, warm like sunshine.

It was his patience, and the way he kept showing up, and the way he made Shane laugh.

It was in the way Ilya made it easier for Shane to breathe, to *be,* like he could finally take off the mask and just exist, without worrying he might be too much.

It was in the way Ilya and Shane's parents instantly adored each other; the way his friends all like him; the way Hattie pinches Ilya's cheeks every time she sees him.

The love is in Ilya, and in Shane, and all around them. It's in each time they laugh together, each time they hold hands, each time Ilya traces the freckles on Shane's face. It's in every single breath that they breathe.

For Shane, the world has always felt like it wasn't quite built for him. Too loud, too busy, too much, like everything is speeding around him and he can't keep up with it all.

Ilya makes it all slow down.

The love is in the quiet, the stillness, where neither of them have to pretend to be anything other than exactly who they are.

Their first *official* date is at their favourite coffee shop on campus.

They've hung out at the book store, and library, and Ilya's dorm since their first kiss last week, but this time Ilya was waiting for Shane when he walked out of his seminar.

"I'm taking you on a date," he'd said, and Shane was too busy kissing him to reply.

They've been to the coffee shop half a dozen times before, at least, but this time they walk through the door with their hands entwined. They take the same seat they always sit at, and order the same drinks they always get - Ilya insisting on paying for both, like always - and everything should feel the exact same as it usually does. But there's something fundamentally different about it now.

Different about *them.*

Nothing has *really* changed - except for the kisses, and the cuddles, and the sleepovers in Ilya's dorm room - but Shane's soul feels different. Brighter.

Like something has clicked into place and that missing feeling has finally gone away.

His parents had been ecstatic when he and Ilya told them they were dating. His mom had tried to hide her tears, but they all saw them. She'd invited Ilya to Ottawa, told him he was always welcome, and it comforted the part of Ilya that still longs for his mama.

Shane's friends were happy for him, too. Rose most of all, naturally. But even Hayden and J.J. had admitted that Ilya was good for him - that Shane seemed happier than he'd ever been

before.

Everything just feels *right.*

Their legs are intertwined beneath the table, and Ilya has one hand around his cup of coffee and the other covering Shane's on the table. Open in a way that feels comforting, instead of embarrassing.

Like Ilya isn't trying to draw attention to them, but he's still proud to show Shane off.

"You didn't fail," Ilya insists.

"I definitely did."

"You know that book inside and out," Ilya says. "*I* know that book inside and out with the amount you've talked about it."

Shane laughs, squeezing his calves around Ilya's shin. "Shut up, I'm serious. I think I blacked out while I was talking."

Ilya scoffs. "You could do that presentation in your sleep, anyway. Don't worry."

Shane is about to reply when sometime catches his eye. Ilya is sitting with his back to the room because he knows Shane prefers being able to see everything that's happening.

It's why Shane sees them first, right before they spot Shane and Ilya and make a beeline for them. Ilya's teammates.

"Uh, Ilya-"

"Rozanov!" The one who calls out is the one from the bookstore that time. Hazy, Shane thinks they called him.

Ilya swivels around in his seat at the sound of his name, and Shane carefully watches his expression - waits to see it falter, waits for Ilya to pull his hand and legs away, but Ilya never does. Of course not.

Shane knows that Ilya's team knows about them. But it's one thing knowing it, and another thing entirely to see it.

"Hazy!" Ilya greets him. "And Bood, and Choui. I thought you guys had class?"

Ilya doesn't get up, but he holds his fist out for all three of his teammates to bump their own against.

"Professor has stomach flu," Choui says.

"Gross," Ilya grimaces. But then he turns back to Shane with a smile and says, "At least now you can meet my boyfriend. This is Shane. Shane, this is Hazy, Bood, and Choui."

Ilya introduces him with such confidence and pride that it sends Shane reeling for a moment.

When he was that terrified, sixteen year old kid who had just realised he was gay, Shane couldn't envision a world where a hockey player - the number one draft pick, at that - would be able to introduce his boyfriend to his teammates without a care in the world. He had been so certain that it would never be possible - that something like that would always be out of reach.

He thinks of his own teammates, the way they reacted to Shane being gay like he was some kind of predator. And then he looks at Ilya's teammates, at the smiles on their faces, and he's so happy for Ilya that he could cry right here and right now.

"Holy shit!" Chou hollers.

"This is *the* Shane?" Hazy asks.

"Well it's about damn time," Bood says, shaking his head as he grins at them both.

