

I'll Believe In Anything

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I'll Believe In Anything

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Summary

Sometimes, it feels like they're two planets caught in the same volatile orbit.

Shane spends his nights wondering why the girls in the rinkside seats feel like white noise while every single highlight reel of Ilya Rozanov feels like a secret rendezvous.

Ilya spends his afternoons wondering if the heavy thrumming in his heart whenever Shane pins him against the boards is hate, or if it's the only thing that makes him feel human.

All Ilya knows is that he would have been there to tell him that a lost game wasn't the end of the world, and he would have iced the bruises on Shane's back.



Their story is a road movie. It's a double-feature. Two boys striking out across a field of wildflowers in Ottawa, while desire, like a monster, crawls up out of a lake nearby.

All of us are wondering if these two boys will find a way to figure things out. One cuts a lock of his hair with a steak knife in the restroom of a gas station. He knows he's desperate to subvert expectations. Expectations of being the golden boy, the very best, the pride of his family.

The other smothers a cigarette on the ground with the toe of his scuffed-up boot. He presses down on it, hard, and it almost feels like a part of his bruised heart gets smashed into the tile too.

One boy, half-destroyed, and the other, half-complete. Both screaming into the space between their faces as they run across a field, watching the sky around them transform from dark night into the coming of dawn.

It's not just the warmth of the glow of sunrise they're feeling, no. There's something more there that makes their hearts flutter, something that settles into the pits of their stomachs as Shane grabs onto Ilya's hand.

The world still looks the same to Ilya, but when he squints a little harder, he realizes it burns brighter.

It's shinier, and it's sunnier.

It's *better*.

There is a kind of love between them that Ilya doesn't quite know how to describe. A love that blazes in innocence, born on a Tuesday afternoon in a downtown community rink.

Warm, damp grass grazes Ilya's palms as he leans back on his hands outside the arena, letting himself bathe in the slow midday heat. It feels like soft kisses across his face. Something he never knew and felt in the biting winters of his childhood in Moscow. It's nice.

Shane braces himself with a wince as he feels the ice beneath his palms etch into his skin like a blade after a particularly hard fall. He feels the glaring floodlights burn holes into his back, right through his jersey.

"How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

Two boys with their shoulders pressed against each other's as they lean over the boards. Shane with his custom skates that are glossy with crisp red lines running across the middle. He'd leave behind clean lines in the ice as he weaved around the slower skaters.

Ilya looks back down at his own skates. They're rentals, and a jarring industrial blue. Not the shiny finish of Shane's skates, no. It's the kind of plastic that makes you scrunch your nose up in disgust. He runs his fingers across the dozens of scratches and scuff marks. He'd leave odd-shaped gashes in the ice after ramming himself into the boards in an effort to slow down.

"I wish I could skate like you." Ilya bumps the toe of his skates against the boards.

"Well, if you come here every Tuesday, I can teach you," Shane says, glancing behind his back.

"Oh, really?" Ilya asks, his accent still clipped.

"Yeah."

Ilya never returns to the rink.

His family moves again, chasing work and a life that he's never quite entirely sure belongs to him. He clutches a small, crumpled hockey trading card Shane had signed for him as a joke. All he can think about in the car is the distance growing between them as the engine revs, away from the only boy who didn't care that Ilya was the "weird foreign kid" that nobody wanted to get close to.

A sign overhead whizzes past, and Ilya can barely make out the words on it as he clambers to peer through the backseat windows.

For years, Shane Hollander had been a recurring dream for Ilya.

Ilya had moved from Ottawa to Toronto, then back to a Russia that somehow felt so much colder than he'd remembered it to be. Moscow winters were cold and biting, and Ilya never figured out where he fit in the world.

He'd stayed up one night, watching a pixelated, staticky Junior A game in Canada on the TV. The commentator's voice was all grainy, but the name was unmistakable: *Hollander*. Ilya watched as Shane scored a hat trick, his heart thumping wildly against his ribs. Shane looked taller now, his shoulders broader. Faster, too, and much more polished.

But when he lifted his stick and smiled, he still had that silly grin that Ilya remembered from years ago.

Ilya wanted so badly to reach out and ask if he still collected those stupid hockey cards. Wanted to ask if he ever thought about the Russian kid with the beat-up rental skates, or if he ever felt lonely. Instead, he turns the TV off and heads to practice, skates hitting the ice harder than ever.

If he couldn't have the sun, Ilya thinks he'd become the storm.

MOSCOW, 2015

Ilya loved the person Shane had been ten years ago, though for most of that decade, he was nothing more than a ghost haunting the darkest corners of Ilya's mind.