Ilya smiles at Shane with the look in his eyes that makes Shane feel like a pile of goop melted onto the floor. It's so affectionate, so unflinchingly honest, that it takes Shane's breath away.

"Isn't he beautiful?" He asks his teammates, and Shane chokes.

He kicks Ilya under the table as he hisses, "Ilya! *Behave.*"

"Sorry, sweetheart," Ilya says sheepishly, but he doesn't *look* sorry. He looks like a menace.

"Oh, brother. He's got you whipped, Ilya," Bood laughs loudly, and the other guys join in with him.

But it's not unkind, not even mocking. They're not laughing *at* Ilya, they're just lightly teasing him. And Ilya nods proudly, anyway, like Shane having him *"whipped"* is the greatest honour that could possibly be bestowed upon him.

"Yes," Ilya agrees. "He has me on a tight leash, except I put it on myself."

All four of them stare at Ilya for a moment, and then they burst out laughing.

Bood, Hazy, and Choui all pull up a chair to Shane and Ilya's little table, and - for the first time in years - Shane remembers how it feels to be part of a team. Only it's better this time, because Ilya doesn't let go of his hand and Shane doesn't have to pretend to be anyone other than who he is.

It feels like letting go of something old, and finding something new. Something better.

"It's *my* turn!"

"Ah, no. You are lying," Ilya argues.

“No I’m not, *you* are!”

“Shane, it is my turn to pick,” Ilya insists.

They’re approaching Ilya’s building, on the way to Ilya’s dorm for their regularly scheduled movie night, only neither of them can agree on whose turn it is to pick the movie. Shane’s certain it’s his turn, because-

“You picked *Step Brothers* last time,” Shane reminds him.

Ilya scrunches his nose up. “Yes, and after that you picked-“

Shit.

“-*Mamma Mia,*” Ilya finishes.

Shane bites his lip. He did. He did pick Mamma Mia, because Ilya had never seen it and that’s just completely unacceptable. But Ilya had *loved* it, bopping his head to all of the songs and tapping his foot so much that Shane had to throw his leg over Ilya’s to stop him from shaking the whole bed. But still…

Shane looks up at Ilya through his lashes, eyes wide in the way that drives Ilya crazy.

“No.”

“Baby…”

“Don’t look at me like that,” Ilya says.

He stops walking and slaps his hand over his own eyes so he doesn’t have to look at Shane. Shane, knowing he’s about to get his own way, grabs Ilya’s wrist and pulls his hand away from his face.

When their eyes lock, he can practically *see* Ilya’s resolve starting to crack.

“That’s cheating.”

“I’m not doing anything,” Shane lies.

Ilya scoffs. “You know exactly what you are doing, demon.”

Shane is about to lean in and kiss Ilya, just to seal the deal, when:

“Oh, Ilya. Hey.”

Some guy pauses beside them, with brown hair and green eyes, and a smile he shouldn’t be directing towards Shane’s boyfriend.

He says Ilya’s name wrong. Three syllables instead of two. It makes Shane grind his teeth together in quiet fury. It’s not hard to say his fucking *name* properly. It’s the least he could do, if he’s gonna stand here and try to flirt with Shane’s boyfriend right in front of him.

He looks Ilya up and down, acting like Shane isn't even there.

"It's uh, Cam," he continues. "Cameron. From the gym?"

A look of recognition passes over Ilya's face and he nods. "Oh yes, I remember. Hey."

"I don't see you around so much anymore," fucking *Cameron* says, fluttering his lashes all pretty-like.

"Yes, my schedule is very busy now," Ilya explains.

"Well you certainly *look* like you've been keeping up with the gym," Cameron says, his green eyes wandering to Ilya's biceps. Shane wants to gouge them out.

He doesn't know what comes over him.

He doesn't think he's ever been jealous before. Not over a person, at least. But Ilya is *his*. His boyfriend, his best friend, his everything. And this fucking *Cameron* is stood here, flirting like Shane doesn't exist - like he isn't literally still holding onto one of Ilya's wrists.

He feels fucking insane, and petty, and maybe even a little childish, but he can't help himself.

He slides his arm around Ilya's waist, smirking smugly when Ilya throws his own arm over Shane's shoulder. Then Shane places his hand on Ilya's chest, slowly sliding it down until it rests just above the waistband on his sweats.

"Yeah, my *boyfriend* looks great. Doesn't he?"

Cameron looks startled when he finally acknowledges Shane's existence. His face blanches, and he laughs awkwardly.

"Yeah. Uh, anyway, I better go. Nice seeing you," he says.

They watch him leave, and the moment he rounds the corner of the building, Ilya bursts out laughing. Shane whacks him in the stomach, but it only makes Ilya laugh even harder.