Ten years ago, Shane had been the kid in a jersey a few sizes too big, pushing Ilya around on a plastic seal aid they called *Capitaine*. Because Shane had told him that he was going to be the best hockey player in the world, and Ilya believed it because Shane had looked like the human embodiment of the sun, standing in front of him.

Ilya had given him his name, a name that still felt heavy in his mouth.

A name that later went on to be etched into the headlines of every sports column, along with a certain someone's. Ilya watched with a bitter sort of obsession as Shane Hollander climbed the draft rankings. His own wins somehow started feeling like losses.

Ilya called him "*golden boy*", because he hated how much Shane looked like the sun. And Shane called him "*stone-cold*", because he felt like Ilya was the only person in the world

who could see through the cracks in him and not say a word.

Sometimes, it feels like they're two planets caught in the same volatile orbit. Shane spends his nights wondering why the girls in the rinkside seats feel like white noise while every single highlight reel of Ilya Rozanov feels like a secret conversation he's having. Ilya spends his afternoons wondering if the heavy thrumming in his heart whenever Shane pins him against the boards is hate, or if it's the only thing that makes him feel human.

He wonders if Shane remembers *Capitaine*, or if the golden boy has scrubbed his post-2005 memory clean to make room for his stupid endorsement deals and playbooks. He wonders if the way Shane looks at him, all sharp and heated, is because Shane wants to break another one of his records, or because Shane is looking for a semblance of a ghost that also resides in Ilya.

All Ilya knows is that he would have been there to tell him that a lost game wasn't the end of the world, and he would have iced the bruises on Shane's back.

MONTREAL, 2016

"And that is it! The Boston Raiders take it 4-3 over the Montreal Metros!"

The air in Bell Centre buzzes like static tonight as Ilya raises his stick high up in the air.

Shane moves through the handshake line like a ghost. When he finally reaches Ilya, he keeps his head lowered, gaze fixed stubbornly on the crest of Ilya's chest rather than meeting his eyes. Shane's hand is a limp weight in Ilya's. His jaw's set in a tight and ugly grimace, and he's sure that the commentators will attribute it to the sting of a home-ice loss.

But Ilya sees right through it. He doesn't see an angry, disgraced captain. He sees a trembling boy who's terrified of being perceived, armor so riddled with fractures and cracks that even a single look from Ilya might cause him to shatter right there on center-ice.

Ilya wants to squeeze his hand tighter, wants to pull him out of the line and escape together.

Look at me, please.

Shane doesn't look. He simply moves on to the next Raider, eyes vacant and glassed over.

Later, Shane disappears off the arena with his head bowed.

And Ilya doesn't follow the rest to the celebratory chaos in the Raiders' locker room. He peels himself away from everyone else and moves towards the back.

By now, the halls are empty, and the silence is only punctuated by the occasional muffled roar of audience members filtering out of the exits. Ilya finds Shane exactly where he feared he would be: in a dim, cavernous storage room full of overflow equipment.

Shane hasn't even taken off his gear. He's slumped against the wall, staring at the floor, shoulders shuddering. He looks like he's expecting a second fatal blow of some sort.

"You are going to get cramp sitting like that," Ilya says softly, voice echoing off the walls.

Shane flinches, head snapping up. His eyes are bloodshot, and he looks terrifyingly broken. Ilya's chest tightens.

"What do you want, Rozanov?"

"Nothing." Ilya shrugs as the door clicks shut behind him. He sits right next to Shane on the floor.

Shane lets out an exasperated huff. "So you came to gloat, huh? Or did you miss a spot on my ribs during second period?"

"I came to see if you were still breathing."

"Fuck off," Shane snaps. He tries to stand, but his knee buckles. Hissing through his teeth, Shane reaches for the wall.

Ilya moves instinctively, his hands catching Shane's shoulders before he can hit the floor. For a second, the contact burns with searing hot intensity. Shane's fingers dig into Ilya's forearms anyway, his breath hitching.

"Let go," Shane begs softly. He doesn't pull away. "I know you've been waiting for this, Rozanov."

"Waiting for what?"

"For me to finally break so you can watch."

Ilya pries Shane's hands away, forcing him to look up at him. "Oh, that's what you think? You think I have spent ten years watching every game you play just so I can watch you fall?"

"Yes!" Shane yells, voice cracking slightly. He shoves Ilya back, square in the chest. In the dim light, his eyes shimmer with tears that he refuses to let fall. "Because you fucking hate me, Rozanov! You should hate me! So just— go. Go be the fucking winner. Leave me alone."

Shane sinks back onto the ground. He assumes the world hates him because he hates himself. It doesn't make any fucking sense. But above that, Ilya being here just feels like the world's cruelest punch in the gut for him.