"Shut up," Shane groans.

"Of course, sweetheart."

Shane drags a still laughing Ilya through the building with a finger hooked beneath the hem of Ilya's compression shirt. Ilya doesn't argue, doesn't even say a word, just follows along while trying - and failing - to stifle his laughter.

When they finally reach Ilya's room, the door clicks closed behind them right as Ilya says, "Shane Hollander, were you jealous?"

The words are barely out of his mouth before Shane is crowding him back against the door.

His hands come up behind Ilya's head before he can bump it, then they're tangling in his hair and Shane is kissing him. Claiming him. Devouring him. *Mine,* he thinks. *Mine, mine, mine.*

"Yours," Ilya promises, and Shane realises he must have said it out loud. He doesn't care.

He's past pretending he's anything less than obsessed with his boyfriend. *His* boyfriend. No one else's.

It feels like Ilya was made for him. Designed specifically with Shane in mind. Their bodies, and hearts, and interests, and opinions all slot together perfectly. They're equal parts give and take - two halves of a whole.

Shane almost can't remember what his life looked like without Ilya, and he doesn't ever want to have to go back to that.

Shane was lonely, he thinks. Even with his friends and his family, even in a crowded room. Until Ilya.

Ilya sucks on his tongue, and Shane's knees go weak. Ilya holds him up, pulls him into his chest, hands sliding down to fondle Shane's ass as he keeps kissing him like he's starving. It makes Shane groan, makes him press their hips together in a way that lets him feel how hard Ilya is in his sweats.

They haven't…not yet.

Ilya sucked him off so languorously that Shane was crying by the time he finally came. Once he came back to his body he returned the gesture; on his knees, between Ilya's thighs, it felt like he was kneeling at an altar for worship. The sounds Ilya made, the words of praise he whispered, had Shane whimpering around his cock until Ilya came in his own hand. He'd almost come again when Shane leaned forward to lap at the cum.

But they haven't gone any further yet. They've only been officially together for a few weeks, and Shane knows there's no rush - Ilya has been making it abundantly clear that he'll wait for as long as Shane wants to, or forever if that's what he needs.

Right now, what Shane needs is Ilya.

"Ilya, please," Shane whimpers into his mouth.

"What?" He pants. "Tell me what you need, sweetheart."

"Need you," Shane begs him. "Need you to fuck me."

Ilya pulls back and Shane whines, trying to chase after his mouth, but Ilya rests a hand at the base of Shane's throat and holds him still.

"Look at me," Ilya orders, and Shane is helpless to do anything but comply. "Are you sure? There is no rush, Shane."

"I know. But I want you."

Ilya's pupils dilate so wide that his eyes look black, and suddenly Shane is being lifted into the air and carried over to the bed.

Time falls away from him, after that.

Ilya is slow, and gentle, and so unbearably sweet that it brings Shane to tears. Ilya takes him apart with his mouth and his fingers, and then - finally - his cock. And it feels otherworldly. Transcendent. Like the pleasure in Shane's body is sending his mind somewhere else, somewhere higher.

Ilya talks Shane through it - tender and reassuring and patient, every single step of the way.

And after, when Shane is trembling as he comes back to himself, Ilya cleans him up slowly, anticipating Shane's needs before he can even verbalise them.

Ilya kisses the corner of Shane's mouth as he crawls back in bed beside him. "Are you okay?"

Shane turns his head, brushes Ilya's curls out of his eyes. "I'm perfect."

"Yes," Ilya agrees, "you are."

Shane laughs quietly, and Ilya rubs their noses together. Then, with a featherlight touch, he traces the freckles on Shane's cheeks and across the bridge of his nose. Shane watches Ilya's eyes, the way they're cataloguing every single freckle like he's trying to create a map of them in his mind.

It makes Shane feel treasured. Like Ilya finds even the smallest parts of Shane worth appreciating, worth spending time on.

"Pretty," Ilya whispers, then trails his lips over the same path his fingers just followed.

When he finally rests his head on Shane's chest, he is certain Ilya must be able to feel the way Shane's heart is pounding. Not even from the sex, but from the tenderness. From the love that's too big to keep inside of him for much longer.

Shane plays with Ilya's hair, and Ilya nuzzles into him like a cat. Like Jupiter. The thought makes Shane smile.

Ilya whispers something in Russian, then, shyly, "Shane?"

"Yes, baby?" Shane murmurs sleepily.

"I love you."

A punched-out sound slips from between Shane's lips, and Ilya quickly props himself up to look at Shane. His eyes are wide, hesitant, like he's scared Shane might not say it back, and Shane won't allow that for a single second longer.

He kisses Ilya, once, twice, three times.

“I love you, too,” Shane promises. “Oh my god, I love you so much.”

Tears flood Ilya‘s eyes, and he buries his face in Shane’s chest like he’s trying to hide them. Shane just kisses him, his hair and his forehead and everywhere that he can reach, over and over again until they’re both laughing and crying and so filled with love that it pours out of them like sunlight.

Shane used to think he felt too much.

As a little boy who got overwhelmed by the lights overhead, or the overlap of voices, or the feeling of clothing tags on his skin. As a little boy who felt everything so intensely, from fear, to joy, to sorrow, to grief. As a little boy who sometimes felt like he couldn’t breathe because of how heavy the world weighed on his shoulders.

But now he knows: it was all for this.

He feels so much so he can feel the weight, and depth, and breadth of Ilya’s love. So he can understand it. So he can love Ilya back in the way that he deserves.

“I can still pick the movie, right?” Shane whispers.

Ilya sinks his teeth into Shane’s collarbone.

Shane’s life changes shape around Ilya.

Not drastically or suddenly, but like a path slowly worn into the ground where there wasn’t one before.

Ilya doesn’t demand space in Shane’s life - he doesn’t barge into Shane’s routine and expect Shane to make accommodations or changes for him. Instead, Ilya slots into the spaces that already exist and he stands still while Shane’s life grows around him.

And for Shane - who has always been so set in his way, so rigid and particular - he finds that these small changes are the easiest ones he has ever made.

Getting to have Ilya slip inside his orbit makes Shane’s world feel infinitely bigger.

Ilya doesn’t make Shane feel like there is something wrong with him, doesn’t get mad when Shane is too overstimulated to hang out with their friends, or too peopled-out to go for the dinner Ilya had planned. When the world gets too loud and too messy and too uncontrollable, Ilya sits in the chaos with Shane. He tries to help where he can, and where he can’t he simply holds Shane steady as they ride the waves.

Shane is so desperately in love with Ilya that it feels like his chest is cracking open from trying to carry it all.

It’s the beginning of April, the sun is shining, and it’s the warmest day they’ve had in months.

They’re back at the reservoir, the exact same spot that Ilya brought him for the picnic - their *kind of* first date - when they were both too afraid to put words to what was happening between them.

This time Ilya still brings sushi and green tea with honey, but he holds Shane’s hand the whole time. He kisses his temple, and his knuckles, and his lips. He says *I love you* like they’re his favourite words in every language that he knows.

“So.”

“So,” Shane repeats.

“You might have heard, but. My team made it to the Frozen Four this year.”

Shane snorts out a laugh, and gently shoves Ilya. “Yeah, I think I might have heard something about that,” Shane teases.

He’d been there at the game, with his earplugs in his ears, screaming alongside six thousand other people as Ilya scored in overtime, sending the Eagles to the Frozen Four for the second year running.

Shane doesn’t think he’s ever been so proud of anyone in his entire life.

Hayden, Rose, J.J., and Svetlana had all been there with him, screaming until their voices were hoarse. Svetlana had slipped her hand into Shane’s, and when he turned to look at her there were tears in her eyes that matched his own. For a moment, it felt like they were the only two people in the world, celebrating the man they both loved.

Shane’s has been wearing Ilya’s team-issued *Rozanov 81* hoodie all week, just as a subtle reminder to everyone that Ilya is his.

“Well, I don’t know if you know, but it’s being held in DC this year.”

“I know, baby,” Shane says.

Hockey doesn’t hurt anymore, or. Not quite as much. Not like it used to. He still misses it; he thinks he always will. And maybe one day he’ll play again - join a rec league or something. Who knows, maybe he’ll even find another way into the NHL like Ilya had suggested.

But getting to watch Ilya live out his dreams feels like enough, for now.

“I was wondering if you’d come with me?” Ilya asks. “I know it’s short notice, and I know games can be a lot for you, but-“

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes, of course, you idiot,” Shane laughs. “Like I would be anywhere else!”

He’s already bought his ticket and booked his hotel room. So have his parents. That’s a surprise, though.

He’s not telling Ilya until they get there.

Ilya tackles him down into the blanket and kisses him breathless, until Shane is laughing, and hitting his back, and saying, “Ilya! We’re in *public!*”

“Don’t care. I love you,” he says between kisses. “My boyfriend is the best.”

“Yeah? You sure about that?”

“Absolutely certain.”