Ilya stands there, heart hammering against his ribs. He thinks about the seal. Capitaine. Thinks about the crumpled trading card he still keeps in his wallet. Thinks of the thousands

of nights he's spent wondering if Shane is looking at the same moon, too.

"I don't hate you, Shane," Ilya says, his voice dropping.

"Fucking liar," Shane chokes out, burying his head in his hands again. "Everyone wants something from me. You're the only one who doesn't even want to be in the same fucking room as me."

"I don't want anything from you because I am scared of what happens if I get it!" Ilya spits out, looking at Shane in the eyes. "You think I play hard because I hate you? I play hard because it is the only time you look at me!"

"Ilya—"

"No, don't." Ilya snaps, pacing the small space as he runs a hand through his hair. "You, Shane Hollander. You have been the center of my world since I was fourteen, okay? I moved across so many oceans and I still looked for you in every fucking crowd. I have spent ten years trying to figure out how to tell you that I don't want to beat you. I want to be with you, okay? Fuck."

Shane stands up slowly. "You don't hate me?"

"I hate how much I love you, Hollander." Ilya drags his palm down his face. "It's because I fucking love you, okay? I love you, do you get it? I have loved you since that Tuesday in Ottawa when you pushed me on the plastic seal, and you told me you were going to be a Captain when you grow up. I have loved you through every game and playoff and every summer break and it is only you. It has always been only you."

The silence that follows is suffocating. Ilya's chest is heaving, face flushed as he waits for Shane to do something. Laugh, maybe. Push him away. Look at him in disgust.

Except, Shane does none of that. He makes a small, broken sound and lunges forward into Ilya's arms, all desperate and clumsy. His mouth crashes against Ilya's, tasting vaguely of sweat and mint and ten years of unsaid words.

Shane runs his hand up the back of Ilya's neck and grasps at his hair, pulling him closer. "I thought you forgot." Shane whispers against Ilya's lips, voice trembling. "I thought you wouldn't remember anything. I was such a dick and—"

"No, Shane." Ilya murmurs, thumbs wiping away the stream of tears down Shane's cheeks. "I remembered everything. I could never forget."

"The seal," Shane snuffles, letting out a half-hearted chuckle. "I named it Capitaine because I wanted you to think I was brave. That I was something. I wasn't brave then, and I'm really not any braver now."

"You are brave enough for me." Ilya smiles. "All that matters, Shane."

They stay in the storage room for a long time, two boys who have finally found each other. The world outside rages with headlines and demands and expectations, but here in the quiet,

Ilya thinks this is how their road movie would end.

OTTAWA, 2017

Hockey has always been a loud sport, but their love is quiet.

They realize that the intimacy between two lovers is not measured with physical actions, but rather, it's measured in the confines of being able to share every thought with each other. Shane's never had to worry about the need to hold back with the thought of *maybe I've shared too much*. Because Ilya will listen, and he'll listen to every single word that comes out of Shane's mouth. And he vows to commit each and every word to memory.

Their love is innocent. As innocent as it was in the summer of 2005 in Ottawa.

"Y'know, people say moles are where your lover had kissed you the most in your past life." Shane smiles as he looks up at Ilya.

"Oh, really."

"Really." Shane trails the tip of his finger down Ilya's nose bridge, to his cheekbone, to his chin, stopping at each mole. His fingers graze Ilya's skin, moving from his face, to his neck, then down to his arms. He comes across little silvery scars, all faded with time, but they still stand out to Shane nonetheless.

"You're like a science fiction map." Shane smiles as Ilya raises an eyebrow.

"What?"

"A map." Shane traces a finger lightly against Ilya's skin again, going across every little mark and dent.

"See, here's a space station, a fuel depot, a satellite..." Ilya laughs. Shane looks a lot like a little kid completing a join-the-dots exercise at school.

"And a random alien, hello there! And another space station, and a—"

"How about you?" Ilya pokes at Shane's cheek. "You are part of system too, no? I think you are the sun."

Shane smiles into the crook of Ilya's neck, whispering, "that makes you the moon, then." He cups Ilya's face in his hands, admiring his work.

How Shane always manages to make Ilya feel beautiful, he'll never know. Ilya thinks it's because Shane still has that little kid from Ottawa in him.

The same boy who'd proudly stuck a picture of himself over a hockey card and signed it for Ilya, the same boy who'd be busy explaining the physics of a hollow grind to a bewildered Ilya, who just simply got lost in Shane's hazel-brown eyes.

"Aaaaand that completes the star system." Shane glides his finger over one last mark on Ilya's shoulder. He's made a constellation out of Ilya's scars and marks. Every bit means something to Ilya, and now, they mean something to Shane too.

But they're still less numerous than the ways you've taught me to be loved, Shane Hollander.

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