Shane takes a breath, suddenly nervous. He hadn’t planned on telling Ilya like this - hasn’t yet figured out the right words. But he doesn’t want to keep it from him any longer. He’s too apprehensive, too excited, too much of every emotion. It’s all swirling around inside him like a tornado.

He shoves at Ilya again so he’ll sit up properly, and then he pulls Shane up alongside him.

“That’s good,” Shane says. “Because I was thinking…”

“That sounds very dangerous.”

Shane scoffs, and elbows Ilya gently.

“*I was thinking,*” he repeats, “you’re still gonna be in Boston after graduation.”

“Yes,” Ilya confirms. “I am.”

“What if - I mean, I was wondering-“

Shane doesn’t know how to say it, or ask for it, or whatever. It’s big. Probably way too fucking big for how long they’ve been together. And *god*, is Shane being stupid? Is it foolish to change his entire life around a man he’s only known for four months?

Yes. Of course the answer is *yes.*

Shane has never been reckless, or impulsive - he’s never done anything at all without thinking it through completely, all the pros and cons and potential complications or diversions. And he’s done it with this, too. Has lost so many hours of sleep making lists, and spreadsheets, and plans.

But he keeps coming to the same conclusion every time.

He’s never been so certain of anything. Never been so completely sure that this is the right choice, and Ilya is the right man.

So, he opens his mouth, and says: “How would you feel if I maybe stayed here, too?”

“In Boston?”

Shane bites his lip and nods his head slowly.

He loves Ilya. He loves him in a way he had never thought possible, a way he had assumed was reserved for books and songs and movies. He loves Ilya in a way that completes him without consuming him. And he knows, beyond any doubt, that he will never love anyone like this again.

Maybe it’s crazy. Maybe it’s too fast. But Shane thinks he’d regret it forever if he didn’t at least try.

“Shane…don’t say this to me unless you are serious.”

“I’m serious, Ilya,” Shane assures him. “Hattie says I can work full time at the book store. I can get my green card. Maybe we could live toge-“

Shane doesn’t get to finish his sentence.

Instead he gets Ilya straddling his lap, holding his face, and kissing him kissing *kissing him.*

Shane can feel Ilya’s tears mixing with his own as he winds his arms around Ilya’s waist and kisses him back. Holds him close. Rocks them from side to side as they laugh, and kiss, and cry - so overwhelmed with joy that they don’t care who might see them, don’t care what they might think.

Nothing in the world matters more than this. Than *him.*

“I love you,” Ilya says. “Oh my god, Shane. I love you so much.”

“Is that a yes?” Shane teases, grinning up at Ilya.

“Yes. Yes, yes, yes. Please stay. We will get a house, and a dog, and we’ll get married.”

“Alright, slow down,” Shane laughs.

But he can feel himself blush, and feel the ache in his cheeks from how hard he is smiling.

He used to have a love/hate relationship with Boston, but now he thinks maybe it’s just love. A house, and a dog, and a husband sounds like a pretty good life to Shane.

It sounds like the start of forever.

Ilya looks down at Shane, still sitting on his lap, and he cradles Shane’s face in his hands. There’s a sparkle in Ilya’s eyes, a little, knowing glimmer that says: *I see you.* And Shane knows it’s true.

“Do you remember that first day I came back to the bookstore?” Ilya asks. “After I read your book?”

Shane hums softly. It somehow feels like a lifetime, and no time at all since that day. So much has happened, so much has changed, but Shane remembers every detail with such clarity.

“*Aristotle and Dante.* Yeah. Of course I remember.”

“I think, maybe, you are not so inscrutable after all.”

“No?” Shane wonders.

“No. You just have to trust someone before you let them know you,” Ilya says.

“Yeah, maybe you’re right.”

Ilya often is when it comes to Shane.

“Thank you, for trusting me. I’m so happy that I get to know you,” Ilya whispers. “That I get to love you.”

Trusting Ilya was one of the best, easiest things that Shane has ever done. Maybe only second to loving him. It has opened up his world, opened up his *heart,* and everything is so much brighter for it. So much *better.*

“Thank you for being patient with me.”

“Sweetheart, I would have waited forever for you.”

End Notes

This was loosely inspired by a lovely little book I read recently, called *Still Here* by A.J. Knight. I loved the autism rep in it. Shane's autism in this is based on my own, so not a reflection of every autistic person, obviously.

It kind of ran away from me as I was writing, but I hope you enjoy it :)

Also, I'm not from Boston. I'm not even from the US. I did my best to research BC but if anything is wrong, I'm sorry!

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